From School Management to Transformational Leadership

What Leading an Applied Technology School in Egypt Has Taught Me About the Future of Vocational Education

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Beyond Managing Daily Operations

Vocational education is expected to do more than deliver technical knowledge. It must help young people develop practical competencies, problem-solving skills, adaptability and the confidence to respond to changing professional environments. This places new demands on the institutions that prepare them—and on the people who lead those institutions.

From my experience leading an applied technology school in Egypt, I have learned that meaningful improvement does not begin with equipment, procedures or a new organisational chart alone. It begins with how people understand their purpose, work together and take responsibility for results.

School management remains responsible for essential daily operations: organising timetables, allocating duties, following regulations and ensuring that teaching and learning take place. These responsibilities matter. However, they are not the whole of leadership. A school can run its routines efficiently and still make limited progress if its people do not share a clear direction or feel able to contribute to change.

Transformational leadership connects daily decisions with a longer-term institutional vision. It moves the focus from completing activities to improving what students learn, what teachers can achieve and how effectively the school responds to the needs of employers and society.

People Are the Starting Point of Change

Teachers and trainers are not simply the people who implement decisions. They are central partners in institutional development. They understand students' learning needs, recognise where difficulties arise and see whether classroom and workshop activities are building the competencies that learners need.

Leadership should therefore create practical opportunities for teachers to exchange experience, contribute ideas, take part in decisions and try improved approaches. Professional development is most valuable when it is continuous and connected to everyday practice—not limited to occasional training events.

This also means building trust. Staff members need clear expectations, useful feedback and the confidence that raising a problem or suggesting a different approach will be treated as a contribution to improvement. The leader's role is not to have every answer, but to create the conditions in which the team can find better answers together.

Building a Culture of Shared Responsibility

Institutional improvement cannot depend on one person. It requires a shared understanding of priorities and a coordinated effort across teaching, technical training, administration and school management.

Accountability is important, but it should not become a culture of blame. Information about performance should help the school identify gaps, provide support, recognise progress and decide what needs to change. Leaders also need to listen to constructive criticism and be willing to learn from mistakes.

In practice, innovation does not always require a major investment. A clearer administrative process, more consistent follow-up of student progress or a better way to coordinate staff responsibilities can make a meaningful difference. What matters is whether improvement becomes part of normal working practice rather than a temporary initiative.

Connecting Leadership with Evidence and Results

In vocational education, school performance cannot be judged only by examination results or the completion of an academic programme. Leaders also need to ask whether students can demonstrate the competencies required in their chosen fields, apply what they learn in practical settings and make informed decisions about further education or employment.

In my school, shared digital tools have helped organise and follow important processes, including student assessment information, staff attendance and administrative workflows. The value of these tools is not simply that they reduce paperwork. They can make information easier to access, support more timely follow-up and help school leaders identify issues that require attention.

Data, however, does not replace professional judgement. It is useful when leaders and teams interpret it carefully, discuss what it means and turn it into realistic improvement actions. The same principle applies to cooperation with industry: employers should contribute not only by offering training opportunities, but also by sharing insight into the skills and behaviours expected in real working environments.

Five Priorities for School Leaders in VET

Based on my professional experience, I see five connected priorities for leaders of vocational and applied technology schools:

1. Develop a clear institutional vision. Connect the school's objectives to student development, professional competencies and labour-market needs.

2. Empower teachers and trainers. Support continuous professional development, collaboration and meaningful participation in decision-making.

3. Build shared accountability. Use performance information to identify needs, support improvement and recognise achievement.

4. Encourage practical innovation. Improve educational and administrative processes, including the responsible use of digital tools.

5. Strengthen partnerships. Work with industry and other educational institutions to keep learning relevant and connected to real opportunities.

These priorities should not be treated as separate projects. They reinforce one another and create an institutional environment in which people, learning and continuous improvement remain at the centre.

Learning Through International Exchange

Professional exchange can broaden the questions school leaders ask and introduce approaches that may be useful in their own institutions. Participation in international vocational education discussions, conferences and professional networks has value when it leads to reflection and practical follow-up.

Transferring experience does not mean copying a model from another country. Educational systems operate within different economic, cultural and institutional conditions. The task is to understand the principle behind a practice, consider whether it responds to a real local need and adapt it responsibly to the school's context.

For me, this is one of the most useful contributions of international cooperation: it creates opportunities to compare experiences, question established routines and identify ideas that can be tested and improved locally.

Leadership Is About Creating the Conditions for Change

The future of vocational education will not be shaped by technology, curricula or partnerships alone. It will also depend on the ability of institutional leaders to bring people together around a shared purpose and turn that purpose into consistent action.

My experience in applied technology education has reinforced a simple belief: sustainable school improvement begins when people stop seeing change only as an external requirement and become active participants in shaping it. The challenge for school leaders is therefore not just to manage the institution, but to create the conditions in which teachers, students and partners can contribute to its development.

I would welcome the perspectives of other VET leaders and practitioners: what has helped you move from managing daily operations to building a shared culture of improvement?

About the Author

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