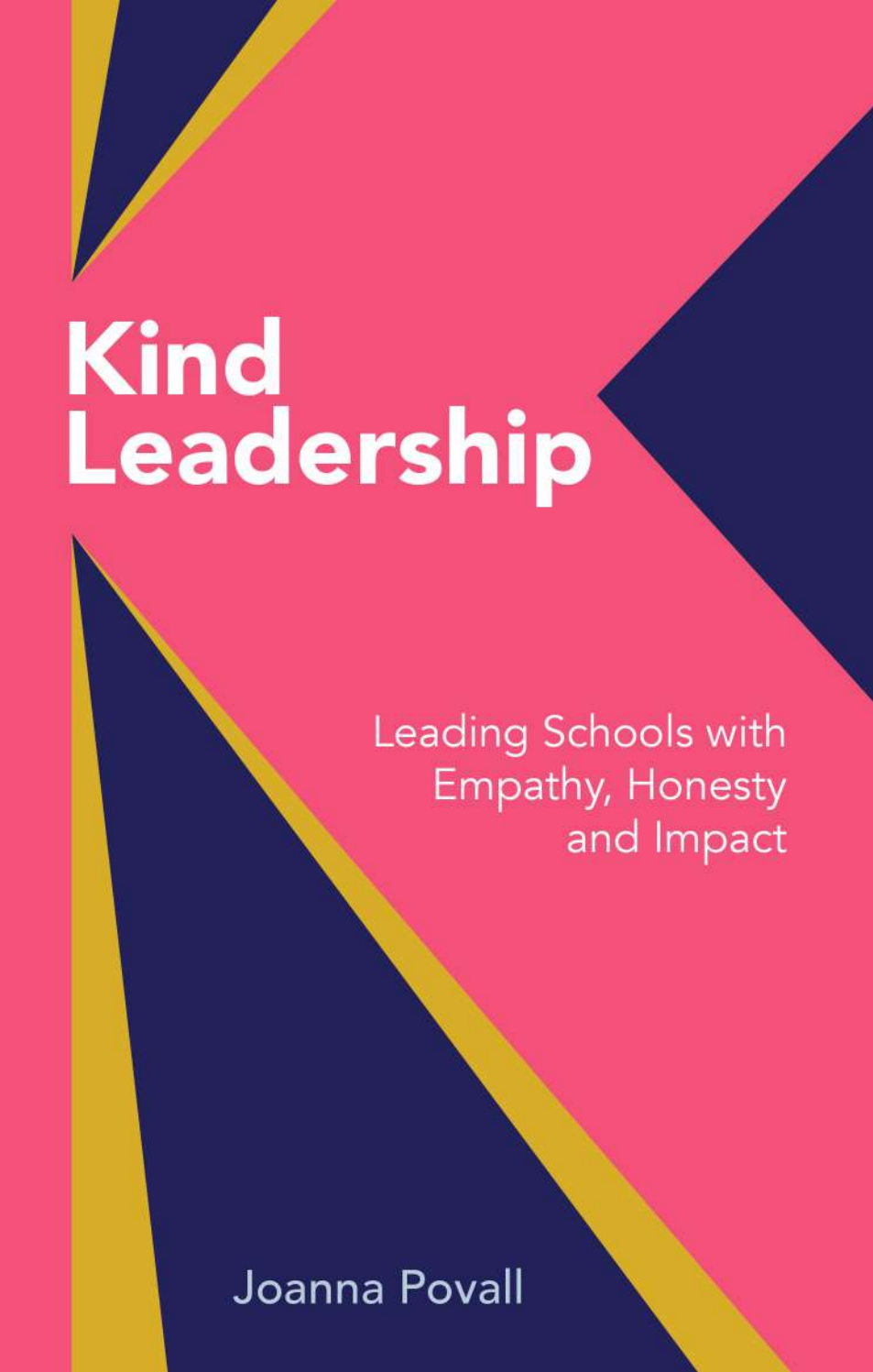




Kind Leadership

Leading Schools with
Empathy, Honesty
and Impact

Joanna Povall

Introduction: CHASE Kindness

‘Don’t mistake my kindness for weakness.’

Those words, attributed to Al Capone, may seem like an unlikely starting point for a book about leadership, but they have always stayed with me. Not because of who said them, but because of the uncomfortable truth that they hold for many people. Kindness is so often misunderstood. It is easily dismissed as soft, as a lack of strength, or as naivety. Weakness. True kindness – the kind that communicates with compassion, leads with honesty not ego, holds people accountable, and creates cultures that build self-esteem – is anything but weak. It is strong. And, in school leadership, I promise that it’s transformative.

The Old-Fashioned Way That Influences

Truth be told, I never set out to be a leader, let alone a ‘kind leader’. I just wanted to be known as a good teacher. I hoped to be the kind of person who inspires, challenges, delivers results, and earns respect. What I hadn’t planned for was that, as my career advanced, I would move into leadership.

I come from a generation of teachers who were trained in the method of ‘Don’t smile until Christmas’. Kindness in the classroom was never encouraged. You needed to be tough. The same was said of school leadership. It was the era of Tom Cruise as Jerry Maguire and Michael Douglas as Gordon Gekko. As a young woman new to the world of work, my suggested role models were the stoic Queen Elizabeth II and Margaret Thatcher as the Iron Lady. There was certainly no place for a velvet glove around the more-conventional iron fist in those days.

In the early part of this journey, I still believed that strength came from assertiveness, decisiveness, and the ability to push through the pressure. Not smiling. I am not a naturally kind person. I was one of those people who thought that kindness was weakness. But somewhere along the way, through classrooms filled with joy, difficult meetings behind closed doors, and those special moments with staff and students, I discovered something radical. Kindness isn’t just compatible with strong leadership; it is an essential part of it. The stories have been anonymised, but I am sure that certain experiences will feel familiar, and you might well be mentally replacing the pronouns with the names of your The stories have been anonymised, but I am sure that certain experiences will feel familiar, and



The Revelations

We don't arrive at kind leadership in isolation. We carry the influence of our experience and of those who led us throughout our careers. Some with compassion and empathy; others with control, coldness, or fear. My approach has been strongly influenced by the leadership that I have experienced personally. The leaders who made me feel empowered shaped my impression of the kind of leader I wanted to become. The ones who led through criticism or ego taught me, very often painfully, what I never wanted to emulate.

Some of the most impactful leaders I have worked with weren't the most noticeable person in the room. One of the best leaders I ever worked with wasn't at all gregarious and didn't have a particularly commanding presence or a charismatic voice. They listened. They had a quiet confidence, and they made people feel seen. They made decisions with empathy, not just expediency. And they showed, all day, every day, that kindness wasn't just a leadership tool; it was a philosophy and a way of life in their school.

Early in my teaching career, I had associated strong leadership with emotional distance, with being assertive at all costs. All newly qualified teachers in the first school that I worked in, myself included, were sent on assertiveness training. I was afraid that being open or compassionate would erode my authority. However, gradually, I changed. What I found was that kindness in leadership did not mean avoiding hard truths or only giving positive feedback. In fact, the opposite is true.

I realised that when I led with warmth, listened with care, and admitted when I didn't have all the answers, people responded not with less respect but with more. They trusted the leadership team, contributed more fully, and challenged themselves more confidently, because they knew they were safe. Kindness brought positive results and changed the landscape of the school. Kindness insists on clarity. It requires us to see the potential in people and to have the courage to help them meet it. It sets the tone not just for how we treat people, but for the standards we uphold and the whole school culture we create.

In this book I share stories from my schools, my leadership mistakes, and the moments that have made me stop and think. The real-life experiences that I have included are all true. They are things that I have encountered throughout my career. The kind examples are moments which have reflected the ideal that we would wish to have in our schools. I have also experienced epic fails, which are included to acknowledge mistakes, because nobody is perfect. Those unkind instances, the ones that make you feel uncomfortable, have been learning experiences.



you might well be mentally replacing the pronouns with the names of your own colleagues! With permission, I have been able to include case studies that have very kindly been provided by friends and associates from other schools. For every story from my personal working life, I can guarantee that I have been told identical, or at the very least similar, anecdotes by colleagues in other settings. Unfortunately, we have all been there. Our experiences are not just personal narratives; they are part of our emotional tapestry, and they inform how we lead today.

The Changing Landscape

The world is changing, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Life is different now. Teachers do not want to work in schools that rely solely on authority to function. The old days – when you threw a teacher into a classroom and ignored them – have gone. At that time, this was deemed acceptable behaviour from schools. It wasn't. Your team are entitled to support and care and now they are confident enough to say it. Previously, management decisions were made with the proviso that it's my way or the highway. Decisions were shrouded in smoke and mirrors, with most staff having no idea why they had been made. Unfortunately, there are still places where this happens, but this isn't what people want. They are desperate for realness, authenticity, and, most importantly, truth. They are looking for kindness.

What I am hearing more regularly from colleagues confirms something I have long thought: leaders are also tired of the lack of openness and transparency. Of the lack of kindness. It is lonely at the top. I meet with leaders who hold on to their worries because they do not feel able to speak openly about them. They are afraid that being compassionate makes them look weak. They are not able to be honest with other school leaders about the struggles that they are facing for fear of being judged. They don't want to ask for help because they believe they need to manage on their own. We need to stop thinking of leadership as a competition to be the best, to be the strongest leader. These are not isolated concerns; they are reflections of a broader crisis in school leadership.

Kind school leadership is not easy. It requires energy, courage, and emotional resilience. It forces us to slow down and to see the human behind every policy, every email, every decision. But through experience, I have seen that the kind path is also the path of integrity, courage, and transformation.

CHASE Kindness

I am certainly not an expert with all the answers. I am a practitioner: someone still learning, still a work in progress, and still getting it wrong. I am not under the illusion that anything in this book is revolutionary in the world of education. You will probably not read anything that you did not already know, but maybe some things that you had forgotten or hadn't really thought about. My intention here is for school leaders to engage with its contents and take the time to pause and think about their own leadership approach. Even when you already know something, this does not necessarily mean that you are doing it in practice. I hope that some parts will make you smile and laugh, and that others will resonate more seriously, but above all I hope that it makes you think and reflect. Look into your heart. Be honest with yourself.

Kind leadership is about being human. It is supporting a teacher who has lost their confidence. It is recognising the struggles the school librarian carries, although they never speak out. It is facing a difficult decision with empathy rather than detachment. Put yourself in their shoes. In those moments, kindness isn't weakness, it is wisdom. And it keeps us aligned with what really matters: people.

That is why I created CHASE Kindness. Using the CHASE acronym helps me and my school community to recall the principles of kind leadership easily, through a recognisable and repeatable format. I may be a school leader now and no longer in the classroom, but I am still a teacher at heart. This book is not an instruction manual. It is not a checklist or a quick fix. It is a reflection, a conversation, and a call to action. You won't find new theories here, just enduring truths about the power of kindness.

CHASE Kindness is a mindset. It needs to become a practice. A commitment to lead with purpose through five essential principles:

C - Communication

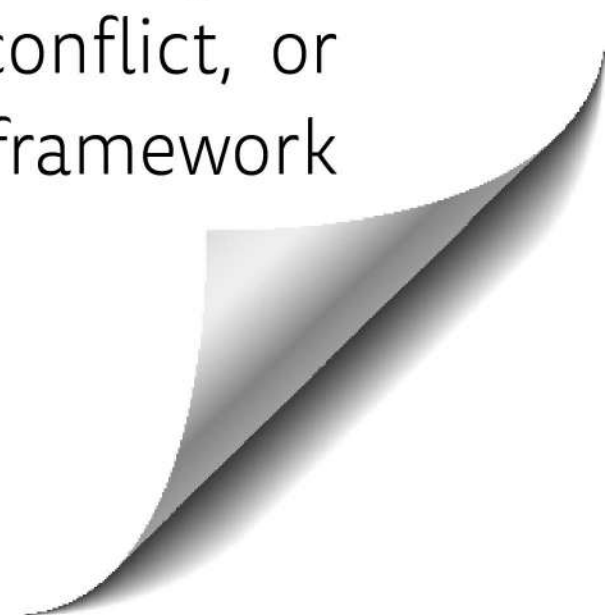
H - Honesty

A - Accountability

S - Self-esteem

E - Ego

These principles are not theoretical ideals. They are the areas in which leadership in schools is tested on a daily basis: when you're delivering difficult feedback, addressing underperformance, navigating conflict, or admitting you've made a mistake. CHASE Kindness gives us a framework



for reflection and thus enables us to navigate those moments without sacrificing our compassion or our credibility. It invites us to lead not with perfection but with presence and purpose.

Why Do We Need CHASE Kindness?

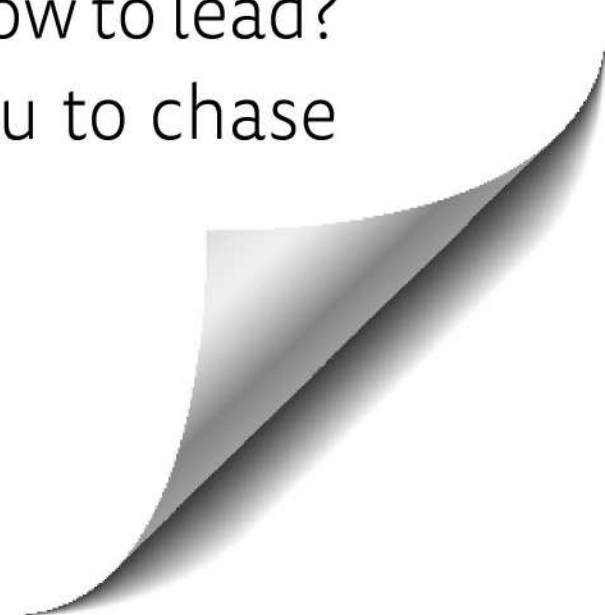
When I first started thinking about CHASE Kindness, I didn't intend to create a framework at all. It was a response to the difficulties of real leadership, not the theory of it. I kept returning to the same questions: how can we communicate with compassion under pressure? How can we lead with empathy and still uphold our standards? How do we hold people accountable without damaging their self-esteem? CHASE Kindness became my way of working through these challenges. It offered me a structure that kept me honest with myself and with others.

Over time, I began to realise that the real power of CHASE Kindness was not in its individual parts, but in how they interacted. Communicating with kindness means speaking with respect but also being direct. People want and need to know where they stand. Honesty means being truthful – not only about successes, but about struggles, limitations, and mistakes – with your team and with yourself. Accountability says that you believe in people and yourself enough to expect more. It is a kindness that guides, not a harshness that shames. Damaged self-esteem limits trust, but when met with compassion, it becomes a catalyst for development and growth. And finally, ego: our ego needs validation, but true kindness puts ego aside and focuses on what is right for our people and our school.

Kind leadership isn't about putting a bar of chocolate in a teacher's pigeonhole. It isn't about organising an end-of-term party or a staff social night out. It's about the daily choices we make. The way we speak to people, the way we listen, the way we celebrate success, and the way we respond when things go wrong. It means believing in others enough to hold them to high standards, while supporting them with care. It creates cultures in which people can be honest, feedback is clear and constructive, and accountability is shared rather than imposed. People feel good about themselves. Every interaction we have is a chance to lead with kindness.

Reflection

As you read on, reflect not only on how you lead, but on how you have been led. Please consider the moments that shaped you and your values. Who made you believe in yourself? From whom did you learn how to lead? Who did you watch and not want to emulate? I encourage you to chase



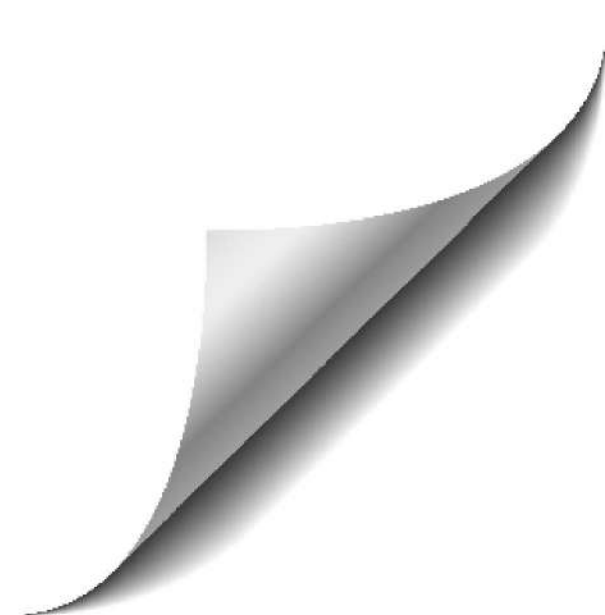
kindness, not perfection. Because, in the end, it is not just what makes us memorable as leaders; it is what makes us trustworthy, compassionate, and human. It is our legacy.

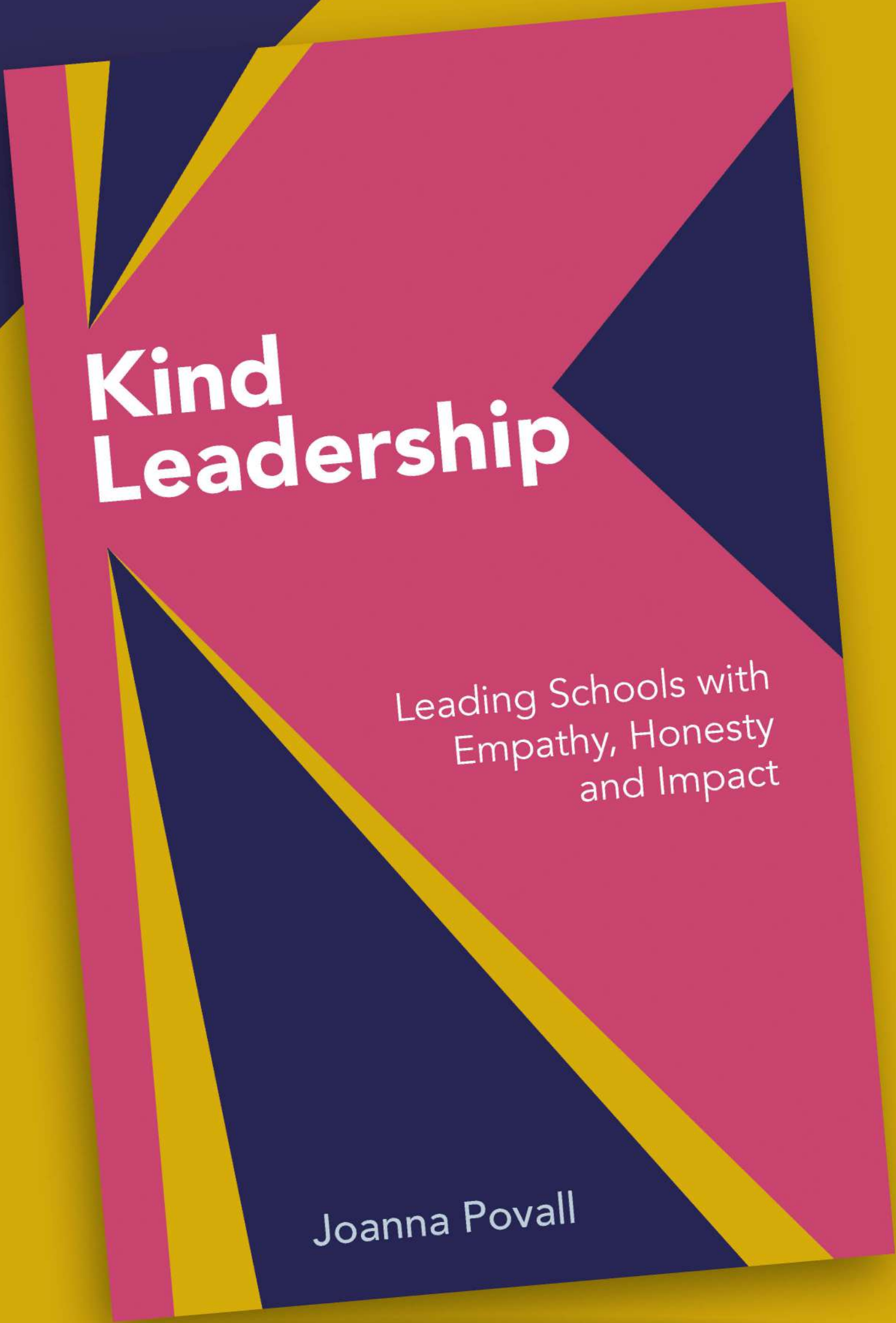
We will explore, in the chapters that follow, each of the five CHASE Kindness pillars through true stories, insights, and reflective questions. It's not always comfortable reading, but it is grounded in reality. And it shows that when kindness is paired with clarity and courage, it becomes the most powerful leadership tool we have.

Welcome to a place where kindness is seen for what it truly is: authentic, intentional, transformative, and essential.

Reflection Questions

- ✦ In what ways might your own view of kindness be limiting your school leadership? Why do you think you hold these views? What can you do to change this?
- ✦ If you were to ask your school community now, would they describe you as a kind leader? Why do you think this?
- ✦ Which CHASE Kindness pillar already feels like it will be a challenge for you? Why?
- ✦ What one small habit can you adopt to strengthen the CHASE Kindness pillar you think will be most challenging? How would this impact your school?
- ✦ Think of a time when kindness prevented or resolved an issue, in your experience, and how can you make that your usual approach?





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