

## **Core Question**

The session began with a provocative challenge:

### **What are the things independent school leaders know, but rarely say out loud?**

Kavanagh argued that mission drift is rarely dramatic. Schools do not wake up one morning and decide to abandon their mission. Instead, drift occurs through small compromises, unexamined assumptions, and decisions that make sense in the moment but gradually move the institution off course.

Using humor, audience participation, and examples drawn from independent schools, he explored several areas where leaders often avoid difficult truths.

## **What We Pretend Not to Notice About Mission**

Kavanagh challenged participants to consider whether most mission statements are actually useful.

Using a fictional mission statement:

"The mission of the school is to enrich minds and inspire dreams."

he asked attendees to describe the school. Participants quickly discovered that the statement provided almost no meaningful guidance about the institution's identity, priorities, or decision-making.

The point was not that mission statements are unimportant.

The point was that many are too generic to help leaders navigate difficult choices.

## **Key Insight**

Mission drift rarely begins when a school abandons its mission.

It begins when the mission stops functioning as a decision-making tool.

The session reinforced Scott Wilson's earlier challenge by asking whether a mission:

- Reflects the school's desired reality
- Inspires stakeholders
- Successfully moves from abstract ideals to daily practice

### **What We Pretend Not to Notice About Change**

Kavanagh argued that schools continue to operate as if stability is around the corner.

Using the VUCA framework, he described today's environment as:

- Volatile
- Uncertain
- Complex
- Ambiguous

Yet many schools still make plans as though the future will be more predictable than the present.

#### **Key Insight**

The environment is changing faster than most institutions.

Mission drift accelerates when decision velocity increases and leaders fail to revisit the assumptions underlying their choices.

The challenge for schools is not merely responding to change but learning how to maintain clarity of purpose while operating in a constantly changing environment.

### **What We Pretend Not to Notice About Strategy**

A major section of the presentation focused on the difference between strategic thinking and operational activity.

Kavanagh introduced a hierarchy of thinking:

- Tactical
- Operational
- Structural
- Systemic
- Philosophical

He argued that many schools spend enormous amounts of time discussing operational issues while believing they are engaging in strategic leadership.

#### **Key Insight**

Operational conversations often feel strategic simply because they occur above the tactical level.

As a result:

- Schools focus on symptoms rather than causes.
- Leaders solve immediate problems without addressing underlying systems.
- Meetings become crowded with management issues while deeper questions go unexplored.

He summarized the problem succinctly:

Most schools are over-managed operationally and under-led strategically.

### **Understanding Different Types of Problems**

Kavanagh also distinguished between different categories of organizational challenges:

- Simple problems
- Complicated problems
- Complex problems
- Chaotic problems

Many educational leaders are trained to solve simple and complicated problems, where cause and effect are relatively predictable.

Today's challenges increasingly fall into the complex category, where solutions emerge through experimentation, adaptation, and learning rather than established best practices.

### **What We Pretend Not to Notice About Leadership**

The session next examined how schools select and develop leaders.

Kavanagh suggested that most educational leaders are promoted because they excel at solving today's problems.

However, future challenges require a different capability.

### **Anticipatory vs. Compensatory Leadership**

He distinguished between two forms of leadership:

#### **Compensatory Leaders**

These leaders excel during crises.

They:

- Remain calm under pressure
- Preserve relationships
- Recover quickly from setbacks
- Help organizations navigate immediate challenges

### **Anticipatory Leaders**

These leaders focus on what comes next.

They:

- Identify emerging trends
- Imagine future scenarios
- Prepare systems and people in advance
- Reduce the likelihood of future crises

### **Key Insight**

Compensatory leadership gets institutions through crises.

Anticipatory leadership helps institutions avoid crises.

Schools need both, but many organizations disproportionately reward the ability to solve current problems rather than anticipate future ones.

### **What We Pretend Not to Notice About the Future**

The final major section focused on artificial intelligence and its implications for schools.

Rather than treating AI as a technology discussion, Kavanagh framed it as a mission discussion.

He posed a simple but powerful question:

Is your mission AI ready?

### **Key Insight**

The future does not care what a mission statement says.

The future only cares whether the mission helps leaders make decisions.

If a school's mission cannot guide decisions about AI, it is unlikely to guide decisions about whatever disruptive force comes next.

## **AI as a Leadership Challenge**

The session examined how AI is already affecting both teaching and school operations.

Examples included:

### **In Teaching**

- Lesson planning
- Assessment creation
- Feedback generation
- Curriculum alignment
- Student support
- Professional learning

### **In School Operations**

- Enrollment forecasting
- Budget modeling
- Advancement analytics
- Human resources
- Policy development
- Marketing and communications
- Board support and reporting

Kavanagh argued that the central leadership question is not whether schools will use AI.

They already are.

The real question is whether AI adoption is being guided by mission or by convenience.

## **Questions Leaders Should Be Asking**

To help schools think more intentionally, Kavanagh proposed three categories of leadership questions.

### **Generative Questions**

Questions about meaning, identity, and purpose:

- What problem are we actually trying to solve?
- What uniquely human work must we protect?

- How does this decision reflect who we say we are?

### **Strategic Questions**

Questions about direction and positioning:

- How does AI support our long-term value proposition?
- Does this strengthen or dilute our model?
- How do we build capacity rather than dependence?

### **Fiduciary Questions**

Questions about stewardship and risk:

- What risks are we ignoring?
- Are efficiencies coming at the expense of mission?
- Are we investing appropriately in training and oversight?

### **Facing Reality**

Near the end of the session, participants completed an exercise identifying:

- Five things their schools do exceptionally well
- Five things their schools consistently struggle with

The exercise reinforced a recurring theme:

Organizations often know their strengths and weaknesses.

The challenge is acknowledging them honestly enough to act on them.

Mission drift frequently occurs not because leaders lack information, but because they avoid confronting uncomfortable realities.

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### **Key Takeaway**

Kavanagh's central message was that mission drift is not a sudden event.

It is the cumulative result of unanswered questions, unexamined assumptions, and decisions made without intentional reference to purpose.

## **Dr. Damian Kavanagh: Mission Drift and Other Things We Pretend Not to Notice**

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Schools remain mission-driven when leaders continually ask difficult questions about mission, change, strategy, leadership, and the future.

The most dangerous organizational blind spot is not what leaders do not know.

It is what they know, but pretend not to notice.