

# POSITIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

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## SUMMARY

Presenting the organizational theory of Positive School Leadership in the form of a meta-analysis of research concerning the characteristics of effective leadership in a wide range of settings. Then, using the lens of positive psychology and the context of education, Murphy and Louis propose a Positive School Leadership model that is defined and explored. Focus is placed strongly on a leader's core values and trust to foster and strengthen relationships among educational stakeholders and build capacity among school team members. These elements are identified as the cornerstones to guiding successful leadership in a school setting.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### *Joseph F Murphy*

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His work is in the area of school improvement, with special emphasis on  
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### *Karen Seashore Louis*

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Louis' research focuses on school improvement and reform, school  
effectiveness, leadership in school settings, and the politics of  
knowledge use in education. Current projects include research-practice  
collaboration and the application of positive psychology to larger  
social settings.



# FOUNDATIONS



## OVERVIEW

*"We think of trust as both an input and outcome variable that is in a continuous, dynamic relationship with all of the other elements of Positive School Leadership." (p.10)*

*“Context always matters.”*  
(p.15)

- Positive School Leadership Model
- Dimensions of Positive School Leadership
- Principles of Positive School Leadership
- Positive Leader-Member Relationships
- Positive Behavior and Relational Basis for Organizing
- Taking the Organizational Temperature
- Positive Leaders, Teams, and Meaningful Work
- Positive Leadership and the Organization
- The Case for Positive Leadership in Schools



# DIMENSIONS



**Positive Orientation:** Focusing on what is going right with the leadership instead of assuming something needs to be fixed. Playing on strengths, values and resilience to build capacity and engage others.

**Moral Orientation:** Focus on values that embody 'goodness, truth and beauty'(p20). Building a moral foundation that matches the needs of the organization and the people within it and develops a set of common core values.

**Relational Orientation:** Focusing on decision-making that values the needs of others, personal growth, and allowing individuals to guide goals and beliefs through meaningful relationships.

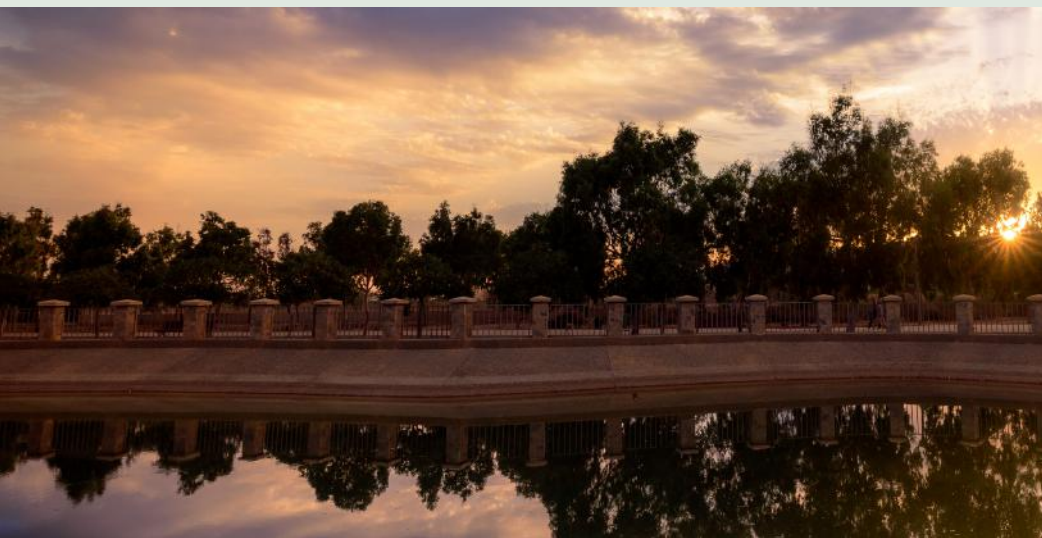
**Spiritual Stewardship Orientation:** Focusing on self-reflection, servant leadership, mutual trust, authenticity, caring for others. Demonstrating a commitment to individual's growth and the organization's goals, and fostering an open and supportive culture that values integrity and humanity.

## Impact

- Attributions to the Leader
- Connections to the Leader
- Meaningful Work
- Positive Work Orientation
- Transcendent Ethos
- Moral Relational Communities
- Positive Organizational Behaviour
- Institutional Outcomes
- Organizational Performance

“  
*We raise the issue of values because schooling is fundamentally a process of moral as well as intellectual development. (p17)*

”



# 9 PRINCIPLES

of Positive School Leadership  
(Taken from Chapter 3 - page 30)



*"To improve the 'bottom line' for students, leaders must be virtue-based and use the guiding principles to maintain a laser-like focus on the development of ethically grounded relationships among adults. Only then can they ensure the organizational conditions that will sustain high-quality and equitable achievement." (p42)*

## ASSET-BASED

"Is consistently focuses on the assets that all stakeholders bring to the school."

## VALUE-CENTERED

"Clearly and regularly articulates enduring values that are the foundation of an enterprise committed to human development."

## RELATIONALLY GROUNDED

"Places the development of positive relationships with all stakeholders at the center of all leadership work."

## MEANS-FOCUSED

"Recognizes the importance of the daily tasks of school leadership as a foundation for positive transformation."

## GROWTH-BASED

"Emphasizes the importance of personal growth and development for all members of the school."

## AUTHENTIC

"Requires self-awareness, transparency, balanced consideration, and self-regulated behaviour."

## TRANSCENDENT

"Establishes a morally compelling vision that moves others to make commitments to the common good."

## VIRTUE-BASED

"Consistently models value-based behaviors in ways that others would describe as virtuous."

## SERVICE-GROUNDED

"Emphasizes the stewardship functions of leadership, conserving and nurturing the humanity of all those serving and served by the school."

# POSITIVE LEADER-MEMBER RELATIONSHIPS

## *Why Exchanges Matter*

*The emergence of Exchange Theory in economics in the 1960's, and sociology's application to social relationships, has led to a focus on every day communications and how they contribute to the development of shared goals and values, effective*

*leadership, and building trust. Positive School Leadership extends this theory to specifically include leadership in schools where relationships, and specifically leader-member relationships are key factors to a school's success. Leaders in schools knit together a culture of respect, cooperation, support, and ownership of responsibilities through relationships. Three key factors are identified as integral to building strong relationships.*



## PERCEPTIONS

*How individuals perceive the trustworthiness, transparency and fairness of a leader can determine leadership effectiveness. These are communicated through daily actions and interactions that allow individuals to decide if the leader is virtuous or has integrity.*

## QUALITY/TIMING

*Murphy & Louis focus on Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX), and how it is both 'situational and personal'. Each situation varies, and each person's qualities vary. Also critical is time. Relationships require time to develop and foster and it is the leader's responsibility to initiate and maintain quality relationships, that lead to trust, understanding, respect, and compassion.*

*“Principals, whether introverts or extroverts, must recognize that if they want to develop solid, trusting relationships with teachers (and others), they need to get out of their offices, initiate exchanges, and do so in a positive manner.” (p.57)*

## OUTCOMES

*Outlining a developmental cycle of leader-member relationships and how they lead to positive outcomes:*

- mutual understanding of reciprocity in relationships*
- leaders demonstrate both expertise and are grounded in positive values*
- member satisfaction with leader and commitment to shared goals*
- emotional connections deepened and reinforced*
- organizational commitment developed over time*



# POSITIVE BEHAVIOURS AND RELATIONAL ORGANIZING

*Murphy & Louis differentiate Positive School Leadership from other leadership styles by focusing on*

- *leadership as both an improvement-focused process and a socially fabricated existence*
- *the foundations for action rather than the*

*framework within which action may occur*

- *language that is strength-based and inspiring*
- Murphy & Louis examine leadership behaviours that celebrate and support the work of others and create an environment and culture for success. Six behaviours are identified as keys factors.*

“

*...it is time to think*

*about leadership*

*differently,*

*to move beyond*

*'instructional leadership' or*

*'data-driven practices'*

*to consider ways of thinking about positive*

*school leadership that are not*

*automatically constrained by current*

*organizational structures. (p60)*

”

## SUPPORTING

*Leadership support with four converging actions:*

- *Knowing Individual Needs- knowing a teacher personally and professionally creates opportunities to support growth*
- *Building the School's Culture - openly supporting, acknowledging and celebrating teachers' work and strengths*
- *Listening and 'Sensemaking' - giving voice to teachers, considering their input in decision-making, and helping them to maneuver challenging situations by emphasizing their strength as a whole*
- *Psychological Safety & Clear Expectations - instilling a sense of belonging in all and seeing changes as opportunities, not risks.*

## ENABLING & EMPOWERING

*Positive Leadership is viewed as providing the tools and conditions to allow teachers to do their best.*

*Giving voice, shared purpose and social support to teachers to empower them to grow and learn both independently and as a whole. This enhances organizational trust. Leaders empower others, share responsibilities and lead by example.*



## ACTING AUTHENTICALLY

*Positive Leaders are expected to be true to themselves and living a high moral standard that is visible to all in their actions and words. This also requires self-reflection, openness, accountability, and developing a personal value-based theory for leadership. With practice and experience, the leader develops integrity, encourages integrity in others and builds trust and commitment.*





## MODELING

*Positive Leadership as modelling:*

- *character and behaviours that demonstrate morality, and instill trust, reliability and respect*
- *positive attributes including confidence, hope, optimism, resilience, self-determination*
- *influence of organizational culture*
- *visibility within the school*
- *engagement with others and school goals*
- *attentiveness to social context*
- *credibility*

*Positive Leaders may also coach or serve as mentors but Murphy & Louis stress that none of these roles can be imposed on others. School leaders must be viewed as dependable, knowledgeable, and ethical for teachers to accept them as role models, coaches, and/or mentors.*



## ESTABLISHING VALUES

*Positive Leadership is seen through daily actions and interactions that translate values into visible behaviours. Key factors in these behaviours include 'consistency and reliability' (p77). These can be seen in daily routines and verbal messages that convey common values and norms within the school. Vision can be established through common values and can bind a school/staff together in a caring, committed, trusting and cooperative environment.*

“

*...determining/shaping core values, keeping them vibrant, and ensuring that they bind people together - (these) are critical to schools where the daily work is rarely easy and often ambiguous, and where feedback on performance is rarely immediate.” (p77)* ”

## DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS

*Murphy & Louis focus here on research-based leader behaviours that strengthen both formal and informal relationship-building. These include:*

- *emphasizing trust over control*
- *finding opportunities for people to interact and relate to one another*
- *encouraging multi-level collaboration and celebrate group successes over individual performance*
- *knowing what people need and helping them to get what they need*
- *promoting and nurturing inclusivity among all school stakeholders*
- *sharing work-loads and responsibilities to build stronger connections with teachers*
- *consistently demonstrating caring and consideration and encouraging others to do the same*
- *establishing an organizational framework that encourages positive networking among teachers*
- *fostering shared traditions and norms that celebrate relationships*
- *listening and paying attention to the values of others*

# Taking the Organizational Temperature

Murphy & Louis look at empirical data and find that there are three main factors that indicate how well a leader is doing within an organization. These include:



A teacher's sense of well-being, optimism and meaningfulness can fluctuate regularly and affect the emotions of others. How well teachers can self-regulate and manage difficult situations can say a lot about the leaders and the school in general.

Administration needs to be able to manage both positive and negative emotions within the school. Murphy & Louis refer to the research of L.M. Little et al. (2016) to provide four actions that school leaders can take when dealing with emotions:

1. modifying the situation by adding/removing factors that elicit positive/negative emotions.
2. creating cognitive change by instilling a positive mindset towards potentially negative situations

3. distracting by using humour or other behaviours to draw attention away from negative situations

4. modulating the emotional response by helping teachers to suppress their reactions.

There are appropriate situations for each of these strategies and teachers, as leaders of students are expected to do the same in their classrooms. Effective use of these strategies can result in a productive school climate and so it is important for administrators of schools to stay attuned to the emotional state of the staff.



Murphy and Louis assert that it is generally believed by psychologists that how we see ourselves develops over time and is a rather stable state of mind. Self-concept is linked to well-being, motivation, self-awareness, and moral identity. Murphy & Louis focus in on four particular concepts that have been associated with positive organizational leadership.

*Self Efficacy* has been linked to both performance and positivity. It is learned socially through contextual experience

and feedback from interactions, and it can be influenced and managed by leaders.

*"...the development of self-efficacy in individuals requires authentic relationships..."(87)*

Since feedback is a key factor, how school leaders receive and provide feedback can impact both relationships and leader/teacher self-efficacy.

*Psychological Empowerment* is tied to self-efficacy, but also a sense of meaning, self-determination and impact.

Unfortunately, the research here is not united in the belief that psychological empowerment is directly linked to leadership, and so although they acknowledge its importance, Murphy & Louis admit that more empirical research is needed in this area.

*Psychological Capital* is defined as personal assets that each individual can select from to boost his or her well-being and effectiveness. These assets include optimism, hope, confidence and resilience. According to Murphy & Louis, research has shown that leaders can influence psychological capital through perceptions of trust in the organization, peer relationships, and a service-focused climate.



*Identification* focuses on a sense of satisfaction with relationships and belonging in an organization. Research has linked identification to both performance and organizational culture. When members have a sense of openness, inclusion, reciprocity, and support, they feel a greater satisfaction with and commitment to their role. These factors are also indicative of positive relationships and thus positive leadership.

### Positive Orientations to Work

motivation  
commitment  
job satisfaction  
self-concordance

Murphy & Louis use the framework of 'job crafting' to sort out how Positive School Leaders can create positive orientations to work. Job crafting refers to the ever-changing tasks and relationships that make up so many jobs of today, especially in education.

How much input or control a teacher has on defining their roles and responsibilities can impact motivation, commitment, job satisfaction and inner peace. Many factors are at play in a school setting. Some job criteria are optional and others are mandated. Regular changes in student bodies, staff can affect relationships perceptions of climate/culture and roles within the school.

According to Murphy & Louis, it is the responsibility of the principal to organize and support the school, staff, and students so that optimum performance and job satisfaction can be achieved. They tie job crafting and leadership directly to empowerment, fitting the right teacher to the right jobs/responsibilities, flexibility, and the promotion of positive change.

Murphy & Louis also relate positive orientations to work as essentially relational in nature. Knowing your

teachers well enough to know and provide them with what they need to do their jobs gives meaning to their work. When teachers see that they are listened to and valued, it improves the factors that contribute to positive orientations to work and encourages them to build their skills and refine their work, which in turn improves performance.

Job crafting is subtle and often not visible, according to Murphy & Louis. It does require a fair bit of attention on the part of the leader. Principals must recognize opportunities, observe how teachers adapt to and make sense of new work, and pay careful attention to the impact that teachers' work has on themselves and on their students. It also requires a caring approach that incorporates support with the negotiation of boundaries.

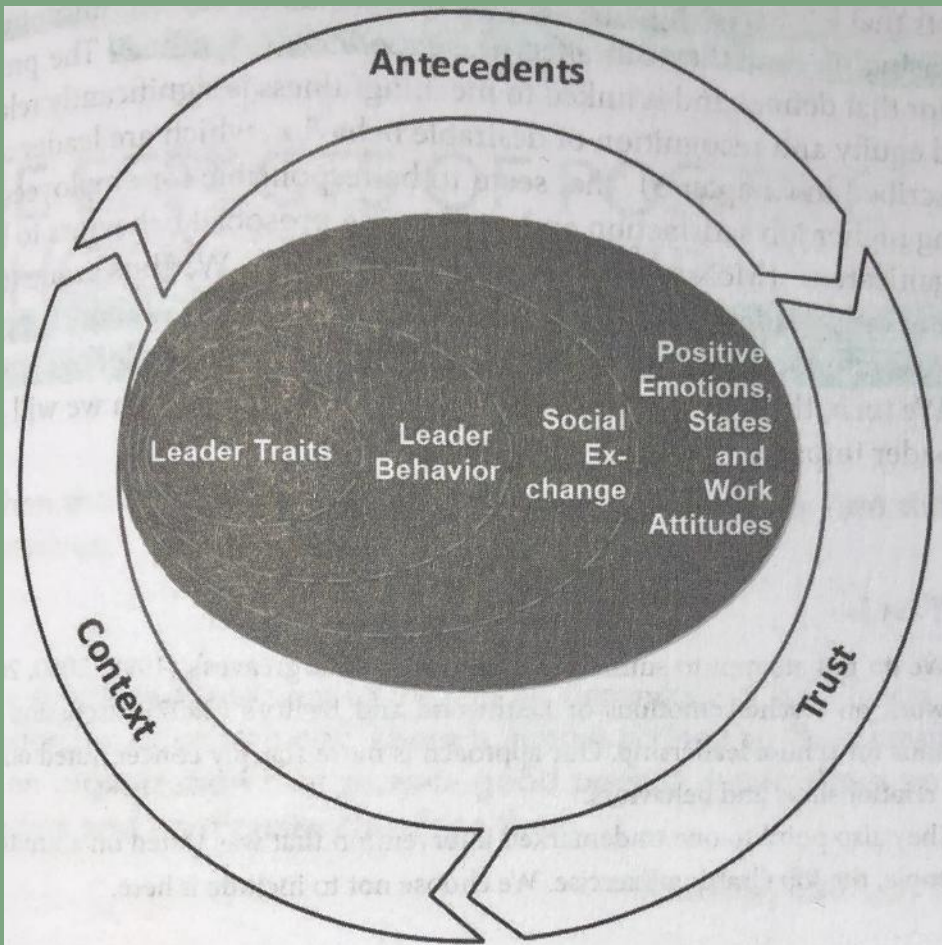


*"...the understanding leaders gain from observing, understanding, and supporting individual members will determine the course of positive collective improvement." (p98)*

## Taking the Temperature of Individuals

Murphy and Louis take a note from the old adage that to care for others, we must first care for ourselves. School leaders have great responsibilities to care for others, and so must also focus on their own well-being. This involves them being courageous enough to engage in honest self-reflection grasp their own

positive self-concept, build their own resilience and stay true to themselves in challenging situations. In this way they can remain sensitive to individuals so they can consider next steps in fostering positive relationships and reframing negative thoughts into more positive outlooks.



## Positive School Leadership: Foundations

Image taken from Chapter 6: Taking the Organizational Temperature, (p97)

## Positive Leaders, Teams, and Meaningful Work

In Chapter 7, Murphy & Louis turn towards the effects of Positive School Leadership and specifically visible outcomes of putting this theory into practice. They focus specifically on the creation of teams that are founded in strong relationships and that foster the engagement and empowerment of team members.

They argue that teams are necessary to organize and design cohesiveness in schools and that relationships within teams are key factors in job satisfaction. The principal's role is then to acknowledge the leadership within and between teams and negotiate their role in relation to school-based teams, so as to help develop meaning, motivate members, and develop a shared purpose that binds various teams together.

"...a central positive leadership function - thinking about the design of teams and how variability among them affects what they do."  
(p103)



## Emotions

Murphy and Louis caution that Positive School Leadership is not only about focusing on the positive emotions and sentiments in schools. It also requires leaders to attend to the negative emotions that sometimes crop up and spread quickly in complex social settings.

School teams, especially diverse ones have the potential to cause division among members and can result in member withdrawal from the group. According to Murphy & Louis, it is the leader's role to hone their observational skills and develop their ability to quickly assess the emotions of the group and its individuals, especially in times of turmoil.

## Team Climate & Mental Models

Every team or group develops its own routines or ways of doing things. They have their own social norms, ways of connecting/communicating, and sharing responsibilities. Murphy & Louis assert that positive leaders must watch for both the positive and negative aspects of strongly bonded teams. Look-fors include:

- whether the team vision is shared and accepted by all
- whether members feel safe to contribute to decisions and propose new ideas
- whether members are accountable to each other and can reflect on their own performance and cooperate to achieve goals
- whether members are invited to and supported for introducing new ideas to accomplish tasks
- whether members take ownership for their role in the team and as a team and are accountable for their performance

Leaders in schools have the complex task to build trust and empowerment in its teams while also intervening when necessary to smooth over troubles within the teams. This requires open and caring relationships while influencing learning, professional development and knowledge sharing.

“

*Sometimes it is important to be assertive in guiding your school teams, even if it means that you will be less loved. (p109)*

”

## Meaningful Work

Teams are both psychologically and socially significant to members.

They allow for collaborative problem-solving which provide both purpose and satisfaction.

Leaders must then:

1. empower teams through coaching effective teamwork skills
2. help teams stay connected to what is happening elsewhere that might affect the work they are doing



# DESIGNING & DEVELOPING TEAMS

Murphy & Louis focus on the design stage of team construction, suggesting the models of Sundstrom et al. (1990), that include:

- semi-autonomous teams - designed to meet mandated goals and follow specific procedures
- self-regulating teams - initiated by but not directed by leaders, allowing for autonomy in team management
- self-organizing teams - voluntarily created teams in response to specific school needs

Designing teams also requires consideration of strategy, process, benefits, and necessary skills required to accomplish goals. It is also important to support team members by providing training and criteria for success without micromanaging or devaluing the work of the team.

*"positive leader influence over teams is often a matter of influence, through developing relationships and providing support, rather than of control." (p110)*

## POSITIVE LEADERSHIP & THE ORGANIZATION

Murphy & Louis shift the focus away from individuals and small groups to broaden the lens of leadership and address the whole organization, or school. They argue that it is not enough to build strong relationships and strong teams.

Positive leaders must also attend to the structure and goals of the organization as a whole. Research indicates that three factors, organizational climate, culture and productivity can be impacted by leaders but that they often overlap and are not clearly distinguished from one another.

## PERFORMANCE & PRODUCTIVITY

School performance and productivity are often referred to as effectiveness or success.

Unfortunately, Murphy and Louis relate that there is little empirical evidence to directly tie school success to positive leadership. Success or effectiveness is more often related to student achievement, but what constitutes achievement may vary from student to student, teacher to teacher and school

to school. Murphy & Louis claim that parent or 'client' satisfaction, a key factor in performance rating, is often more related to satisfaction with their child's teacher than with the education system. I would argue that the increased diversity of student needs and the push to have those needs met in the education system might indicate a shift in parent focus for satisfaction.

## CLIMATE

Organizational climate is described as the general feeling one has for their work setting or of the health of the organization they work in. It is difficult to measure but is nonetheless considered important. Factors include feeling connected, having a sense of belonging, equity, trust, autonomy, support, engagement, leader-member relations, and clear objectives.

By influencing individual experiences through the development and maintenance of strong positive relationships, leaders can impact organizational climate and performance.

Individuals that are satisfied with their jobs, are committed, want to stay, are engaged and feel like they are treated fairly, contribute to positive organizational climate.

## CULTURE

Schools are steeped in culture that is influenced by widely accepted beliefs about the roles and responsibilities of teachers and schools. The purpose and underlying values of schools and those that work in education are often taken for granted. Like organizational climate, organizational culture is difficult to measure yet considered necessary for organizational success.

Murphy and Louis cite the research of Denison and his colleagues between 1990 and 2003, that identify four main elements of organizational culture:

- involvement - by building social networks that give voice, engage and empower
- consistency - norms rooted in core values with consensus
- adaptability-responsive to needs and willing to collectively take risks
- mission - clear purpose and direction

## Summary & Thoughts...

Murphy and Louis provide school leaders with guiding principles steeped in research from both leadership theories and positive psychology. It is an amalgamation of several leadership styles that they acknowledge cannot be fully realized in every school environment by every leader. It is what leaders should aspire to be but allows for flexibility and choice of focus based on the context of the school environment and the organizational culture.

The idea of 'spirituality' is up for debate, and values and morals can be interpreted in different ways, by various cultures. Although the language for values and beliefs may be similar across schools and between cultures, there may be different understandings of those values which may prove challenging for leaders, especially in schools that are becoming increasingly diverse.

Although not explicitly stated, Murphy and Louis support current research that stresses the importance of followership influence in leadership success. They are inherently inseparable due to their reliance on mutually beneficial relationships. Unfortunately the theory of Positive School Leadership is still in its infancy as Murphy and Louis admit that there is a paucity of research in some areas. Still, their research analysis effectively links positive psychology to positive leadership. Further research is needed to prove its effectiveness in practice.

## Discussion Questions

What other leadership styles does Positive School Leadership pull from?

What does Positive School Leadership address in a school culture that might not be seen in other organizations?

What challenges might school leaders face when using Positive School Leadership?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of this theory?

