

Leadership Learning – the Praxis of Dilemma Management

Carol Cardno

Abstract: *We are exhorted on many fronts to believe that leadership is critical to organisational success yet we know that many leaders fail to resolve the crucial, long-term problems that mitigate effectiveness, especially those that arise in the context of performance appraisal. It is timely to revisit the art of dilemma management which constitutes essential, deep learning for educational leaders. Critiqued as disquieting and perhaps not easily transferable to non-Western settings, such learning involves not only the demands of theoretical understanding but also the determination to change one's practice. Research in New Zealand reveals that when 'leadership dilemmas' can be recognised and when defensiveness can be countered, then skills for double-loop learning can be practiced. This metaknowledge is the cornerstone of self-awareness and self-discipline that underpins the praxis of dilemma management – an approach that simultaneously engages head, heart and hand.*

Introduction

Dilemmas are complex, tension-fraught problems that arise when a leader is challenged to achieve more than one objective. Faced with such daunting problems, leaders typically adopt a stance associated with the most common belief related to resolving dilemmas: that they are irresolvable. Consequently, they avoid having to deal with them. However, if an organisation is to survive and succeed in achieving its goals this can only be accomplished when leaders are prepared to acknowledge and confront dilemmas and attempt their resolution, especially when these dilemmas are associated with the effectiveness of the core work of the organisation.

Educational leaders today cannot ignore the expectation that the focus of their influence must be directed towards improving the achievement of students. Furthermore, standards-based reforms all around the world have increased the degree of accountability for principals, especially in relation to managing the performance of the professionals responsible for carrying out the core task of the organisation: learning and teaching. It is in this context of performance appraisal that a particular type of dilemma emerges when organisational needs and the needs of an individual are in conflict. I call this type of dilemma a *leadership dilemma* for several reasons. Firstly, those who exercise leadership at all levels of organisations (from classrooms to whole institution) have the power to influence the learning-teaching environment for better or worse, thus they must take personal responsibility and own these dilemmas as they alone are in a position to directly lead change in both organisational and individual practice. This happens through face-to-face encounters

that implicate them wholly in the success or otherwise of the resolution process. Secondly, these are leadership dilemmas because, once owned by the leader, it is a leadership obligation to declare this ownership to self and others as a starting point for dilemma management. Thirdly, in leadership dilemmas there is tension between organisational concerns and a concern for the relationship between the leader and the individual(s) implicated in the dilemma. Fourthly, this type of dilemma differs from what has been termed an *organisational dilemma* (Dimmock, 1999; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Owens, 2004), which is a dilemma nevertheless, but may involve the leader only indirectly, and often by exerting a mediating influence on structures and systems through distribution of leadership to others who are part of the action-mix surrounding a long-term solution. In contrast, the leadership dilemma arises most often in the context of a leader directly managing the performance of colleagues.

A leadership dilemma then, in the sense in which I use the term, arises in the course of working with and through others to achieve the organisation's goals. When a colleague's performance jeopardises goals and when it is not possible to resolve the issue in a collaborative manner and without conflict, then the leader could be facing a dilemma. It manifests as tensions between a leader's concern to do what is best for the organisation whilst at the same time maintaining a positive working relationship with a colleague. Thus, in the context of performance appraisal such dilemmas are experienced by principals in smaller schools, and in larger schools by principals, senior managers who appraise middle managers, and middle managers who appraise staff in their teams. I contend that such dilemmas can be managed to resolution despite many views to the contrary (Cuban, 2001; Dimmock, 1999; Dimmock & Walker, 2005). But this can only occur when a leader learns how to approach the management of dilemmas in a productive way. This requires the meshing both before and during action of a high degree of theorising about the problem with a self-critique that is both cognitively and emotionally demanding whilst the action is occurring. This is the praxis of dilemma management. Each time a leader embarks on the process of managing a dilemma, and in every encounter between the leader and others, there is praxis as the theory of learning associated with managing leadership dilemmas interacts with the practice in a reciprocal way.

In learning about how to manage leadership dilemmas a conscious choice is made to deal with both the organisational and relational horns of the dilemma simultaneously. Leaders learn about the theory of theories of practice or action that guide their behaviour and this constitutes a curriculum for dilemma management (Cardno, 1999). They learn how to put this curriculum to use at a highly practical level as they continue to internalise the skills of productive approaches that allow dilemmas to be managed to resolution. This places a demand on the leader to engage head, heart and hand in a process of on-going learning. As Sergiovanni (1992) asserts, this integration of head (cognitive engagement with and self-knowledge about theories of practice and mindscapes that form the basis for reflection); heart (self-awareness of beliefs and values that determine one's world view); and hand (actual behaviour and choosing what to do) is the challenge in terms of alignment. In his terms, 'the head of leadership is shaped by the heart and drives the hand' (p. 7). Senge (1990) also refers to the discipline of managing mental models, that is, 'surfacing, testing, and improving our internal pictures of how the world works' (p. 174) in order to change what we do. The learning associated with this requires familiarity with the 'body of theory and method for reflection and inquiry on the reasoning that underlies our actions' (p.182). The

strongest catalyst for engaging in such learning and internalising it so that it is actually transferred to practice is awareness that some of the problems that confront a leader are particularly difficult to resolve and because of their complexity and recurrence are actually dilemmas. This is the first point at which praxis can occur: when the practitioner can intellectualise about the nature of a leadership dilemma and then act to confront it.

The nature of dilemmas

We know a great deal about dilemmas of many types, and the messages associated with their management are confusing to say the least. We encounter these dilemmas in organisations and in our personal lives.

Organisational dilemmas

In their broadest, universal and organisational sense, dilemmas are always with us because, as Hoy and Miskel (2005, p. 421) assert, 'a dilemma arises when one is confronted with decision alternatives in which any choice sacrifices some valued objective in the interest of other objectives'. This immediately establishes the notion that both horns of a dilemma can not be attended to and sets up the tendency to polarise achievement of one objective at the expense of the other. Yet, leaders know that value-complexities invariably come into play if they embark on the path to resolution. Owens (2004) illustrates this value tension in a fundamental dilemma facing formal organisations: the tension between order and freedom which is played out in many arenas such as fostering innovation and individual creativeness whilst ensuring this does not conflict with formal requirements and plans. As well as value tensions, many dilemmas that beset the organisation are in essence about ethical issues and Dempster and Berry (2003) question the ability of school leaders to make decisions that are fraught with ethical difficulty. They refer to the complex nature of problems that arise, for example, in relation to ethical decisions needing to be made about racism and sexuality issues. Their research reveals that, 'increasingly, principals find themselves caught between local school management needs and priorities and centrally determined policy initiatives' (p. 456). Similar dilemmas at an organisational level have been identified by Dimmock (1999) where ambiguity has been exacerbated by school-system restructuring creating tension for the principal caught between being part of the new system and their own school-based management initiatives. The general characteristics of a dilemma are easily recognised by practitioners in organisations because we also experience dilemmas in a personal context.

General dilemma characteristics

Every leader is familiar with the sense of finding themselves in a sticky situation or between a rock and a hard place. They anticipate an uncomfortable situation because of the sense that whichever way they turn they are likely to have to choose between equally undesirable or conflicted alternatives and this creates indecisiveness. Thus a dilemma is a complex problem characterised by multiple demands or goals, creating difficult options and presenting irreconcilable choices. These complex problems persist, they resurface or recur and often our attempts to resolve them only exacerbate the tensions and conflict. To attend to one aspect of the dilemma means sacrificing another aspect. It is not surprising then to find that whenever possible the need to resolve the dilemma is avoided or at best the dilemma is polarised and one aspect is attended to at the expense of others. At this point the distinction between mere problems and dilemmas is important in understanding the nature of a leadership dilemma.

Recognising dilemmas

In the vast literature that exists on problem-solving and decision-making in organisations, Owens (2004) reminds us that problems are most often categorised into those that lend themselves to intuition or to rational models of problem-solving and those that test the limits of rationality. Rational models, such as those suggesting a step-by-step approach to defining and analysing the problem, developing alternative solutions and then acting on the best solution, are confounded when problems are beset by the uncertainty and ambiguity that are dominant features of the real world of educational management. A crucial issue in leadership learning is to build the capacity of leaders to determine the degree of complexity of a problem by reflecting on the problem holistically 'understanding [...] the complexities, interconnections, ambiguity and uncertainty of educational organisations' (Owens, 2004, p. 301). Dilemmas are just such problems requiring an alternative approach to the one leaders would adopt to address simple, routine problems.

The notion of tame problems versus wicked problems (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Cuban, 2001) provides further clarification of the differences between problems and dilemmas. Cuban makes a distinction between 'tame problems' which are familiar and frequent situations to which routine procedures and solutions can be applied as opposed to 'wicked' problems. Wicked problems are 'ill-defined, ambiguous, complex, interconnected situations packed with potential conflict' (Cuban, 2001, p. 10). According to Cuban these problems are actually dilemmas.

Messages that reinforce the impossibility of resolution

Since we think, when faced with a dilemma, that we have to choose between two equally unattractive options, it is not surprising to believe that dilemmas cannot be resolved. Because dilemmas are exceedingly *complex problems* the very idea that they can be managed is unthinkable. Dimmock (1999) explains that whilst a problem may be solved, dilemmas are distinguishable from problems in that they are taken to be irresolvable because in attending to one element or horn of a dilemma, others are left unresolved. In Cuban's view dilemmas are 'messy, complicated and conflict-filled situations that require undesirable choices between competing, highly-prized values that cannot be simultaneously or fully satisfied' (2001, p. 10). They arise when:

- People compete for limited resources
- Hold conflicting values
- Wrestle with diverse expectations held by others.

Neither of these authors believes that dilemmas can be resolved. Dimmock asserts that the management of dilemmas begins with the ability 'to conceptualise, reconceptualise and redefine the situation, and then to identify its elements and the values underlying it' (1999, p. 110). At best, however, the principal can learn to *cope* by having the ability to employ a range of management strategies. In a recent study of Chinese principals in Hong Kong, this coping takes many forms such as transfer of a teacher to another school, attempting to compromise, acquiescing with seniors or withdrawing from direct involvement (Dimmock & Walker, 2005). Cuban (2001) is of the view that dilemmas cannot be solved although he believes they can be managed. He conceptualises this management of dilemmas as a form of *satisficing* which requires compromise and helps one to cope with the 'debris of disappointment' (p.16) that is the consequence of repeated failure and associated guilt. Accordingly if one accepts this limitation then the best a leader can achieve is to continue to create compromises on the

understanding that problems are *solved* but dilemmas *recur*. In fact, what we may be seeing here is evidence of various ways in which the confrontation of a dilemma is *avoided*.

Resolving leadership dilemmas

As a contrast to believing that coping or satisficing are sufficient outcomes in the management of leadership dilemmas, I present an alternative view that it is both possible and imperative for leaders to manage dilemmas to resolution. A resolved dilemma does not recur. Leadership effectiveness presupposes the ability to address these tough problems in such a way that they remain solved. I am suggesting here a theory of effectiveness that could be extremely challenging for leaders to adopt. In this view of effectiveness an educational leader makes the following commitment. They commit themselves to making a conscious choice to manage dilemmas and they commit themselves to learning and internalising a curriculum that embraces the theory and practice of managing leadership dilemmas. Ultimately they commit to praxis in theorising about their action as they embrace and enact a productive approach to managing dilemmas every time they are encountered.

Methodology and results

In the fifteen years or so that I have dedicated to an understanding of the nature of leadership dilemmas and their management in the context of performance appraisal, I have researched practice in a variety of ways. This is a form of 'rolling research' using opportunity sampling to collect data from educational leaders participating in leadership development programmes at Unitec Institute of Technology in Auckland, New Zealand. The study reported in this paper was conducted to increase understanding about the nature of complex problems encountered by leaders in schools with the aim of investigating how practitioners perceive and respond to leadership dilemmas. This study reports the findings from opportunity sampling of two cohorts of students who participated in 2005/6 (Phase One – n=35) and 2006 (Phase Two – n=27) surveys. Phase One data were collected from participants *before* they were introduced to theoretical resources for dilemma management. The aim was to investigate experience of dilemmas and how they responded to these complex problems. These data contribute to building a knowledge platform for understanding the nature of dilemmas as perceived by participants. Phase Two data were collected *after* participants had encountered the theory and skills of dilemma management in formal learning situations and had the opportunity to engage in workshops and work-based practice to develop productive dialogue skills. The aim was to investigate the extent to which formal theory and skill learning had altered their initial response to dilemmas. Thus, Phase Two data build a platform of knowledge about how practitioners confront the dilemmas they encounter.

The survey tools were structured interview schedules administered as 45 minute open-ended questionnaires in both phases of the study because of time pressure, which is an acceptable occurrence within the bounds of qualitative research (Fontana & Frey, 2000). The data were analysed thematically using coding to identify common themes and organise these within categories that are suggested by the data itself and confirmed in the literature that deals with theorising about complex problems that present as dilemmas for leaders (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Cardno, 1999).

Why practitioners think they may have a dilemma.

Practitioners were asked whether they encountered problems that they would consider to be *dilemmas* and to comment on why they would classify them as such. Every single respondent

answered in the affirmative regarding having encountered dilemmas. Beliefs about the nature of these dilemmas are reflected in the following participant statements.

Dilemmas cannot be resolved

For some, dilemmas were problems that could not be resolved easily or at all.

One respondent comments that dilemmas are encountered 'because the needs of both parties cannot ever be met'. Another comments that dilemmas are problems solved at a cost: 'There is usually a cost in determining a positive solution/resolution and when cost is related to personal relationships it is always difficult'. Yet another stated, 'Yes, I have dilemmas. These are problematic occurrences that involve a colleague, colleagues or myself, in which I feel helpless to support or solve'.

A number of themes about the nature of these dilemmas also emerged from the data.

Persistence of problem

Dilemmas were seen as problems that had not been effectively addressed in the past and hence persisted. Several respondents stated that in their view these problems remained dilemmas because: 'for me these usually involve issues with professional colleagues that are not new – existed prior to me trying to deal with it'; 'it was a problem I inherited'; 'despite trying to address the problems from many different angles they are still problems'.

Tough messages (feedback) needed

For at least two participants, a dilemma involves: 'Delivering hard messages in a way that keeps people's mana intact and in a way that will more than likely get them on board to make a change – but without compromising the truth'; 'good communication but some people feel threatened'.

Fear of confronting the issue (own inability)

Several respondents commented that they identified dilemmas because these problems needed to be confronted and they were challenged by this. 'I want to seek and accept advice – judgement of my ability. I know I need help but don't want anyone to know I need it. For example, managing staff – questioning own management. Is the problem the staff or you? Limited experience makes it difficult'; 'I prefer to lead by example and get on with it, trying to avoid confrontation at all costs'; 'The danger is with me asking for greater commitment I isolate them'; 'I find it far more stressful to deal with than any other problem as my philosophical beliefs are being challenged'; 'Largely, I ignore it and I say, 'it will be OK' to myself'.

Intuitively leaders *know* when they have a problem that is 'wicked' (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Cuban, 2001) tough or challenging in its complexity, value-conflict laden or just something they dread dealing with. Participants in this study have also confirmed that the issues central to their belief that what they might be facing is a dilemma are those identified in the existing theory base.

Issues at the centre of challenging problems

Practitioners were asked to identify the issues that created challenging problems for them. What practitioners have revealed is that when a problem has aspects that challenge them at a deep level, these trigger the notion that the problem they are dealing with might be a 'hot situation' (Argyris & Schon, 1996, p. 159): in other words, a dilemma.

Almost all of the issues identified dealt with *people* at the centre of a complex problem.

Responses have been clustered under three categories: firstly *managing people issues*; secondly, *managing resources for people issues*; and thirdly, *managing personal issues*. Some examples are provided below:

1. Managing People Issues (focus on performance)

- Staff performance – maintaining standards
- Underqualified and ineffective staff member
- Developing an underperforming staff member
- Communication with staff / explaining to staff
- Excellent teacher – poor manager performance issue
- Trying to change older teachers' practices.

2. Managing Resources for People Issues (focus on equitable distribution)

- Meeting timetable requests with staff shortages
- Work overload / lack of time for change management
- Meeting needs of organisation and individual (workload).

3. Managing Personal Issues

- Hate having to deliver hard messages
- Being a leader as well as a friend to staff
- Accepting advice and help without feeling threatened
- Not enough time to focus on the 'big things'
- Nervous because of being new to the job
- Reluctance because people might disagree with my decision.

Every issue for respondents involved people – and/or the resources people needed to perform their work. Of interest here is the surfacing of personal feelings of inadequacy or disquiet when a dilemma is known to exist. Perhaps it is not therefore a case of the leader's ability to *recognise* a dilemma, but to *acknowledge that it needs to be confronted* that is the first learning challenge in dilemma management.

Self-reported approaches to solving problems

The participants were asked to recount the ways in which they would normally deal with problems that they believed were dilemmas. The data reveals four dominant approaches. The first approach was to speak directly to the person involved in the dilemma. The second approach was to engage in discussion about or around the dilemma as a form of preparation for dealing with it. The third approach was trying to achieve a balance between opposing needs. The fourth approach was providing support for the staff member in a variety of ways. Several respondents indicated the *direct approach* as follows: 'Talking to the person about how I felt about their behaviour'; 'Speak with the person or persons concerned about the problem and how best we could move forward'; 'Discuss specifically (as much as possible)

the concerns and agree a course of action'; 'Discussing individually with this staff member ways they can deal with these issues'; Many respondents commented on their approach to dealing with a dilemma involving preparation of some kind. They said this in various ways, for example: 'Such problems would be dealt with by confiding in a 'close, trusted' and critical friend or colleague who would/could offer some advice or suggestions about how to handle the dilemma'; 'Ask/seek help from trusted and respected mentor'; 'Talk to others outside my organisation';

For a further few respondents, the issue of *achieving balance* between tensions and needs was important. They say, for example: 'Find a balance that ensures both sets of needs are adequately met. Emphasis on the needs of students'; 'Either a compromise or one party loses out completely'; 'Move in direction which appears to bring greatest good, maybe for the individual or maybe for our school'.

Several respondents indicated that they would provide *support for staff members* in their approach to dealing with the dilemma. This could be provided, for example, in the following ways:

- Allocate extra resources
- Arrange professional development
- Bring in a professional advisor.

Support for leaders themselves was also suggested in the following forms:

- Mentor
- Expert advice
- Learning about conflict management
- Professional development
- Continued leadership study.

Self-reported success of approaches to dilemmas

Participants were asked to comment on the success of their approaches to dilemmas. The overwhelming pattern in these responses is the mention of the duration of time it has taken to resolve (or not resolve) a dilemma. In addition, there is mention of why, in the views of some of these respondents, the situation has not changed.

Several respondents refer to the time span of the dilemma they are talking about. This ranges from 'problem lasted for 18 months'; 'it occurred over two years'; 'this problem has occurred for the past three years'; to 'on-going problem' and 'it is a long-term problem'.

One respondent says: 'When I returned from overseas I found the problem was recurring'.

Another says: 'This has lasted two years. It is significant because it relates directly to the core business of teaching/schools, impacting on student learning and requires fundamental shifts in teaching practice'.

And yet another states: 'Long term – before I arrived as principal. Occasionally recurs. It involves people, personalities, feelings and emotions'.

For several respondents, by reflecting on the effectiveness of their approach to a dilemma,

they view the situation as one they cannot see changing. They say, for example: 'It is different from less challenging problems as I cannot solve the problem myself. The effects of the problem radiate through the Department'. It is beyond my power to change this'; 'The problem continues – it has become self-perpetuating and therefore destructive'; 'Hard to deal with this aggressive and abrupt staff member'; 'To date attempts to resolve this problem have been an unmitigated failure'; 'They are successful for short periods but people always slip back into same habits once focus has gone'; 'Certainly I could have given it more time and attention but often that is easier said than done'.

Whilst the evidence shows that practitioners are aware of the need for a direct approach to individuals implicated in a dilemma, only a very small proportion suggested this option. The majority of responses were consistent with what is known in relation to facing up to a complex problem – that is, that it is much thought about, advice may be sought, support may be provided but, for a variety of reasons, action is delayed or avoided altogether. The reasons provided to justify delay and avoidance are related to non-ownership of the dilemma as an issue that the leader has specific responsibility to deal with and the matter of time. The time factor appears to be a big issue in terms of the duration of the problem and the amount of time practitioners believe they will need to spend on resolving the dilemma. The respondents have been painfully honest in their evaluation of their own effectiveness in relation to dealing with a dilemma.

Phase Two Results

A specific curriculum is taught to assist the integration of theory and practice when practitioners attempt to manage dilemmas by engaging in reflecting-in-action. This is a second point of praxis where theory and action reciprocally interact. Their knowledge of the nature of dilemmas is heightened, their knowledge of their own responses is heightened. Above all, their knowledge of *learning how to un-learn in order to re-learn* is also heightened. Eraut (1994) advocates the use of this sort of control knowledge or *metaknowledge* in leadership development:

that is, knowledge about knowledge and its use, which guides one's thinking and one's learning. In its most situational form, this might include self-awareness; in its most abstract form it covers thinking strategies and overarching theories that appear to govern one's behaviour. Its core is self-management. (pp. 95, 96)

Leaders who have this metaknowledge should be able to move through stages of learning that mirror the stages of dilemma management. Beginning with the ability to acknowledge and articulate a dilemma, the leader has to know how to surmount defensive barriers in order to confront the problem. This is only possible when they know about and can apply the skills of double-loop change. In all subsequent engagements leaders need to be highly self-aware of the theory-in-use they practice when they are under pressure, and how this inhibits both on-going learning and effectiveness.

Changed views about confronting dilemmas

Without exception participants responded that an understanding of the nature of leadership dilemmas and dilemma management theory increased their willingness and confidence to confront a dilemma. Some of these responses are as follows: 'I am now more accepting that

dilemmas will inevitably occur and that they are part of a leadership role. My ability to deal with them will be a measure of my success as an educational leader;’ ‘I now acknowledge and/or identify when issues I face are dilemmas. This can be challenging as I now feel obliged to consider possible resolution as opposed to a situation which is too difficult to deal with and I can therefore ignore;’ ‘I would confront the dilemma directly, assertively and quickly;’ ‘When faced with a choice – choose action over inaction;’ ‘Recognition has been the main thing for me. It is hard to resolve a dilemma if you are unable to realise a dilemma exists;’ ‘The theory reminds you it is possible to solve a dilemma’.

In relation to acknowledging the common tendency to avoid dealing with the dilemma participants are extremely honest as the following responses show: ‘Knowing this theory allows you to take on dilemmas with more confidence – at least it allows you to attempt something that might otherwise not have been attempted;’ ‘For me, studying this theory has made me more aware of my shortcomings. It has also meant that I can recognise now if I am using strategies like ‘soft sell’ so I can improve my practice;’ ‘Increased confidence that I have the knowledge to sort this out and trying not to be sidelined along the way;’ ‘The theory impacts on my awareness of avoidance as a common form of problem-solving for managers’.

Application of new theory knowledge and skills

Participants were asked to comment on how the theory they had learnt had an impact on their actions in relation to managing a dilemma. Only one third of the responses (6 out of 17) indicated that attempts had been made to confront a dilemma. The remainder talked in terms of anticipated attempts, and two participants reported not being in a position to resolve an actual dilemma. The following comments exemplify what participants say about actual attempts to confront a dilemma: ‘I start with identification of the dilemma. On the one hand ... on the other hand and seek all information that is possible. I have tried to be open about the outcome even if it may not be what I wanted. It is hard to stop going into the resolution with pre-defined expectations;’ ‘I now use the theory as a framework to support the action. It informs what I do, when and how;’ ‘I anticipate defensiveness – on the part of both parties. I now have a theory base to inform my actions;’ ‘Talked directly to the person involved and stated my concerns and why I have these concerns. Worked with them to gather relevant and accurate information and we dealt with emotions where necessary. My aim was for a double-loop learning solution’.

Of the 17 respondents 7 specifically mentioned that they had attempted to or would attempt to apply the Triple I approach (Cardno, 2001) in their efforts to resolve a dilemma.

On-going challenges in changing practice

Participants were asked to comment on what they felt would be the on-going challenges for them in terms of both learning and changing practice.

Every single respondent referred to the need to practice and of the 17, 10 indicated that internalising the theory alone was a challenge. In relation to on-going learning they identified the need for the following:

- Role models in the school who could demonstrate the values that underpinned a theory of action approach to dilemma management
- Coaching partnerships with others to strengthen skills
- Leaders who were knowledgeable about dilemma management theory

- People around them who knew about dilemma management theory and could assist them as they practised the skills
- Building a culture of dilemma management rather than dilemma avoidance in the school.

These issues are exemplified in the following comments: 'I would like to practice this but it will be difficult unless I am supported by leaders who understand the theory'; 'Unless we practise we can't make the theory relevant or contextual'; 'Getting others to undertake training is necessary. I need the whole SMT to know about dilemma management, ideally the whole staff should know it'.

The most significant data that emerged from this second phase of research related to the engagement of practitioners with a theory of practice that allowed them to consider an alternative to avoiding dilemmas. If, as this small study has revealed, participants have moved from a stance of inaction to a stance of theory-informed-action then they may be ready to engage in praxis at this point of managing dilemmas. Here it is the ability to theorise about the nature of and beliefs about managing dilemmas to resolution that might lead to changed action that creates opportunity for praxis. As one participant notes: 'Praxis makes you stronger. You are more inclined to believe an action that is backed by theory. You are more prepared to enter a difficult situation if you believe in your action'.

Preparation for praxis: Building reciprocity between theory and practice

A curriculum for dilemma management

Leaders need recourse to intellectual resources in order to manage leadership dilemmas. These include familiarity with a specific theory base and development of a set of skills related to productive reasoning. This curriculum can be described as having the following components:

- Confronting the dilemma
- Overcoming avoidance and attempting resolution
- Learning the skills of productive reasoning
- Using the skills - reflection-in-action
- Creating a dilemma management culture.

Confronting the dilemma

Leaders should be able to use both intuition and a holistic understanding of problems to help them to recognise a dilemma when they encounter problems that are complex and likely to recur. Senge (1990) promotes the value of a systems-thinking orientation that takes into account the underlying and interconnected patterns of problems that need attention at a deep level to uncover and address their sources. Leadership dilemmas are such problems because unless the beliefs and assumptions that have led to their long and festering life are openly tested, nothing much changes. Hence, the very persistence of a problem is an indicator that it could be a dilemma.

Having recognised (and owned) a dilemma, a leader must then be able to acknowledge it and make a commitment to confronting it. An ability to articulate this both for themselves

and for others involved requires both head and heart working in tandem – before the hand is played in the form of instigating a dialogue. One part of an effective dialogue about a dilemma is the ability of the leader to *say* to others that the problem is complex and to demonstrate this by mapping the tensions in such a way that the concern for meeting *both* organisational needs and individual needs simultaneously is declared publicly. Capable dilemma articulation requires a statement of, on the one hand, the organisational strand of the dilemma and its attendant concerns and, on the other hand, the collegial relationship strand of the dilemma and its attendant concerns. This also allows the leader to make their views testable and to test the perceptions of others, and encourage them to articulate their assumptions about the dilemma. Leaders engaging in such learning are encouraged to write dilemma maps which also serve to aid reflection- on- action: that is, looking critically at past attempts and considering how open display of a leadership dilemma might lead to new attempts to put a particular theory into action. There is evidence that in some cases at least this learning is transferred to practice. As one participant states: ‘The skill is in being able to identify simple problems that can be solved by traditional decision-making processes and dilemmas which need to be treated quite differently’.

Overcoming avoidance and attempting resolution

Leaders faced with the realisation that they are dealing with a leadership dilemma might be able to recognise this and may also be capable of articulating the dilemma clearly. We cannot be sure, however, that they will actually confront the dilemma. This involves moving out of a comfort zone into extremely risky or even dangerous ground. It involves meeting with a colleague or other person in a face-to-face situation or communicating a message about their dilemma in an effective way – so that the issues are mapped for all to see. Knowing what we know about the most common responses to dilemmas, even the most experienced leaders will find ways to do little or nothing, or they could create even more tension around the dilemma by failing in an attempt to resolve it.

Participants in this study have stated categorically that after learning the theory base their self-awareness is heightened and they are cognisant of the fact of avoidance. As one participant reveals, the difficulty has been: ‘challenging my own avoidance – the preference to ignore it and hope it goes away’; Another states: ‘I do know that if I see a problem and do nothing, I am part of the problem!’.

A rich and salutary body of research exists around the topic of why leaders do little or nothing to confront the crucial matters of poor performance and incompetence amongst professional colleagues. Study after study reveals that when faced by these challenging problems most leaders are overwhelmed to the extent where they avoid the dilemma or polarise it and hence avoid dealing with its opposing strands simultaneously and effectively (Beer, 1987; Bridges, 1992; Cardno, 1998; Robinson, 1993). The typical and most common response is to *do nothing*. Thus the dilemma (and its threat) is avoided, heads are buried in the sand once again, whilst guilt might be felt about one’s ineffectiveness – unless this is job-threatening it too can be relegated to the ‘too hard to think about today’ basket. When leaders polarise the horns of a dilemma they often adopt a *be nice* approach where they have decided that relationship preservation is the priority and the organisational goal is sacrificed. Conversely, in a *be nasty* approach the relationship is sacrificed but achievement of an organisational goal (however temporary, and usually based on compliance not commitment to change) is made the priority, In making these unsatisfactory choices the overarching value that drives practice has been identified as that of *defensiveness*.

Learning the skills of productive reasoning

There is no context like performance appraisal for heightening defensiveness both in those being appraised and those doing the appraising. Yet this is the very context in which leadership dilemmas arise and in which a leader is being exhorted to adopt a non-avoidance stance so that dilemmas are actually confronted. We know a great deal about defensiveness from the work of Argyris (1990; 1995) and Argyris and Schön (1996). When individuals on their own behalf, or on behalf of the organisation are threatened or embarrassed they become defensive. When conflict and value tensions are present we invariably act on a 'theory of action' in which the governing values are control and avoidance of unpleasantness. In this programme of behaviour our actions are driven by a wish to win and a wish to protect ourselves and others that overrides what we may espouse as a collaborative style of leadership. This defensive style is not only ineffective but also likely to heighten the defensiveness of others and create barriers to uncovering and examining the assumptions at the source of complex problems.

What is needed when a leader must confront a dilemma is a theory of action that is productive and governed by an altogether different set of values. In this programme of behaviour our actions are driven by a wish to generate with others the valid information needed to appreciate all dimensions of the problem. In addition this approach values moving towards joint rather than preordained solutions and seeking commitment from both parties that relies on joint monitoring of change. This is a theory of action often espoused as an ideal by leaders. When resistance to change is encountered and when goals are in opposition, this is a difficult theory to put into use and most leaders when faced with a dilemma revert to the default programme that is common to every human being – that of defensive reasoning.

Defensive reasoning is sustained by a leadership response that is called single-loop learning (Argyris, 1990). Guided by defensive values a leader who fails in an attempt to resolve a dilemma tries a variety of different tactics that are consistent with the need to win and keep control unilaterally whilst avoiding unpleasantness and protecting self and others. To break out of this loop requires a form of praxis based on implementing a new theory of action leading not only to different actions but different actions guided by an alternative set of values – those of providing and receiving honest feedback that is evidence-based, negotiating solutions jointly and both parties making a commitment to monitoring these solutions. Double-loop learning further requires an understanding of and theorising about reflection – and what it really means to be a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983) in the midst of dealing with a leadership dilemma.

Using the skills - reflection-in-action

Reflection is something that almost every management text recommends that leaders do. It is associated with notions of deep thinking, critical reflection upon one's own practice and the use of hindsight and theory to conceptualise and reconceptualise issues – especially those related to practice. Many of these exhortations about reflection imply a form of reflection-on-action which Schön reminds us usually focuses on thinking about action after the event and this is often directed towards preparation for the next similar event. This type of reflection does have a place in the range of resources leaders need to manage dilemmas to resolution. However, they also need to engage the more demanding form of reflection which is the ability to *reflect-in-action*. In order to do this one has to bring reasoning informed by theory to bear on the action whilst in the throes of carrying out that action. This is exactly what

dilemma management demands. It is this ability to reflect-in-action that enables a leader to recognise defensiveness, abandon single-loop learning as inappropriate for the particular situation, and move into a new learning loop (double-loop learning) that is dependent on the adoption of productive values *and* do this in the process of the engagement itself. It calls for the ability to stop action as you theorise and re-start with the aim of applying the theory more effectively. Participants in this study have recognised the high learning demand involved. For example, respondents assert: 'I need to learn how I can reflect during practice as opposed to after'; 'I will anticipate defensiveness – on the part of both parties. I now have a theory base to inform my actions'. 'I have to practice and keep reading the theory, particularly the 7 point checklist for dialogue. Keep that sheet on my desk'.

Several skills have been suggested as the means for achieving reflection-in-action involving double-loop learning. Seemingly simple yet extremely challenging rules of thumb can be applied to generate valid information in a bilateral way (Argyris, 1985; Cardno, 1999). Cardno (2001) has proposed the Triple I approach which uses the prompts information, illustration and inquiry to bring productive values into play. Garmston and Wellman (1998) suggest the learning of discussion skills that balance advocacy and inquiry in a quest for honest communication.

Creating a dilemma management culture

Schein (2004) asserts that culture is closely related to the way in which an organisation or group goes about solving its problems. If an organisation is capable of detecting and correcting errors it is developing capacity for organisational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1996) which is a matter of individual learning that can become embedded in the norms of an organisation and thus create a learning culture. Leaders play a key role in modelling such learning and transferring norms associated with the effective resolution of dilemmas to the culture of the organisation. The concepts of organisational culture and organisational learning are based on a fundamental premise of organisational memory that is carried by individuals and taught to new members of the group. Thus, for dilemma management to become embedded in the way the organisation attends to complex problems it needs to be taught as both theory and skills to all members of the organisation both those who lead and those dependent on effective leadership practice for the health and success of the organisation as a whole. Participants in this study have highlighted the issue of practising the skills of dilemma management in settings that are not supportive of its value base. For one at least, the ability to practice dilemma management will rely on 'changing the culture of the school'. For another: 'Educating others that dilemmas have a significant impact on the organisation is important. If problems are not addressed then the organisation cannot move forward, learning will not occur and change becomes increasingly difficult'.

Learning Challenges

Emotional Challenges

Because we are socialised into defensiveness, the wish to protect ourselves and others becomes an almost insurmountable barrier in the pursuit of dilemma resolution. Leaders who learn a dilemma management approach are shocked to find that they are largely to blame for dilemma persistence and recurrence because their behaviour has impacted on the dilemma. Even when they know this, and have learnt skills for reflection-in-action, they are

daunted by the expectation that they must deal with this difficult problem and do so openly and honestly. Piggot-Irvine (2003) found in her research that:

The emotional difficulty associated with this honesty is so intense for some participants that either they resign to avoid employing the skills and to continue with their status-quo interactions, or they reinterpret the productive reasoning to employ the behaviour changes without changing underlying values. (p.8)

Argyris (1990) alludes to an emotional challenge that exists for those who are redesigning their actions to be productive rather than defensive and reveals how attempts to practice new skills can make people feel embarrassed or even threatened. One participant in this study revealed just such a concern and says: 'It is very difficult to study and learn about this theory as it brings issues you are currently dealing with to the surface. When facilitating courses you need to be aware of the emotional state of participants. Can be a very 'raw' course – still well worth it'.

One of the most emotional aspects of the new learning is the realisation of how hard it is to jettison all that we know and have thought to be successful strategies in other situations. For many people their self-confidence and self-esteem are built around the way they have successfully used defensive approaches. In attempting to produce double-loop change, human beings are skilfully incompetent (Argyris, 1995) because the un-learning of single-loop change is so demanding. It can also be painful in terms of having to confront your own failure and disquieting for intelligent people who find themselves unable to change fundamental values although they can learn and reproduce the skills.

Diverse Learners

Whilst it is possible to conjecture that the management of leadership dilemmas might be influenced by factors such as gender or social class, there is little evidence to support this. In fact, what Argyris (1995) has found in his research over the years is that the dominant theory-in-use (regardless of what people might espouse) is about bypassing or covering up the truth and that this was found to be the same whether in Africa or the Far East, whether the subjects were young or old, male or female. This author contends that the behaviour of individuals varies widely but the theory they used to implement the behaviour did not. He says: 'For example, the actual behaviour called 'face saving' varies widely. But the proposition or the rule that is followed to produce face saving remains the same: when encountering embarrassment or threat, bypass it and cover up the bypass'. (p 21)

So Argyris suggests that whatever the element of diversity, there is likely to be difference between espoused theory of action and the theory-in-use and because of the universality of the particular defensive theory-in-use in the industrialised world, it may be possible to facilitate learning in a variety of settings.

Others, however have referred to the particular challenges of ethnic-cultural diversity in relation to organisational dilemmas. It is always salutary to read of cases where because of ethnic-cultural mores a hither-to-thought-to-be universal theory might not apply. Dimmock and Walker (2005) have shown in their Hong Kong study of dilemmas experienced by principals that these dilemmas were not resolved. At best Hong Kong principals used a variety of coping strategies that were 'frequently derived from cultural characteristics and

usually resulted in the status quo being maintained' (p. 177). Strong ethnic-cultural Chinese values of preserving harmonious relationships and respecting seniority often caused tension when in opposition with formal school goals. These authors suggest that approaches to dilemma management (see for example Cardno, 2001; Dempsey & Berry, 2003) may not be culturally appropriate outside of Western settings. It could be argued that whilst the Hong Kong Chinese principals demonstrated a deep-seated value of the need to maintain harmony in relationships with others, this is in itself a universal value, especially one that comes to the fore in understanding the nature of a leadership dilemma where one horn is significantly related to maintaining a harmonious collegial relationship. In our research in New Zealand (Cardno, 2001; Piggot-Irvine, 2003) we have worked with practitioners who are Maori, Pacific Island (from New Zealand, the Fiji Islands, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu) and Chinese for whom strong values about relationships and respect are fundamental ethnic-cultural mores. None of these participants have rejected the theory of dilemma management (Cardno, 2001) on the basis that it conflicts with personally held ethnic-cultural values. Instead within this so-called Western setting, some have asserted that being able to disclose the strength of these values in mapping and articulating a dilemma provides a stepping-stone to the stage of confrontation and dialogue. What might be more problematic in relation to expecting Chinese principals in Hong Kong to implement a productive theory-in-use is the tendency that 'they will not easily or openly disagree with someone in a hierarchically superior position, or even someone who is older' (Dimmock & Walker, 2005, p. 152). Being forthright in declaring the strands of a dilemma, and thus openly stating the concerns one has is the cornerstone of dilemma management. If this kind of feedback (normally associated with performance appraisal dilemmas) is viewed as something that 'destroys the harmony' and 'can cause irreparable damage to the employee's 'face' and ruin his or her loyalty to the organisation' (Hofstede, 1995, cited in Dimmock & Walker, 2005, p. 153) then not only is the appropriateness of this dilemma management approach in question but so is the very appropriateness of appraisal as it is construed in the Western world.

Conclusion

Dilemma management offers leaders a way to become more effective by solving long-term, recurring problems once and for all. If leaders do not accept accountability to resolve these particularly difficult, wicked problems then they are abrogating the expectation that they must bring about change for the better and especially change that impacts on learning – both student learning and teacher learning.

We know that leaders can recognise a dilemma when they encounter one. We also know that they avoid dealing with them. These complex problems trigger fear, nervousness, discomfort and a lack of confidence in the leader's own ability to tackle these 'hot' problems. Dilemmas are tailor-made to create defensiveness and it is this that can be countered when leaders' self-awareness is increased to enable them to understand the nature of a dilemma. Only then, can they consider learning how to adopt a different set of governing values that are productive. Being productive means being prepared to examine and alter the theory-in-use that supports defensive behaviour. This is no easy matter when all human beings are programmed to be defensive and the universal theory-in-use involves cover up and bypass of embarrassment or threat.

Learners of dilemma management skills can examine their current theory-in-use as a basis for learning skills and new governing values that are part of a theory of action that is

productive. The cognitive and practice demand for implementing this new theory of action is the very essence of praxis.

References

- Argyris, C. (1985) *Strategy, change and defensive routines*, Boston, Pitman.
- Argyris, C. (1990) *Overcoming organizational defenses: Facilitating organisational learning*, Boston, Allyn and Bacon.
- Argyris, C. (1995) Action science and organizational learning, *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 10(6) pp. 20-26.
- Argyris, C. & Schön, D. (1996) *Organizational learning II: Theory, method and practice*, Reading, MA, Addison Wesley.
- Beer, M. (1987) Performance appraisal, in J. B. Lorsch (Ed.) *Handbook of organisational behaviour* (pp. 286-300) New Jersey, Prentice Hall.
- Bridges, E. M. (1992) *The incompetent teacher*, Lewes, Falmer Press.
- Cardno, C. (1998) Making a difference by managing dilemmas, *Research Information for Teachers, SET One* (13). Wellington, New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Cardno, C. (1999) Problem-based methodology in leadership development: Interventions to improve dilemma management, *New Zealand Journal of Educational Administration*, 14, pp. 44-51.
- Cardno, C. (2001) Managing dilemmas in appraising performance: An approach for school leaders, in D. Middlewood & C. Cardno (Eds.) *Managing teacher appraisal and performance: A comparative approach* (pp. 143-159) London, RoutledgeFalmer.
- Cuban, L. (2001) *How can I fix it? Finding solutions and managing dilemmas: An educator's road map*, Columbia University, Teachers College Press.
- Dimmock, C. (1999) The management of dilemmas in school restructuring, *School Leadership & Management*, 19(1) pp. 97-113.
- Dimmock, C. & Walker, A. (2005) *Educational leadership: Culture and Diversity*, London, Sage.
- Dempster, N. & Berry, V. (2003) Blindfold in a minefield: principals' ethical decision-making, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 33(3) pp. 457-477.
- Eraut, M. (1994) *Developing professional knowledge and competence*, London, Falmer Press.
- Fontana, A. & Frey, J. H. (2000) *The interview: From structured questions to negotiated text*, in N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.) (pp. 645-672) Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.
- Garmston, R. & Wellman, B. (1998) Teacher talk that makes a difference, *Educational Leadership*, April, pp. 30-34.
- Hoy, W. K. & Miskel, C. G. (2005) *Educational administration: Theory, research and practice* (7th ed) New York, McGraw-Hill.
- Owens, R. G. (2004) *Organizational behaviour in education: Adaptive leadership and school reform* (8th ed.) Boston, Pearson.
- Piggot-Irvine, E. (2003) Facilitating openness and partnerships in action research, *Paper presented at the Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management World Congress*, University of Pretoria, South Africa.
- Robinson, V. (1993) *Problem-based methodology: Research for the improvement of practice*, Oxford, Pergamon Press.

Schön, D. A. (1983) *The reflective practitioner*, New York, Basic Books.

Schein, E. H. (2004) *Organizational culture and leadership* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, Jossey Bass.

Senge, P. (1990) *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organisation*, London, Century Business.

Sergiovanni, T. J. (1992) *Moral leadership: getting to the heart of school improvement*, San Francisco, Jossey Bass.

Author Details:

Professor Carol Cardno
Head of School of Education
Unitec Institute of Technology
Private Bag 92025
Auckland, New Zealand
E mail: ccardno@unitec.ac.nz