Sabbatical: The Hedgehog Concept

A strategic focus on organizational management that considers the relationship between passion, capability and drive

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Executive summary

This report addresses the issue of how on earth do we as Principals make time for what we deem to be of most importance in our schools.

It explains a number of research based approaches to how to identify your strategic focus, and lead change in school, as well as exploring Berlin (1953) and his somewhat tongue and cheek model, and then concludes with advice from a significant cohort of Auckland Principals about effective strategies they employ to simplify the work and maintain this focus.

Purpose

Our schools are becoming increasingly complex environments with competing demands which impact on our capacity to achieve the expected outcomes for our students at times, as well as impacting on the emotional wellbeing of those tasked with leading change.

The purpose of my research was to:

- Consider the complexities that exist within what we do in school.
- Explore the principles schools value
- Identify organizations which have simplified "the work"
- Determine strategies that these organizations have employed and
- Provide recommendations to the sector

Background and rationale:

During our school's 2015 review it was recommended that our school rationalize the initiatives we have in place and embed key thinking over time. Being able to identify strategies and concepts at the individual, team and whole of system level which may make a difference to how we could better work was a genuine concern. As was the opportunity for identifying ways to reduce staff workload and minimize stress. This is a very real concern for us all.

 "For at least 150 years everything has been getting faster and for the most part speed was doing us more good than harm in that time. But in recent years we've entered the phase of diminishing returns. Today we are addicted to speed, to cramming more and more into every minute. Every moment of the day feels like a race against the clock, a dash to a finish line that we never seem to reach. This roadrunner culture is taking a toll on everything from our health, diet and work to our communities, relationships and the environment." (Honore 2016)

This research therefore sought to establish ways to slow down, in order to focus on what matters most.

Methodology:

The methodology used was a mix of both qualitative and quantitative. I was particularly interested at looking for patterns, both in the data and in what the literature and our colleagues espoused. These patterns were mostly what guided my findings, and also left me with some wonderings.

In choosing where to dig deeper for patterns, I relied on the survey and Principal responses to a question about how much of yesterday they had spent on work they were most passionate about. I looked at what those who had responded with 0-20% closely in what they said, and those in the 81-100% band, I analysed their comments with further depth. I also looked for patterns between these bands and the others I surveyed. This 81-100% group is where my school visit group derived from also.

The following is a general explanation of the process I used:

- Professional Reading (See appendix 1)

- Administration of Principal survey across Auckland Schools.

- School visits within Auckland

- Reflection time

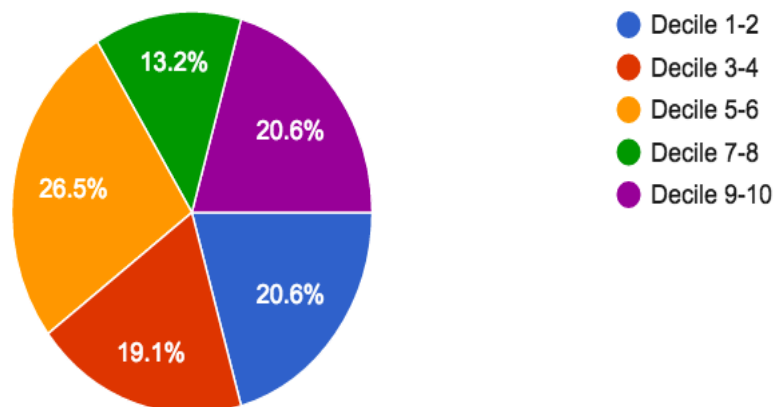- Testing out theories on return to school

Of little surprise, Principals work long hours! In hindsight, and with hauora firmly in mind another question which could have elicited an interesting response would have been to ask about the breaks we took throughout this time.

How many hours did you spend working yesterday? (69 responses)

- less than 6 hours
- 7-9 hours
- 10-12 hours
- over 12 hours

56.5%
18.8%
21.7%
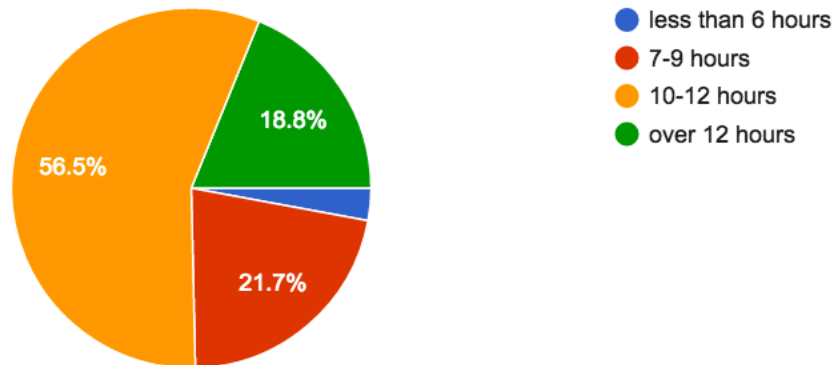
What decile is your school? (68 responses)

- Decile 1-2
- Decile 3-4
- Decile 5-6
- Decile 7-8
- Decile 9-10

13.2%
20.6%
26.5%
20.6%
19.1%

When looking at hours worked from a decile perspective 81% of those in Decile 5-6, 79% in Decile 9-10, 73% in Decile 1-2, 67% in Decile 7-8 and 54% in Decile 3-4 schools worked over a ten hour day. Decile 7-10 schools had the greater numbers proportionally working more than a 12 hour day. Across all deciles there was a range of hours worked with a similar spread.

What size is your school? (69 responses)

● under 200	
● 200-400	
● 401-600	
● 601-800	
● 801-1000	
● over 1000	

17.4%
26.1%
13%
36.2%
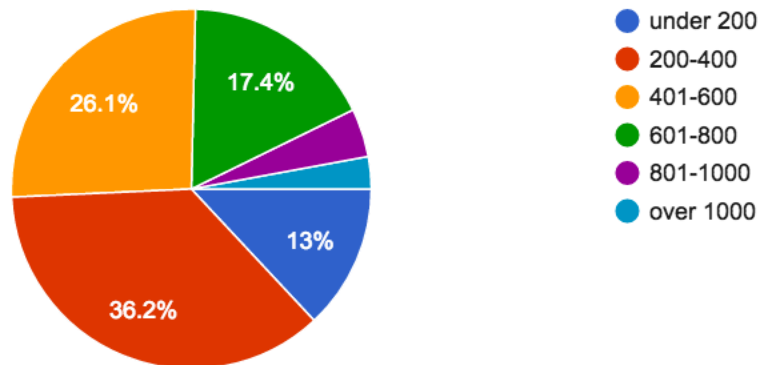
Our smallest schools (those under 200) had double the number of Principals who had spent 0-20% of their day on work they were deeply passionate about compared to the whole cohort. Other than this, school size did not matter when it came to this being a determiner of the amount of hours worked.

What percentage of your day yesterday did you spend on actual work that you are deeply passionate about?
(69 responses)

● 0-20%	
● 21%-40%	
● 41-60%	
● 61-80%,	
● 81-100%	

18.8%
18.8%
7.2%
33.3%
21.7%
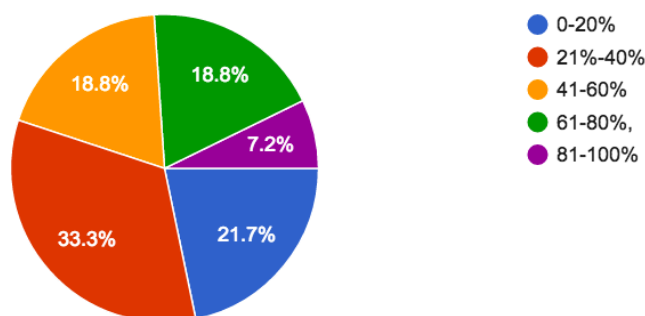
Sadly a high proportion of Principals (52%) had spent 40% or less of their previous day on work they were passionate about.
Generally neither decile nor school size was a determiner of the link between work done and how passionate they were although all but one of the 81-100% group had spent 10 or more hours working the day prior.
All deciles bands had 81-100% and likewise 0-20% markers.
5 did not answer this question.

What are the COMPLEXITIES that exist within what we do in school?

While a couple of Principals (and rightly so) referenced how with a focus on children coming first, our schools need not be as complex as we make them seem to us all, it is obvious that the education system in which we are working currently is indeed a demanding one, with the needs of PEOPLE being at the fore. One Principal's comment sums this up beautifully when they stated that what makes our schools so complex is "The fabulous idiosyncratic default of the human condition". I have chosen a trophy to exemplify what our colleagues said, because we ought to recognise the extent to which we are all leading and managing the complex and competing demands we face in this very difficult time in education.

So HOW can we identify our strategic focus in school? HOW do we choose WHAT to do?

Let's begin by exploring "The Hedgehog Concept".

Berlin (1953) was being provocative when he wrote his essay personifying the hedgehog and the fox as two distinct groups of people. Collins (2001) summarizes his work below: "Hedgehogs simplify a complex world into a single organizing idea, a basic principle or concept that unifies and guides everything. This reduces a complex world, with all of its challenges and dilemmas to simple ideas. Anything that does not relate to the hedgehog idea holds no relevance. This approach keeps the organization focused on what it can best do to achieve greatness, a sustainable competitive advantage. Motto, see what is essential, and ignore the rest.

The fox in contrast, Berlin says has scattered thoughts, moves on many levels, embraces all, self-contradicts, leaves things incomplete. is at times fanatical- with unitary inner vision.

A Hedgehog Concept is not a goal to be the best, a strategy to be the best, an intention to be the best, or a plan to be the best. It is an understanding of what you can be the best at. Focusing solely on what you can potentially do better than any other organization is the only path to greatness."

THE HEDGEHOG CONCEPT

BEST AT   PASSION

MOST IMPORTANT is at the intersection of all 3

DRIVES PERFORMANCE
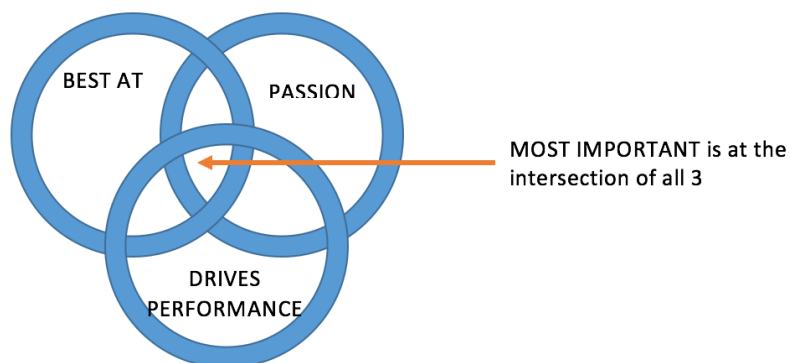
In talking to colleagues it became clear that in some of our schools the intersections between the circles in the above Venn diagram had been well and truly explored. There were examples of schools leveraging off teacher passion and striving for excellence in these areas. There were other examples of schools leveraging off drivers for change, and developing the passion and depth along the way. There were also examples of schools where the Principal was able to clearly articulate drivers for success, school passions and areas of strength (whether intentional or enacted) and in these schools it was clear. In these "hedgehog" schools the intersection was a focus on people.

e.g.
Engaging in deeply respectful practices of relationship building
Investing in the people
Pastoral care of everyone involved in the learning journey

ERO (2015) have identified four key themes that distinguish successful from less successful and unsuccessful schools in targeting achievement:
1. The explicit commitment to equity and excellence (focus on the quality of the learning experience)
2. The effective targeting of progression (optimal level of challenge, maximum visibility and alignment, series of interrelated actions)
3. The spread of leadership (leadership applied at multiple levels)
4. Capability building for school improvement (deliberately building strategic capability, evaluative capability, instructional capability and adaptive capability)

It's interesting to note, that they too are aware of the importance of alignment, that so much of what they have seen in successful schools is about the commitment and growth of people.

Robinson et al (2009) state that while educational expertise is a necessary condition for effective leadership, it is not sufficient; leaders must also build trust relationships if they are to engender and sustain improvements in teaching and learning. Covey (2006) states that trust is the hidden variable that affects everything, and as such we ought to actively address it at the self-trust, relationship trust and organizational trust levels. Bryk & Schneider (2002) as cited in Kiwi Leadership For Principals (2008) states "Building trusting and learning-focussed relationships is central to the Principal role. Relationships built on trust are developed when Principals respect and care for others and consistently "walk the talk". "

Collins (2001) says that finding your strategic focus requires a severe standard of excellence.
Understanding what your organization truly has the potential to be the very best at
...sticking with it
...while building on strength and competence
…focusing solely on what you can potentially do better than any other organization
…allocating resources based on the above understanding and then
…avoiding distractions

Kotter (2012) refers to "The Eight Accelerators" for organizational shift.

1. Create a sense of urgency around a single opportunity
2. Build and maintain a guiding coalition
3. Formulate a strategic vision and develop change initiatives designed to capitalize on the big opportunity
4. Communicate the vision and strategy to create buy-in and attract a growing volunteer army
5. Accelerate movement toward the vision and the opportunity by ensuring that the network removes barriers
6. Celebrate visible, significant short-term wins
7. Never let up. Keep learning from experience. Don't declare victory too soon.
8. Institutionalize strategic changes in culture.

So HOW do we SIMPLIFY the work in schools?

A colleague described these findings as compelling. Not because its new information, or because of the methodology, but just because it's OUR colleagues, talking about what IS working, from THEIR experience, and that others around them have said the same. Six themes emerged amongst Auckland Principals who had been able to spend the majority of their time (81%-100%) on work they were passionate about, for how they simplify the work to focus on what's most important. Readings supported what they had said.

These six themes were:

1. Clarity of vision
2. Use of smart tools
3. Targeted teaching and interventions
4. Growing distributed leadership
5. Reinforcing moving the clutter
6. Getting the right people on the bus in the right seats.

It is important that the voices of our colleagues are heard, and so I include their voices here so that you can read from what they say and interpret it as you see fit. Bear in mind that I have looked for patterns, and as such some of the comments made could fit under more than one of these six key themes, but here are just a few examples of what Principals said simplifies their work…

TWO WONDERINGS:

1. There was a common word used over and over again by the 0-20% group which has really got me thinking… This word was "share". Shared responsibility was also the MOST common phrase used by this group. In contrast, for the 81-100% group the word 'focus' was a common theme. They also talked about using smart tools frequently.
   In talking to some colleagues through OUR Education Network about this other questions have then arisen:
   What does sharing look like?
   If we always have to be together and are always needing to be involved together and always sharing everything together, how does the work get done?
   Where does trust sit? What about assurance?
   Perhaps if we better trust others by distributed leadership and we let them get on with it and ensure we all understand the responsibility to collaborate at key points our work we will be more effective.
   My wondering is: How do we get real clarity of mental models around what distributed leadership looks like?

2. The use of smart tools (including, but not just specific to technology) was mentioned as a key driver for simplifying the work. Interestingly though, those who had spent 0-20% of their time on passion work did not mention technology at all. (e.g. google drive, eTap, google apps, google docs). My wondering is: How big an impact is technology making for us as Principals, and in what ways could it be used to make more of an impact?

SIMPLIFYING THE WORK

What our colleagues said

1. Clarity of vision

"Why do we exist? Distill this"

"This is what I am looking for. I'm seeing this in 90% of classes"

"This is where the government's moving. We need to find out why we're moving there".

"Articulate the change, resource it, make the time available, release to plan the change together"

2. Use of smart tools

"Custom designed software system for efficient manipulation of student data"

"There is a huge resource bank on google drive- it's all there"

3. Targeted teaching and interventions

"Look past the barriers. Where are the opportunities?"

"Deputy Principal has worked intensively in classes changing practice"

"To build on systems you evolve takes commitment and thought"

4. Growing distributed leadership

Deputy Principals in classes every class every other day

Horizontal and vertical teams to provide wider opportunities for leadership

Those who struggle think they can do it all

"If I see a teacher who is keen I will give them the opportunity and then use them as a mentor for others."

"I have to step back where I want to be more involved"

5. Reinforcing removing the clutter

"What's in the way?"

"We have the trust of the teachers that the new initiatives will be aligned to previous initiatives"

6. Getting the right people on the bus and in the right places

"Make BTs Tutor Teachers quick so they grow that kind of next teacher"

"Trust our inner voice more than we do"

Use relievers quickly when CVs come through to trial- get to know them

Conclusions

We are leading at a time of great acceleration in the education system, and are expected to accelerate or get left behind. For many of our learners they too ought to be accelerating so they are not left behind either.

ERO (2015) comments on the importance of our roles in this way, and we know:" A school leader influences outcomes largely through her/his actions as a pedagogical leader and a shaper of school culture.

it is so important *that tasked with such a critical role that we are in good condition, so that we can travel our Principal journeys safely and efficiently. With this in mind,*

WE MUST LOOK AFTER OURSELVES WELL

As Principals we all work too hard, and many of us in an unsustainable way. LOOK AFTER YOUR VEHICLE. Think about how you fuel it, how you maintain it, unlike a real vehicle for most of us we only get one.

WE NEED TO *SLOW DOWN TO MOVE FORWARD WISELY*

When driving, before we accelerate, we generally decelerate or pull back, consider the condition of the vehicle we are in and the condition of the road, what's in the way, clarify our vision and passing distance, indicate and then put our foot down.

We must ensure in our roles as Principals we provide the space to make wise choices about when we put our foot down and for what purpose.

WE OUGHT TO LEARN FROM THOSE AROUND US AND WHAT LIFE HAS TAUGHT THEM ABOUT WHAT WORKS

We can all learn from our colleagues, if only we took the time more to do this. There is a rich resource of people out there, who know what to do to simplify the work to focus on what matters most. Let's learn from one another and consider from their advice:

1. Clarity of vision
2. Use of smart tools
3. Targeted teaching and interventions
4. Growing distributed leadership
5. Reinforcing moving the clutter
6. Getting the right people on the bus in the right seats.

Finally… **WE MUST ALWAYS REMEMBER WE ARE IN A PEOPLE BUSINESS**
While we may aspire to be like a hedgehog in order to lead more simple and sustainable lives as Principals, and lead high performing schools, we are mere humans and its people that make the work we do so complex, we too are complex beings, for even Isaiah Berlin who first initiated the concept of the hedgehog and the fox said in his second edition in print "I am probably a fox, I'm not a hedgehog". ☺

Appendix 1: Professional Reading & References:

Berlin, I (1953). The Hedgehog and The Fox

Collins, J (2001) From Good To Great

Collins, J (1994) Built To Last

Covey, S (2006) The Speed of Trust- The One Thing That Changes Everything

https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_86.htm Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing – Understanding the Stages of Team Formation

Education Review Office (2014)-Raising Achievement in Primary Schools

Education Review Office (2015)- Raising Student Achievement Through Targeted Actions

Education Review Office (2013) Accelerating the progress of priority learners in primary school

Education Review Office (2015) Raising student achievement through targeted actions.

Edwards & Martin- Schools That Deliver

Honore, K (2016) http://www.carlhonore.com

Kotter (2012) Harvard Business Review: Accelerate! How the most innovative companies capitalize on today's rapid-fire strategic challenges- and still make their numbers.

Ministry of Education (2008) Kiwi Leadership For Principals- Principals as Educational Leaders

Robinson et al (2009) School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why

Appendix 2: Recommended titles from our Principal Colleagues:

A Learner's Paradise- Richard Wells

Community- The Structure of Belonging- Peter Block

Drive- Daniel Pink

Everything Bad is Good For You- Steven Johnson

Expansive Education- Bill Lucas

Good Morning Mr Sarra- Chris Sarra

Green Light Classrooms- Rich Allen

In Praise of Slow- Carl Honore

Learning in The Fast Lane- Suzy Rollins

Malcolm Gladwell- The Tipping Point

Mindset- How You Can Fulfil Your Potential Carol Dweck

Quiet Leadership- David Rock

Schools That Deliver- John Edwards & Bill Martin

Student-Centred Leadership- Viviane Robinson

The Influencer- Kerry Patterson et al

The Off Switch- Professor Mark Cropley

The Speed of Trust- Steven M R Covey

The Third Wave (series) - Alvin Toffler

Visible Learning (series)- John Hattie

Weaving Evidence, Inquiry & Standards To Build Better Schools- Helen Timperley and Parr