

Team Leadership in Secondary Schools

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Sabbatical Report
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The importance of middle leaders.

Think of a department, faculty or team you have within your school that exemplifies best practice, produces top results, exhibits the most positive attitudes, makes a great contribution to the 'whole'; and about which you receive few or no complaints. It would be very rare for this to happen unless the department, faculty or team had an outstanding team leader. This is true both within and outside the education sector.

How do we become middle leaders (team leaders) in the Education Sector?

Many of us in senior positions were seen as very good classroom practitioners (and we were – and hopefully still are!); passionate about our subject area; and when work needed to be done, we would 'roll up our sleeves' and work harder and get things done. All of this contributed to good outcomes for our learners and school. However, some of the attributes that helped us with our promotion are not very helpful in our leadership positions. Consider the story of the 'little red hen' with her, "Well, I'll do it myself" approach, as opposed to motivating and leading a group to achieve great outcomes. Team leaders (and senior leaders) whose default approach is to work harder are not setting a good example, and their practice is not sustainable. Having a passion for their subject is great for team leaders, but it must not get in the way of having a school wide view when contributing to strategic discussions.

The unequal opportunities for support and development.

When I became a principal, I was almost awash with opportunities for involvement with professional learning. Groups of colleagues invited me to join professional learning groups; local, regional, and national associations provided opportunities to keep up-to-date and join discussions; the First Time Principals' programme was available, etc, etc. It seems that the only other time in our career that the system commits resource and has clear expectations about PLD is during the first two years of a teacher's journey.

The gap faced by middle leaders

Between being a Beginning Teacher and Principal there is a huge development and support gap for teachers; unless either:

- the school they are part of makes this a priority; or
- they themselves look for and take opportunities, eg, further university study, short courses, subject association involvement, etc.

We need to acknowledge the importance of preparing people to be middle leaders, supporting them in their team leadership roles, and preparing them for steps beyond middle leadership.

Does this gap exist in other sectors/places?

Sadly – Yes. This was confirmed in many conversations I had with leaders in non-education sectors and other places. I met with people in the mental health sector; the New Zealand Department of Corrections; retail leaders; universities; New Zealand Armed Forces; manufacturing and distribution sector; and merchant navy. In addition, I have been fortunate to visit schools; participate in facilitator training in Edinburgh aimed at preparing and upskilling middle leaders; join a Master's programme at Edinburgh University on school improvement and improvement planning; and talk with many team leaders and principals.

Time to read and reflect!

It has been great to read and consider the views of others. Towards the end of this report, I have listed a number of books that I have read during my sabbatical – excluding the various novels. A great 'find' for me in 2017 was an app called Blinkist. The gist of it is this: their team reads books, pulls out the key insights, and explains them in easy-to-digest 'blinks'. We can read or listen to these blinks, and pick up the key messages of the book in about 15 minutes. Try it – you'll see.

Time to wander and ponder.

The Camino de Santiago de Compostela was a special opportunity to walk through 120 kms of historic and fascinating trails and hamlets in North-west Spain. Sally and I had an amazing time, and would recommend this to anyone. There are numerous options; something to suit everyone.

Observations and thoughts

My sabbatical has initiated much thought, and this will be ongoing. Here are some observations and thoughts.

- Middle leadership has, across many sectors, been left to look after itself. The old adage that 'leaders are born not made' seems to be the underlining philosophy/approach, ie, promote good practitioners and assume they'll cope.
- There are pockets of good practice – both within and beyond the education sector – from which we can learn.
- Opportunities for anyone interested in joining a discussion group about middle leadership are positive.
- Somewhere I found that they don't have an Annual Plan, but rather an Improvement Plan. What a great thought. Why do we assume and plan as if everything we need to change (improve) at our schools will normally take one year from start to finish?

- Having middle leaders join the Senior Learning Team for a term not only brings another perspective to the SLT discussions, but further develops a middle leader's school-wide view.
- Leaders interested in promotion can be given the opportunity to 'shadow' a leader in the type of position in which they are interested.
- The East Lothian Council, Edinburgh, have a Next Steps Programme that helps identify potential team leaders and prepares them for possible new positions.
- Another way is to identify aspiring leaders is through their performance management program. Then be sure to include them in meetings and discussions about leadership. This can be whether or not they are in a formal leadership role currently.
- The NZ Probation Service intentionally identifies probation officers who show high-quality facilitation skills, which is considered the essential skill for the 'next step'. They are then given opportunity for further development with the hope that they will move into more senior positions.
- I have spoken with Graham Stoop, CEO of the NZ Education Council, about the possibility of having 'standards' for middle leaders, in addition to the new standards and code for all teachers.
- While listening and reading, I've found many references about the benefits of an organisational culture where there is a high degree of collaboration, trust, respect and transparency; with positive relationships. Of course!
- There is a lot required of a team leader in a New Zealand secondary school; that is distinct from their classroom practice. For example, budgets, team facilitation, curriculum development, resource coordination, H&S, meeting procedures, tough conversations, input into school-wide practises, and more! It is essential that we prepare and support people for these responsibilities.
- Input from many voices is required as practice is improved and programs are developed, so that middle leaders are developed and supported.

Next steps

The sabbatical has prompted a lot of thought, and I'm looking forward to having an 'Improvement Plan' (not an Annual Plan), and implementing some ideas. The good news is that there's no need to 'throw the baby out with the bathwater'; as we do a number of things well.

- Continue with a one-on-one fortnightly meeting for each Faculty Leader and the Teaching and Learning DP. However, be more intentional about a few things, eg, have set agenda that covers:
 - How are you?
 - How is each member of your team?
 - Tell me about the priority learners that are taught in your area.
 - How is progress towards school-wide goals or focus areas?

- How is progress toward Faculty goals?
 - Upcoming deadlines?
 - Any budget matters to discuss?
 - What further support do you need?
 - What's the next thing you are going to do to look after yourself / your team / your family?
- Have similar set meetings, with set agenda for the Deans and the Learner Support DP.
 - When/if the same type of issues or concerns come up at the next meeting, or at the same time the following year, develop a plan with the appropriate people to sort it out. Don't assume the team leader has the skills or experience – they will likely need development and support.
 - Have special professional discussion sessions for the Faculty Leaders and the Teaching and Learning DP, as well as the Deans and the Learner Support DP. Show everyone that this is really important – have these sessions in school time.
 - I am convinced that we don't get out enough! So, arrange for team leaders to visit other schools in two's or three's to pick up good ideas from elsewhere and have good discussions among themselves. That's why we always send them in at least pairs. It's still worthwhile even if they don't pick up any 'hot tips', as they'll be encouraged about their current practice, and those discussions among our team leaders (while rare) are really important.
 - Continue the practice of having a different Head of Learning or Dean join the Senior Learning Team each term.
 - I have initiated a fortnightly 'TEDlunch'. There are so many good talks I want to listen to and ponder; and I just don't get around to it. So, I've invited anyone who wants to join me to meet to come, listen and discuss a TEDtalk or similar. It's very informal, it's a bring your own lunch, and it's not even always about educational leadership! The choice of what we watch is up to the suggestions of those how attend.
 - Be very, very careful when introducing change. I love the title of Viviane Robinson's latest book, Reduce Change to Increase Improvement. It's well worth a read.
 - With regard School Culture, we have all heard that, "the tone comes from the top". There is no doubt that the school leader has considerable influence. However, the principal of a medium to large secondary school does not have direct frequent contact with every member of staff. Therefore, having highly effective team leaders is essential as.....the tone may come from the top, but it is perpetuated, implemented, spread, endorsed and maintained from the middle.
 - I will keep reminding myself that a key role for a principal is to set and articulate the strategic direction (vision, values, etc); appoint good people; let good people do good things; and support them in their efforts.

Visits, Workshops and Discussions

Auckland University, Centre for Educational Leadership

New Zealand Education Council, forum to discuss Middle Leadership

Equip, Mental Health Support Organisation

New Zealand Probation Service, NZ Corrections

Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland

Edinburgh University, Scotland; participation in Masters programme

Large Pharmaceuticals distributor, Ireland

Two Secondary Schools

East Lothian School District, Edinburgh

Middle Leadership Facilitator training, Edinburgh

Readings

Collins, Jim; Good to Great and the Social Sectors (2005); self-published

East Lothian Council; Building Middle Leadership Pathways: Leading Change and Improvement; Facilitator training notes

Fullan, Micheal; The Moral Imperative of School Leadership (2003); Ontario Principal's Council and Corwin Press

Hansel, Tim; When I Relax I Feel Guilty (1979); Chariot Family Publishers

Kahneman, Daniel; Thinking, Fast and Slow (2011); Penguin

Lencioni, Patrick; The Advantage: Why Organization Health Trumps Everything Else in Business (2012); Wiley and Sons

Pink, Daniel; Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us (2009); Canongate

Rock, David; Quiet Leadership (2006); Harper

Sinek, Simon; Start With Why (2009); Penguin Books

Thomson, Graham; School Improvement and Improvement Planning – course notes (2017); Edinburgh University

Wiking, Meik; The Little Book of Hygge – the Danish Way to Live Well (2016); Penguin Random House

The following five papers ('commissioned' by the Education Council) informed Leadership for Communities of Learning:

Bendikson, Linda; Communities of [Learning] leadership – Throwing money and hoping for success?

Gilbert, Jane; Leading in collaborative, complex education systems

Robertson, Dr. Jan; Think-piece on leadership education in New Zealand

Wenmoth, Derek; Networked Leadership

Durie, Mason; Educational Leadership for Tomorrow

The opportunity to have a sabbatical has been wonderful.

I have appreciated all three components – the learning component, a refreshment component, and the rare opportunity for (mostly) uncluttered reflection.

Nearly there

Here's some ancient wisdom, quoted as a whakatauki by Mason Durie.

Ki te kahore he whakakitenga ka ngaro te iwi
(Without foresight and vision, the people will be lost)

Plus something of much more recent origin

He pai te roopu, he pai te kite, ka tupu pai a tatou tamariki
(With a good team and a clear vision, our children will thrive)

Please don't hesitate to make contact if you have any suggestions, comments or questions.

Nga mihi nui

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