



## Breaking the leadership rules

### Leadership: what's wrong?

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My task today is to set out for you the dilemma concerning leadership which has prompted us to focus the conference on that subject. I think it is clear that principals in Australian schools feel they are doing it tough. Can I mention the results of a very interesting survey of over 300 principals, reported last year by Professor Geoff Scott of UTS in Sydney, on behalf of the NSW Department of Education and Training. The survey showed that principals rated two characteristics most highly for their effectiveness:

1. Being able to remain calm under pressure or when things go wrong
2. Having a sense of humour and being able to keep work in perspective.

My own experience of schools and principals suggests that this survey captured the feeling of many principals accurately. But does anyone else think that seeing those characteristics as the most important suggests a very negative view of the circumstances under which principals work? They are characteristics you need when work is awful, when things go wrong all the time, when you can't hope to achieve dramatic and exciting outcomes. I doubt that leaders in other industries would respond in that way. I certainly wouldn't answer as those principals did about my own role.

That view is supported by another recent survey, in which 92% of school principals in one system said that their workload had increased in the previous three years, and 68% said it had increased a lot.

Admittedly that survey was conducted by the AEU, so the principals knew what to say. Nevertheless, these straws in the wind suggest that principals are finding the going tough.

That contrasts with the AIM Business Leaders Survey from 2001, which reports that Australian business leaders are moderately to considerably satisfied with their jobs, and perceive that their leadership is accorded considerable respect by others in the company. They also report that their efforts have succeeded in gaining commitment by staff to the company and the objectives and values it represents.

If that perception is right, that principals are finding the going very tough, and certainly tougher than their peers in business, maybe one of the reasons is the way we think about educational leadership.

I want to suggest that our present ways of talking about leaders and leadership are flawed. I think we have a pretty well-established ideology about leadership, and as with all true ideologies, we are largely unaware that what we think is ideological: we think it is just the truth, the way things are. Let me set out in an extremely simplified way three ideas about educational leadership which I suggest are part of our ideology, and essentially wrong:

1. Power should be shared.
2. Everyone is a leader.
3. We should talk about 'leadership' rather than 'management'.

### **Power should be shared**

This is a quotation from a document prepared for one Australian system, concerning educational leadership. The document refers to studies which:

*...highlighted the need for a 'collaborative culture' [which]...required the principal, amongst other things, to share 'power'. It is clear that the extent to which school leaders are prepared to devolve power to others and provide the support for others to assume leadership roles is critical in transforming school culture from 'bureaucratic organisation' to a 'communal organisation'. This dispersion of 'leadership' represents a monumental shift.*

I think that quotation is a pretty good summary of our contemporary ideology about leadership, and is wrong in almost every respect. The dispersion of leadership is not a monumental shift, so much as a monumental cock-up, or at least a monumental mistake.

I am not saying that people in schools should not be given delegated responsibilities. They should. Our rhetoric is right about the need to work for consensus, to open up inclusive processes, to delegate and to adopt collegial behaviour. And there has, of course, been a big change in the way leaders utilise their position and authority. Smart leaders have got much better at engaging others in significant roles in the organisation, at delegating, at pushing responsibility out into the organisation. What is wrong is assuming these are the core elements of leadership. They are just means to the end of improving student learning, teacher quality and school management. It seems that democratic and consensual processes work best. But if these mechanisms didn't work to achieve our purposes, we should not adopt them.

And they should not in any important sense be a sharing of power, because they are not a sharing of accountability.

Delegation should not reduce the power of the person delegating. It should enhance it, because the person to whom responsibility is delegated feels much more engaged with the task than she would if the leader issued an instruction. Her engagement means greater effectiveness.

But when a really tough decision has to be made (sacking someone, ending a program, changing conditions of employment), that decision will be made by the organisational leader. A smart organisational leader will have a team of people to consult, and to provide advice, because that will engage those individuals in support of the decision. But the team won't make the decision.

What is really occurring here is greater subtlety and sophistication in the use of power, and in its extension across the organisation. Leaders have got better at the techniques by which they get their own way. It is only leaders who misunderstand the changes who find themselves sharing power or losing authority.

Can I ask you why someone with power would willingly share it? If you had the power to make your organisation work highly effectively, to ensure that staff were committed and productive, to achieve whatever outcomes have been set as desirable, why would you share it? What would you hope to gain by sharing power?

The answer, and here I follow Machiavelli, is that you would only do so to increase your power. You would share power because you don't have it. The fact is that changes in leadership style represent an attempt to retain power in the face of social shifts, a movement from authoritarian styles to communicative and consultative styles, reflecting what works these days in the exercise of power. It is a shift from power exercised directly to

power exercised indirectly, and by more sophisticated and subtle means.

Why does this matter? Isn't it really just a matter of semantics?

Actually, it is a matter of semantics, which is why it is important. Semantics is the study of words and their meanings, and what we are talking about here is the meaning of words like 'leader' and 'leadership'. It is in those meanings that a great body of social practice is held. What has happened to the words is that they have been leached of much of their meaning. The elements of their meaning which are to do with power, authority, responsibility, position and accountability have been watered down. If you listen to contemporary discourse about leadership, you will discover that a leader is really a coordinator among equals, a facilitator of the work of others, a kind of post-box for distributing responsibilities. The leader is not seen, semantically, as the individual with the responsibility for the whole organisation, the decision-maker, the accountable individual, the captain who goes down with her ship.

Leaders who say that their intention is to share power so that others can exercise it are foolish, incompetent or self-deceived. If they do it because they think that devolved power is more effective than centralised power, they are foolish. If they do it because they cannot effectively exercise power, they are incompetent. If they say they are doing it, but really intend to hold on to power, they are self-deceived.

### **Everyone is a leader**

I read the American educational journal called *Educational Leadership* regularly. The journal claims it is 'intended primarily for leaders in elementary, middle and secondary education'. But the majority of its articles are about the classroom and the work of teachers. Does this mean that the journal takes

educational leadership to be practiced by teachers? I think it does, and in that respect, I think it is typical of the way people now talk about leaders and leadership. Leadership is taken to be something that everyone does, and in definition is close to doing your job well, whatever it is.

But is everyone a leader? One way of working out the answer is by finding out who goes down with the ship. How does accountability work when there is a hole in the budget, or the school's performance is drastically below expectations? Do all members of staff wave bravely from the bridge as they disappear beneath the waves? I don't think so.

Most of what we mean when we say that everyone is a leader is that many people have roles in program administration. They take responsibility for an area of the school's operations, reporting to someone else. They have some autonomy, and they are expected to exercise some initiative. And just as the smallest box of breakfast cereal you can get is the jumbo size, so it is characteristic of linguistic inflation that people taking on such roles are described as leaders. But there is a substantial difference between organisational leadership and program administration. Leaders stand on the precipice, and are at risk of falling over at any time. Program administrators lounge in comfortable chairs, figuratively speaking, well away from the precipice, and surrounded by lots of other folk who might protect them in an emergency.

Most organisations have a single leader. That leader is out there. She is exposed politically. She is personally responsible for everything, including lots of things she can't control directly, and might not even know about. She is personally accountable, in the end, for every failure and every problem and for the performance of every individual. She

must make sure that every failure and problem is addressed.

In schools, this person is the principal. She's not called the principal<sup>1</sup> for nothing.

We should use the word leader to refer to that person who exercises leadership responsibilities and accepts accountability for everything in an organisation. We should not use it to refer to people with program responsibilities who, when the tsunami arrives, can shelter behind the real leader.

### **We should talk about 'leadership', not 'management'**

What is the relationship between educational leadership and management? You will have noticed that the organisations set up to improve the quality of what principals do are all nowadays called 'leadership' institutions. Heather's organisation, the National College for School Leadership, is characteristic and tomorrow we will hear from Gregor Ramsay, the Interim Chair of our National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership. No-one has recently established a National Reformatory for School Management.

And when we talk about leadership, the language we use is markedly different from the language we use about management. In discussing leadership we talk of values, influence, vision, communication and democratic decision-making. When we talk of management you will hear words like administration, efficiency, procedures, routines, and even 'managerialism', which illustrates the fact that management is such an evil concept that we had to invent a word to castigate it adequately. Leadership is about setting collaborative and democratic values-based goals, and all striving together to

achieve them. Management is about yard duty, the bus timetable, lockers and the collection of the rubbish bins.

But this is not what management usually means. Outside the secret garden of the school education sector, management is about goals, values, inspiration, engagement, influence and vision, as well as resources, personnel, structures, procedures and accountability. Out in the world, leadership is a crucial component of management. You can't be a good manager without being a good leader. But the way we talk about leadership it sounds perfectly possible to be a good leader without having much idea of what we mean by management.

In particular, elements like performance management are characteristic of management rather than leadership and, as I will argue shortly, the absence of performance management is one of the key weaknesses of Australian education. What school leaders really need to be good at is all of management, not just the leadership elements.

### **What can be done?**

So far I have been talking about how we have got it wrong. I want now to say briefly what I think we should do about leadership.

Power is the point of the exercise: the power to change the lives of students, parents and teachers for the better. We are uncomfortable about power just now, and we particularly dislike talking about power which is exercised by individuals.

If you listen to our rhetoric about leadership, you would assume that good leaders are defined by their readiness to adopt particular democratic, consensual and collegial processes. In much of the research on school-based management, for example, there is a strong implication that the initiative should be judged not by its effect on student learning or school

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<sup>1</sup> First, highest, or foremost in importance, rank, worth, or degree; chief.

effectiveness, but by the extent to which democratic processes are adopted.

That is not what leadership is. Leadership is what happens when a responsible individual, faced with a crisis, makes a principled, difficult and unpopular decision and carries it through. It is what happens when an individual makes a decision in the long-term interests of the organisation and in the process rejects popular and attractive short-term alternatives.

We should stop talking about leadership as if it were primarily the carriage of a set of bureaucratic functions, and recognise that it is primarily the exercise of a set of personal ethical responsibilities. We should avoid the rhetoric about collective responsibility and talk instead about how hard, and how important, it is for the individual leader to stand repeatedly and consistently for what is right in the midst of a storm of disagreement. There is no job more difficult than that of school principal. It involves difficult decisions which are made with inadequate information and are certain to cause pain or resentment. That is a shockingly difficult way to work, and principals do it every day. There is no harder job, and our rhetoric makes it worse.

How should it be different? There are two kinds of differences I think are fundamental. The first set of things is cultural. It is about the way we think about leadership, the semantic value we attribute to the word. Here there are three points to make.

### **1. Be honest about power**

The purpose of leadership is to ensure that schools achieve the outcomes they aim for, for the children who rely on them. We need to be honest about the fact that we expect principals to exercise power in the interests of the students. If our rhetoric is restricted to the language of delegation, consensus, power-sharing,

collegial behaviour and democracy, a lot of principals will get the message: we don't want them to exercise power and authority. I challenge you to read system documents about school based management and find any reference which implies that the principal is in a position of power and authority. I believe that principals largely feel powerless at present, and one part of the reason is that we send them a strong message that they should be powerless.

### **2. Moral character of leadership**

The main requirement for any leader is a recognition of the moral character of leadership. We need to select principals mainly because they have a strong grasp on a set of values, because they are principled and ethical people. Leaders are uniquely placed to influence and shape the lives of others. They should do so, because that is their role, but with a strong sense of their ethical responsibility in exercising that influence.

### **3. Strong and committed individuals**

We need to select principals who are strong and committed individuals, who can stand up in situations which require courage, who are prepared to risk unpopularity, who can act with decision in difficult and distressing circumstances. They probably do need, as the principals survey I referred to earlier suggested, to remain calm under pressure and to possess a sense of humour. But more importantly they need the strength of character to continue to make decisions and take actions when the swamp is full of alligators, which, according to much of the literature on leadership, it often is.

The second set of things is operational. It is to do with how leaders and others should behave to improve the quality of the leadership of our schools.

### **4. Management skills**

We need to select people with highly developed management skills, or develop

those skills formally. By 'management', I don't mean the desiccated and scornful concept we mostly use in education, but the rich, powerful meaning most of the world uses. This takes in goals, values, vision, a sense of direction and purpose, as well as the capacity to marshal resources, manage the performance of people with sensitivity and skill, work with students and parents and others, develop and implement plans, set up structures and design procedures. A typical school is a multi-million dollar enterprise with hundreds of clients, thousands of stakeholders, and dozens of staff. Being a fine teacher of legal studies and having a couple of years as a deputy principal does not in itself guarantee that an individual can do all that is required to manage such a complex organisation.

#### **5. Engage everyone**

Leaders should use their power, once they have secured it, to engage every member of the school community in the key task. They should delegate, communicate, spread responsibility around the school, establish democratic forums, consult widely, offer opportunities for every member of the school community to have their say. But my critical point about this is that leaders do this in order to ensure that the goals are achieved, that people are focused on the right task, that the leader's vision and direction become the vision and direction of all those involved. They don't do it in order to find out which direction to head in.

#### **6. Develop potential leaders**

We need to accept that not everyone is a leader, because being a leader is immensely difficult and demanding. There will, however, be a small number of individuals in most schools with potential to become leaders. These people should be selected, guided by the principal, and offered the kind of training and experience that will equip them to become leaders when they are ready. That means, essentially, a structured program of

feedback, training and experience in management.

#### **7. Performance management**

Finally, and probably most importantly, leaders need to use their power to engage in effective and continuous performance management. Listen to what Larry Kamener has to say this afternoon about performance management. The fundamental failing arising from the powerlessness of school leaders is the effective absence of performance management in schools. By performance management I mean coaching for potential leaders, identifying and fostering talent, setting of goals and providing data and feedback to staff, ensuring that program administrators are equipped to manage the performance of those reporting to them, structuring professional development to meet identified weaknesses or organisational needs. I also mean offering support, rewards and incentives to staff, and disciplining and dismissing under-performing members of staff. These things are weakly represented in Australian schools. They cannot be implemented without support from every level of the system, including structural changes to give principals the power to do the things I have been talking about, with confidence that their decisions will usually be supported by their own leaders.

I think we have a crisis of leadership in schools in Australia. There are extraordinary individual leaders, but many principals feel powerless. Our rhetoric reinforces that feeling, and organisational and institutional arrangements conspire to weaken and undermine principals.

I want to rebuild the idea of a strong, courageous, talented individual who takes on responsibility for a school and a school community, who acts ethically and responsibly, who exercises the kind of

power that is appropriate to the position. I want to see principals use their power to ensure that the school focuses clearly and explicitly on the only goal of schooling: the improvement of student learning. I want to see principals setting a direction for schools and managing the performance of those staff who must ensure that the school moves in that direction. And I hope we will learn to applaud and reward those school leaders who take risks, who try new things, who act strongly in the defence and the interests of their students, who manage their schools.