



Breaking the leadership rules

The five new rules of leadership

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Hobart 3 August 2004

When the conference program was developed, I got the 'Where to From Here?' part of the program at the end. This is usually the mind-numbingly predictable part at the end of any conference where we are told that despite the billions of dollars that's been spent on researching the topic, in this case leadership, and the fact that there is a wealth of practical experience in the area, and that there are literally mountains of books addressing the topic, we end the conference with more questions than answers. We then call for funds to research the topic further so we can all meet again and grow each other professionally by sharing our new research results and ideas - and to see if we can make the practice work in theory.

I hope you'll be pleased that I'm not going to do that. It's not that I don't love learning from research and listening to researchers. I really do, especially when the research is able to deliver us some very powerful lessons. For example, recent DEST funded research shows that earlier research in student achievement may have underestimated the effects of schools and overstated the role of student background. It's great to know that an effective school can really lessen the impact that a student's background may have on their level of achievement (Cresswell, J DEST, 2004). Such knowledge can give schools leaders real inspiration - they just have to know how they can best add value to student learning.

So I think it's important that we capture just a few of the powerful emerging directions for leaders we've received from

practitioners, policy-makers and researchers, and know what we are going to do with them when we leave here and return to our various workplaces.

Before I do, I'll revisit a few old pieces of leadership wisdom to give a context. By the way, I'm not saying it's out with the old wisdom and in with the new, I'm saying let's consolidate the best of the old, recognise we have done some of it to death, build on it, and move on with some new approaches.

Leadership – the old wisdom

Leading is doing

Leading is all about execution. Great leaders are also the great do-ers. Whether they are in education, business, or other pursuits, they understand deeply what's important to achieve, how to do it - and get their hands dirty alongside others and lead by example. Ex-Australian of the year Professor Fiona Stanley is an outstanding example of this, as are Noel Pearson and the current Young Australian of the Year, Hugh Evans.

Leading is hard work

Getting to where we want to go in building our own capacity and that of others is very hard to do and takes an enormous amount of constant effort. Improving your own leadership performance and the performance of others around you requires the relentless application of attention to goals, monitoring outcomes, feedback and continuous improvement.

An American woman, Frances Hesselbein, has been hailed by leaders of thought and practice such as Peter Senge,

Warren Bennis and Peter Drucker as being one of the most innovative and inspired leaders today. Asked what leaders need to meet the challenges of today, Frances says without hesitation 'Hard work'. I'm sure that's not news to anyone here - but it's always a relief to know that even if we're not as charismatic and inspirational as we'd like to be, some good hard work, focused on the right areas, can get us a long way towards being effective leaders.

In fact, it might be best not to place too much value at all on charisma - after all, some of the most charismatic leaders of all time include Stalin, Mao and Hitler.

Leaders have a vision and engage everyone in their role in delivering it

Of course, Hesselbein identifies a whole lot more than hard work as being important for leaders to do - all of which have been well documented and agreed to by many others, for example the need to articulate a clear vision and to engage people in enacting that vision, to understand the customer (in our case the students and parents), to know your results and have a plan to improve your results. Admittedly, this is all easier said than done, but we do know this already, that we must know where we are and where we have to go.

Naturally, a leader must always articulate a clear vision, and set key goals and priorities. A leader must be persistent, honest, reliable, ethical and have all those great traits we aspire to have truckloads of ourselves. So, we know and do a lot of good leadership stuff already and we should continue to work on developing these areas.

But what do education leaders need more of in our current environment to make them more effective? I'm going to speak about a few essential new leadership rules - which doesn't necessarily mean the old ones don't apply. You'll recognise

elements of familiar leadership theories as well as acknowledgement of the research findings on what makes a good school leader.

To paraphrase Richard Elmore, the challenge of harnessing leadership to the problem of large scale improvement is '... learning how to do new things and, perhaps more importantly, learning to attach positive value to the learning of doing of new things.'

So here's five new things to do if we are to meet our leadership challenges.

Five New Leadership Rules

1. Leaders must be pissed off

My first new leadership rule is perhaps slightly unconventional. To be a great leader, you probably should spend quite a bit of time being pissed off.

Whether in business, the community or education, many of the inspirational great leaders are completely dissatisfied with mediocrity, injustice, poor performance or dysfunction in their environment.

What sets them apart from lesser leadership candidates is that they capitalise on their anger in a positive way. They aren't like the grumpy old teacher that John Holt was playing yesterday in the hypothetical. I'm talking about people whose productive anger inspires innovation and great actions.

I'm sure we can all think of great leaders who are outstanding at being angry and following through by doing something about it - being angry doesn't mean behaving aggressively. Great leaders like Nelson Mandela harness and use their anger to inspire others and produce positive social outcomes. But we don't all have to be Mandela.

Chris Sarra is a great local practical example of rule. Chris was so pissed off

about the poor life chances and achievements of Indigenous students that he took radical action, and inspired others to take radical action to improve learning, teaching and community life at Cherbourg. As he has said, Chris is amazed that there is a culture of tolerating outcomes for Aboriginal students that are completely unacceptable and wouldn't be tolerated for non-Aboriginal kids.

Some of the best leaders I've seen in schools and systems are palpably pissed off about how the system and/or the school are failing their students and this inspires them to lead results-driven change. Michael Fullan has a more polite way of expressing a related idea - 'effective leadership has ... a sense of moral purpose, based on a belief that education is making a difference in the life of students'. That's why people like Vicki and Heather are doing what they are doing in their systems - we can see that they are driven to achieve excellence and equity- and they clearly don't accept that in our resource rich developed countries that what we are achieving is nearly good enough for our students and society.

Great leaders aren't satisfied with mediocrity or second best - they have a sense of urgency that inspires them, and others to improve the achievements of those around them. So, if you have a tendency towards too much complacency and self-satisfaction, you're probably not great leadership material.

Old leadership is bound by the constraints of hierarchies, adheres to known processes and approaches, respects authority regardless of efficacy, stays calm and tries hard to maintain a sense of humour in the face of adversity.

New leadership challenges the conventional wisdoms of bureaucracies, the way things are and the way things are usually done, and uses power to change

systems and schools for the better - in the way that Bruce described the positive use of power in his opening address yesterday. It's now time for school leaders to use their power to create new solutions and push the boundaries to achieve improvement beyond the norm. We all know outstanding school leaders who have turned around the performance of struggling schools - they are great source of inspiration and can provide new ways of tackling old problems. Find the angry ones and talk to them.

2. Leaders must unleash passion

Again, this may appear a little unconventional, or perhaps even worrying. Passion is a concern to some people, because it seems a bit too affective or personality-based to be achievable - and is perhaps difficult to teach.

But if you care deeply about education and want to achieve great results, which most educators do - you do have an underlying passion for teaching and learning. And we know the research tells us that such a passion must be demonstrated to support a high-achieving climate.

But there's another equally important angle to this passion thing. Some of the best principals I've ever seen have the gift of encouraging teachers to indulge their passions in the course of their teaching where they know that it will not only enthuse, but improve student learning as well. Such principals are not threatened by people working in ways that are slightly outside the mainstream and indulging their creativity. They know that being driven to learn by the passionate pursuit of an interest can be contagious and stimulating.

To give an example, a very successful principal I know in Queensland spends time with each teacher learning about their passions, interests and expertise, and identifies ways in which these could be

applied to the development and delivery of the curriculum. She feels it's important to focus on people's strengths, including her own, and make it clear that they are highly valued. This doesn't mean that if someone is a basket weaving fanatic that that should become part of the curriculum - the curriculum should always be rigorous and teach students what is essential.

This focus on teachers' passions which can support deep learning in essential areas of the curriculum (such as community environmental projects and diverse performing arts) sets the school apart from many others, as it's more common to begin with the interests and needs of the students as a starting point. It's time-consuming and hard work for the principal, but the school has greatly improved results for its students and the teachers have a high level of job satisfaction.

We hear a lot about the importance of student engagement and using student interest as a basis for their work, but I bet if principals focused more of their attention on teacher engagement, through allowing them to exercise their passions, positive results for students would flow. It also fosters that very important but elusive attribute - creativity, as well as creates an environment supportive of innovation- both extremely important in our knowledge society.

So, old leadership encouraged teaching and curriculum pursuits within familiar boundaries. New leadership nurtures and unleashes the passions of teachers in the context of the overarching school vision and maximises their value for the school and students. New leadership sees the value of making it obvious to students that diversity of subject matter, innovation, creativity and the passionate pursuit of interests are valued and create a stimulating learning environment.

3. Leaders must be tough performance managers

Larry and Paul have impressed upon us the importance of a performance culture in schools and systems. Creating the environment in which people can be their best is the one of the most important tasks of the leader. Effective teachers can have a much greater impact on student achievement than previously thought.

More than one school I've visited recently put it in terms of 'making teachers' lives easier' - meaning freeing teachers from as many administrative and organisational tasks as possible, so they can focus on the core business of teaching. That's very important.

But leaders have to be very tough about performance management to achieve great results. That doesn't mean being punitive and critical - although occasionally it might. More importantly, principals have to be tough on themselves, and strive much harder than many of them currently do to develop the key emotional intelligence attributes that Paul referred to yesterday - self-awareness, self-management and social awareness. The old wisdom tells us we must work hard, but the new leadership wisdom is much more specific about what it is important to work hard on right now to improve performance - work on your emotional intelligence.

This has not yet been widely embraced by the education community, but developing EI skills is essential for leaders who need to be able to improve the performance of their staff by having the most effective professional relationship with them.

Such an effective relationship includes being clear about goals and responsibilities, identifying strengths and weaknesses, working with teachers to identify ways to improve performance, giving very regular feedback, providing internal and external professional

learning opportunities and not accepting poor performance. Performance management is hard work, time-consuming and something many people would rather avoid. If you can't do it well, however, you probably shouldn't be running a school, or anything else for that matter.

Leaders have to push themselves, to be demonstrably striving to improve their own performance, and creating the conditions in which others can do the same. Tough, tenacious and supportive performance management is really difficult to do - but a major difference between a good leader and a great leader is the capacity to motivate and get the best out of people so they exceed even their own expectations.

Leaders should be themselves - the best of themselves and visibly try hard to improve the worst - because it's all about performance. If we're going to improve outcomes for students, we know that we need the best teachers. We're not going to get the best teachers unless the leaders - at both the system and school levels - are very clear about what's worth learning, teaching, monitoring, measuring and improving. Which means, if we are leaders, we have to prepare people to be responsive, adaptable and maximise their opportunities.

On the related issue of principal expertise and performance, there is a fairly commonly held view that it is more important for principals to be experts on teaching and learning than expert managers if they are to lead a school well. I strongly disagree with this view - principals could have plenty of staff members who know more about pedagogy than they do, but principals should know the most about how to manage the complex school environment and should be the most skilled at getting the most value out of the system and their school.

If a principal's job is to create the environment in which teachers and students can perform at their best, they should be spending a lot of time and energy ensuring it is running like a well-oiled machine, and that their school receives the greatest possible resourcing and support from the system, ie both managing and managing up to the highest possible standard, and that is exactly what most of the great principals I know do. Instructional leadership is one part of a principal's skill set, but I'd rather be teaching in a brilliantly managed school where the principal had an average knowledge of teaching and learning, than be teaching in school where the best teacher was running the school and doing an average job managing it.

Finally on this point, it's worth saying that in general terms, leaders are rarely the best performers, ie they're not the most technically proficient in their area of work. Many of us spend many years coming to that painful realisation - after working with people in leadership positions we don't consider up to scratch in some important technical areas, or in my case thinking it was terribly important to become a polymath or a polyglot ...and realising much later that being a Pollyanna was a far more important attribute than those put together.

4. Leaders must be Pollyanna

Forget about those fairly uninspiring assertions that principals must have a good sense of humour and stay calm when confronted with difficulties. I know a lot of calm people who have a good sense of humour, but they couldn't lead a bunch of teachers to the pub on a Friday night.

The Pollyanna rule is that leaders must be able to energise others with their boundless optimism and high expectations - which more often than not becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Optimistic leaders retain a positive

viewpoint almost all of the time and can be relied on to put an 'opportunity' spin on anything that happens, and are highly adaptive.

Relentless optimism is essential to lead people in an environment which is complex, dynamic and requires us to be continually adaptive. Such leaders have confidence, tenacity, see challenges as problems to be solved and get on with the job.

Tom Peters puts a related point in a really simple way - 'Leaders show up'. Leaders are there. They keep on 'keeping on'. By their very presence, they inspire others to stay the course. He cites Rudi Giuliani who 'showed up' when it really mattered, on 9/11. As one wag put it, he went from lame-duck philandering husband to *Time* magazine's man of the year in 117 days. How? Not through his strategy, but by showing his face: by standing as the embodiment of Manhattan's indomitable spirit. Woody Allen said it best: '80% of success is showing up'. Many successful school principals have long practised the art of 'management by walking around'.

So, the old wisdom - being calm, cool and having a good sense of humour needs to be ramped up a bit. The new wisdom is that leaders must be there for people, and be so relentlessly optimistic and positive that they need to be hosed down regularly. The ripple effect of such optimism is a very powerful driver of improvement - an effect which came through very strongly in Cheryl's and Helen's presentations.

5. Leaders must have strength of character

Leaders don't have to be charismatic. We don't have to look too far in Australian public life to see that many of the powerful people in our society are indeed a charm-free zone; however, even a dull person can lead well if they are able to convey a strong moral purpose and an

unwavering attachment to a strong set of values and beliefs.

As General H Norman Schwarzkopf said, 'Leadership is a combination of strategy and character. If you must be without one, be without the strategy'.

We haven't been engaging in a values debate recently for nothing. What people and institutions stand for, and how that drives behaviour and improves society, is of critical importance to all of us - perhaps more than ever. The great corporate governance scandals, the questions about the basis of the war in Iraq, the consistent failure of the schooling system to improve the life chances of some of our students, are just some examples of many big issues which draw us back every time to question the values behind some of these societal failures, and the substance of the leaders who allow them to happen.

The phrase 'walk the talk' is a bit overused, but it encapsulates neatly what is important for leaders to do. For leaders to be seen as honest, trustworthy, having integrity and all the other attributes we say are a must for any worthy leader, they can't be making pronouncements from their desk.

They must demonstrate the way in which they live by these values in all their interactions with members of the school community. Leaders are also the ones that make the tough decisions that are not always popular.

This can be hard work and it also requires large amounts of emotional intelligence, particularly the capacity to be reflective, self-aware and consciously manage self-development.

As I said when speaking about performance, leaders must be transparent about their efforts to improve their own performance - this can be difficult

because it involves admitting you are not perfect already. But it is a great demonstration of commitment to the values being espoused, and is an indicator of a key character strength essential for outstanding leadership.

So, what is the way forward? My answer is - look forward, be forward-looking and don't look back. While we of course must learn from history, from evidence, from our mistakes, the very powerful underlying message in all presentations here at conference has been one that focuses on leadership for the future. If we build on the old wisdom, along with the energetic application of these five new leadership rules, we'll have a much greater chance of achieving success for our students.

As successful leaders know, 'Leadership is the art of accomplishing more than the science of management says is possible'.