

Sabbatical Report

Distributive Leadership/ Experienced Principals Establishing Their Authority Term 3 2010

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I would firstly like to thank the Ministry of Education for giving me this wonderful opportunity. This sabbatical not only helped in the area of my professional development, but the time that I was able to rest and reflect, re-energised my career and I came back to school with a completely different attitude. I came back ready to do the best I could for the school and with ideas to change my leadership for the better.

I am also very grateful to the Board of Trustees at David Henry School for agreeing to support me in my application. Their forward thinking in releasing me for the term will certainly benefit the school.

My original plans had to be changed for a number of reasons. OFSTED did not reply to my letter asking for the names of some schools and principals that I could visit in the greater London area to study and discuss distributive leadership and the way that experienced Principals moving into new positions established their authority. I also had to change my travel plans due to availability of flights and schools in both England and Canada were closed for the summer term break. I did manage to talk to a number of Principals and teachers and my report is included below. This report also summarises the ideas and thoughts of a number of Principals in the South Waikato and Bay of Plenty regions of New Zealand.

There are a number of people that I would like to thank for the information they gave to me. This includes:

The Principal of West Moseley School, England

The Principal of Jesse Boot's Primary School, England

Helen Volk, Teacher, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Jim McCabe, Principal, Bishop Edward Gaines School, Tokoroa

Matt Sabapathy, Principal, Amisfield School, Tokoroa

Bill Millward, Principal, Mangakino Area School, Mangakino

Karen Holmes, Retired Principal, Kerikeri Primary School, Kerikeri

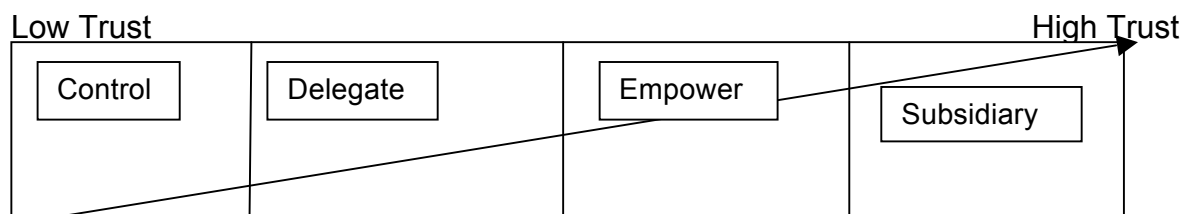
Murray Thompson, Educational Consultant, Cambridge

Jeremy Kedian, Director, Educational Leadership Centre, University of Waikato

Distributive Leadership:

Originally I had planned to come to a mutual understanding of distributive leadership with those I interviewed. This changed as I felt it was best to ask them how distributive leadership was used in their schools and from this information I could then understand what their slant on distributive leadership actually was.

My findings concluded that many Principals and teachers do not fully understand distributive leadership. In most cases they were mistaking delegation for distributive leadership. Rather than identifying strengths and giving responsibility to a staff member for carrying out the task with little or no direction, tasks were handed out to staff members with directions on how to carry them out, what outcomes were expected, and how they were to be reported on. Staff were not chosen because they showed any aptitude for the task, but rather, they were the staff member with the least to do in the school or they were the ones that always seemed to get things done. True distributive leadership is given with the spirit of trust. Trust in the abilities of the person to complete the task without having to check that it is being done and with the knowledge that the task will be completed with professionalism and with integrity. With distributive leadership the task is owned by the person it is entrusted to.



The above model (taken from notes given at the Educational Leadership Centre of the University of Waikato, Jeremy Kedian) demonstrates that distributive leadership is an empowering, high trust system. Control means just that, control over all aspects of the school is taken by the school leader. Delegation is when the staff are told to do something. Empowerment is the distributive leadership model and subsidiary, which flows on from delegation and trust, means that it is inappropriate for a higher authority to carry out a task that is appropriate for a lower authority to complete.

In New Zealand distributive leadership seems to be better understood than in England. This may be because the New Zealand curriculum and systems are less prescribed than those in England. The publishing of league tables and the strict curriculum accountability means that Principals are very aware of how their schools measure up to other schools. The onus is on them to make sure their school is perceived to be performing well. Because of this they may be too intimidated to pass

on to others tasks for curriculum or management responsibilities as failure to complete these to a high standard will reflect on the school and on the Principal as the head.

My unofficial findings have shown me that distributive leadership is practiced more in New Zealand than in England. The term is not universally recognised either in New Zealand or in England, but in New Zealand leaders tend to automatically use distributive leadership in their schools. This may be because Principals in New Zealand are torn between being the educational leader or the manager in their schools. Because of this they tend to trust others to do some tasks in order to free up their time so they can get into classrooms and be true leaders of children's learning. In England, Principals keep more control of all aspects of leadership in their schools.

Distributive leadership involves a great deal of trust and it can sometimes take time for this trust to develop. Lucky is a Principal who develops that trust early in their Principalship and can use distributive leadership to empower those on the staff who will themselves become leaders.

Experienced Principals In New Schools:

After speaking to a number of Principals it is very difficult to say that there is unreserved evidence that any one practice is successfully used to establish the Principal's authority when they move into a new position.

There were very few Principals who used a strict authoritative manner. Wheedling a big stick when dealing with staff is not the approach to use. All those I spoke to agreed that the staff who were treated in this manner would very likely look for another position in order to get away from an atmosphere of dictatorship. Likewise, a Principal who locks themselves in their office and does not interact with staff, would soon lose the respect of the staff.

It seems that one of the surest ways of establishing authority is to get to know the school systems and the staff. This does not mean having to be best friends with the staff. If Principals become too friendly with individuals or factions on the staff then there can be questions of impartiality when disputes arise. Knowing the systems and staff means getting to know how things are done around the school, what is the school's culture. If the Principal wants to change systems then they must think very hard about it. Just because things have been done in the school in the same way for the past number of years and the new Principal can see an easier way to do them, there are a number of factors to take into account. The historical importance of these systems to both the staff and the community has to be taken into account. Can the staff and community be brought on board with these changes? How receptive are they to changes? Will the changes be stable or will the new systems that are put in place need to be adjusted continually? These are just a few of the questions that

new principals will need to think about. Changing the culture of a school takes time and empathy for the school community.

It would seem that Principals almost have to have an intuitive sense about how to establish their authority in new schools. They have to have some understanding of how to deal with different personalities on the staff, the Board of Trustees, the community. They have to know and understand the systems in place in the school. They have to be able to treat all in a fair and consistent manner. There are so many things they have to do and know that it is surprising we have so many successful Principals!

In order to establish their authority Principals have to have personal and interpersonal skills. They need to know and understand how children and adults learn. They need to have patience and empathy. Most importantly, they have to want the best for the children in their care.