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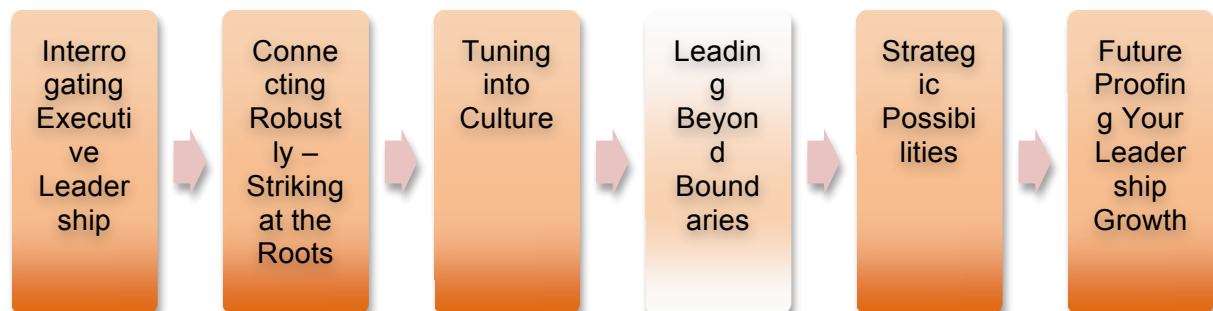
Principals' Sabbatical Report 2010

Focus: To complete the formal requirements of my Executor Hillary Leader Programme for which I have a Woolf Fisher Scholarship.

The Hillary Leadership Programme

The Hillary Leadership Programme is run by Excelerator, a national leadership development and research institute based at Auckland University's School of Business. They run an annual intake into the Hillary programme which is an 18 month programme designed at improving executive leadership. The Woolf Fisher Trust provided 3 scholarships for leaders within education to participate in the programme. My sabbatical was timed for the last few months of this programme to allow me time to contribute fully to the final group project and presentation and to complete the readings associated with the programme.

The primary focus of the Hillary Leadership Programme is framed in the title of the first residential – "Interrogating Executive Leadership". The programme has been designed to stimulate the leadership mindset and particular challenges for senior executives. The following themes formed the backbone of the course.



Methodology

The delivery of learning opportunities was based around the following elements:

Excelerator On-line

An on-line community was established using Moodle. This allowed us to access course information, readings and to engage in on-line discussions that staff or course participants might raise. Each application group also had its own space with a view to facilitating communication between group members.

Oddly enough the Moodle space as it became known became a controversial part of the course with a clear division amongst participants on their willingness to engage with this format. Many of us much preferred the face to face of the residential courses.

Residential Courses

There were 6 of these based around the themes of the course and spaced evenly over the 18 months. These provided the only opportunity to engage with all course participants. Essentially they were the forum for us to gain input from the Excelsior staff as well as providing opportunities for rich discussions. The sessions were interactive and invariably challenging. Guest speakers provided further opportunity to stimulate thinking and to challenge and extend our leadership perspective.

Peer Groups

The peer group was a group of three with whom we met at regular intervals throughout the 18 months. They were designed as a forum to help stimulate our leadership growth. We were able to discuss issues that confronted us in our work settings and how we were implementing learnings into our personal progress. Training was given to make these sessions effective coaching opportunities.

A specific methodology was established in the first residential. Each person had a role and a peer group session was designed to take one and a half to two hours. The roles were an interviewer, a subject and the third person who kept time and monitored the process. The roles rotated during the session.

The training received centered around the quality of the questioning. The interviewers task was to get the subject to reflect on an aspect of their leadership. Questions were designed to encourage deeper reflection and to move behind the obvious. The third person would comment after the interview on the process followed and in particular on how the interviewer performed. This was useful in helping us to see where as interviewer we have missed an opportunity to ask a critical question. From time to time a staff member from Excelsior would "sit-in" on the peer group and give additional comment on the interview process. The result of this process was that over time we became more proficient at probing our colleagues to reflect more deeply on decisions they had made in the circumstances that were the subject of the interview or to expose the assumptions in place that were forming the framework under which we were exercising our leadership.

One of the last activities of the peer group was to spend a day in each others work environment. Having spent 12 months sharing the journey that we were each making and listening to the challenges we faced it was of great interest

Application Groups

An application group included 10 people with a broad task to complete. The principle behind the application groups was that they be “learning laboratories” – that is, a shared place where we could apply and experiment with:

- Using conflict and difference to stimulate new ideas and possibilities.
- Shaping conversations (dialogue) that get to the underlying meaning and shared passion rather than being “dehydrated”.
- Attending to the meaning that is being created in an ongoing basis across the project for the team so that you can shape together the level of engagement, impact and performance that the task requires (and to keep these leadership issues front of stage, not just getting lost in the task).
- To frame and reframe the focus of the application groups so that the strategic possibilities remain strong (for some this has meant expanding the frame, for others focusing the frame).

These groups were in themselves quite an interesting area of study. We saw very clearly that for a group to be successful in achieving effective outcomes that a leader has to step forward and that the group, often comprising strong leaders has to be willing to unite around the leader. An idea is also important and the idea has to connect with each individual. These groups involved busy people setting aside time to work together on a common task. Without the ability to identify with the task people were not willing to set aside the time. In the first group a leader came forward early with an idea we could all work with. The challenge then was to meet sufficiently to conduct the project. As we lived in different cities a variety of methods were used including conference calls, Skype and meeting in smaller groups to stay in touch.

The first group gelled quickly, united around a leadership who provided the organisational framework that ensured we had the opportunity to succeed. The task was to bring something back to the whole course that people could benefit from and help with our leadership journey. We chose to focus on reflection as a means of personal growth and produced a desktop stand with 30 images and sayings to do with reflection.

For the second half of the course new application groups were formed that focused on:

- Identifying an area of shared passion and interest that we can work on together (this could be a shared action or exploring and deepening your understanding of a particular aspect of leadership together).
- Initiating and exploring/acting together (building and leveraging cross-sectoral leadership).

- Engaging the wider group with what you have been doing at the final workshop.

The second group took a while to get going. No one was stepping forward to organise and the early ideas weren't gelling with everyone therefore little communication was taking place and the group never met as a whole. Once an idea came forward and people committed to it progress was fast. It is interesting that while course content had emphasised the value of conflict and robust conversations it was collaboration and flexibility that were important in achieving outcomes in these groups.

The end product was to establish a sustainable youth mentoring programme for high performing teenagers.

Readings

Throughout the first half of the course readings were distributed at regular intervals through Excelerator On-line. These often formed the theoretical framework for the next residential. They readings were organised under the following topics:

- Command Leadership
- Emotional Intelligence
- Leadership as Person
- Leadership as Position
- Leadership as Process
- Leadership as Results
- Questioning and Listening
- Connecting Robustly
- Being Strategic

Interviews

We underwent two in-depth interviews with course staff. The first was prior to the beginning of the course and the second in the middle of the programme.

Our first one was recorded and transcribed and we were given an opportunity to review how our thinking on leadership had changed at the end of the programme.

Personal Journal

We were also encouraged to keep a journal as a means of recording our reflections and embedding our learnings.

Interrogating Executive Leadership

The first residential focused on exposing myths about executive leadership. We generated our own list of myths and we worked to challenge the notion that leadership is about personal characteristics (through exploring lenses of leadership) and worked to distinguish between command, management and leadership which challenges the view that leadership is about having the answers and being in control. In preparation for this residential a Global Executive Leadership Inventory was established for each participant. This was basically a 360⁰ appraisal process that gave each of us the opportunity to compare our own view of our leadership with that of people within our organisation.

This residential also outlined the course methodology, formed the peer and application groups and introduced the value of keeping a journal.

Connecting Robustly - Striking at the Roots

The primary focus of second residential was to explore the idea that “the primary constraints or enablers to leadership are in the quality of the relationships and conversations. What is possible is determined by how you are connected and the robustness of the conversations.” Therefore leadership requires building relationships that are robust enough to have the conversations that address the root of issues.

We explored how conflict, dialogue and courageous conversations enable leaders to get to the underlying issues that affect the future, one’s leadership impact, and performance. The following were identified as myths:

- The primary focus of leadership is on structure, strategy and performance. Rather, recognising that the roots of doing these effectively lie in places we don’t normally look – i.e. in relationships and conversations.
- Conflict should be avoided or minimised. Rather, we see conflict as an ally – needing to be actively fostered to lead adaptively.
- It’s better to keep things private OR It’s better to let things lie or let them work out in their own time. Instead, we hoped to show that leadership requires bringing more of your interpretations into conversation with others.

We were also introduced to the ladder of inference as a way of reflecting more deeply about the assumptions we hold.

For me this was the most challenging part of the programme. The concept that conflict can be fostered to good advantage is still one that does not sit well with me. I could clearly see how there was a lack of robustness in my leadership and the default position of avoiding conflict. This approach was acting as a break to further progress and the assumption that a happy ship was a productive ship is quite erroneous. There is need to confront issues, to challenge thinking and to promote a

more entrepreneurial environment. Otherwise a state of mediocrity is enabled and people can drift, happy but unchallenged.

Being more robust is an important part of my own development that I need to embrace to improve the quality of my leadership. It causes you to think about the quality of the conversation that you are having and are you taking the opportunity provided to you to probe at a persons assumptions that might be limiting their vision. In a school of 60 to 80 employees the opportunity to engage any one of those employees in a conversation that is worth having can be rare. On reflection I think I do this better with our students than I do with our staff.

In establishing professional learning circles within the school one intention is to train staff themselves to be more robust in their conversations with each other. A true learning community will only develop as teacher professional conversations are focussed on developing greater depth in reflection on personal practice.

Tuning into Culture

The primary focus of third residential was that the leadership work with culture is attending to the meaning that is being created in the organisation. Further, that words and phrases; stories; customs, traditions, symbols; and practices and routines “carry” the taken for granted aspects of organisational culture . We identified these as high value places to pay attention to when establishing what meaning is being created in our teams and organisations.

We worked with critical reflection skills that look beneath the situation including questions such as:

- What are the values and meanings tied into this?
- What is important for us to change– what is at stake?
- How is what is important related to existing loyalties and/or historical alliances (colleagues, family members, friends)?
- Who stands to lose/gain and feel betrayed/trusted if we persist?
- If we were a bit more courageous or skilled, what would we do/have do?

We were introduced to the concept of framing, and in particular listening for how people are framing issues was a key leadership practice and one that is critical for picking up the ongoing meaning and culture work.

The following myths were identified:

- Leaders sit outside of their organisations culture and “work” on it (they are as much shaped by culture as they are shaping culture).

- That culture change happens primarily through big culture change projects – rather, leaders also need to pay attention to the incremental, informal, ongoing, subtle, and local interpretations that occur in conversations.
- That senior executives are the most influential members of creating culture – we looked at research that confirmed many of your experiences that middle managers are most influential.

This was the most enjoyable residential for me. I gained great value from exploring the different meanings of culture. Culture change has been a big part of the process for improving my school. Managing an incremental change process based on conversations at different levels of the school has proven to be successful. This has been achieved more by trial and error rather than design. However I now feel much better equipped to embark on a process that seeks to address issues of culture within an organisation through a process that uses people to influence change at different levels. An important message for schools is not to ignore the student voice and the ability of students to influence and lead change.

Strategic Possibilities

The fourth residential focused on Strategic Possibilities where we explored how to see and think strategically. Together we looked at the different ways in which our own initial views of being strategic (as per our pre-programme interview) were shaping our view, then we explored five different ways of “being strategic” via different articles. Both experiences highlighted how being strategic goes beyond listening for frames, to using framing and reframing to see new possibilities for the future.

We experimented with the undervalued dimensions of being strategic – in particular – leadership as story. From this perspective, leaders see strategy as movement (as a compass, not a map). Particularly in wicked or adaptive situations, leadership requires recognising that the plan or map they have in front of them is not sufficient to get them out. What the leader has to do “is instil some confidence in people, get them moving in the some general direction, and be sure they look closely at cues created by their actions so that they learn where they were and get some better idea of where they are and where they want to be.”

Strategy as story also brings other elements of being strategic to the foreground such as “loving what you do”. As the Steve Jobs case highlighted, *‘I just don’t love this. I can’t convince myself to fall in love with this. And this is the most important [area of strategy] we’ve ever done.’* We explored what you love enough in the you do that makes some of the adaptive and messy aspects of leadership worthwhile.

And we explored how to bring a strategic view to everyday situations – seeing ahead, seeing behind, seeing above, seeing below, seeing beyond and seeing beside and of course – seeing it through.

We also spent time looking at some of the strategic tools that the value creation strategic perspective highlight – in particular, using the strategy canvas framework as a basis for your strategic thinking and feedback to one another.

The myths identified were:

- Being strategic is about strategic planning and is event based. Rather we looked to highlight being strategic as a mindset and way of thinking – a view we can bring to everyday situations.
- Strategy is primarily an analytical, data driven exercise. Rather, we highlighted being strategic as emotional and experimental (keeping in movement and being attentive to cues).

These are interesting myths when you consider the current education climate in New Zealand of evidence-based change. One is led to think that without data you can't develop effective strategy. This residential and its associated readings emphasised the importance of using data as only one tool in developing strategy. Listening to people and the stories they have to tell is another. In fact strategy that does not take into account the place that people will have in that strategy is unlikely to be effective.

Leading Beyond Boundaries

The fifth residential encouraged us to explore boundaries and seeded the idea that it is at the boundaries that most productive conversations and opportunities for change take place. “Boundaries” are often self-imposed and are assumptions that define and limit us to behave, act, build within in a certain framework. By identifying these boundaries and “picking” at them we open up the opportunity for some exciting developments.

Conceptually I found this quite a challenging residential. How do I limit myself by the boundaries that I function within? What are these boundaries? Can I identify them? Can I let them go and therefore explore possibilities that I had not previously considered?

Some of our boundaries may be limiting us, holding us back, others may define us.

Future Proofing Your Leadership Growth

The last residential gave an opportunity for application groups to present their projects. We also looked at ways in which we could stay connected. Continuation of the peer groups would be an effective way of ensuring that we still grew as leaders

Conclusion

The effectiveness of a programme like this is dependant on your willingness to engage with the material and commit time to the activities. It was often difficult for many of us to make space and there were times when it was almost impossible. The opportunity provided by my sabbatical in the last few weeks of the course was invaluable in being able to reflect on and draw together some of the key learnings. The course has changed my thinking about leadership in many areas.

- A greater willingness to embrace conflict and to initiate robust conversations with staff.
- A different approach to strategic planning giving more thought to the use of people in implementing strategy and although using data still figures prominently what people feel is also listened to.
- Looking for opportunities to initiate conversations that challenge people to look at their boundaries and where they could look to push in a different direction.
- A fresh look at professional learning in the school and making space for people to use peer groups to help them reflect on their practice.
- An examination of how cultural change takes place within the school and where is it important for the leadership development to take place. This has renewed an earlier focus of mine in developing the capacity of middle managers to lead change.

My view is that the methodologies used allowed us to become immersed in the course material in a way that more conventional methods would not have allowed. This immersion means that as we walked away from the course for the last time I had a feeling that I had been changed as a leader in ways significant enough to ensure that they would endure.

Some Readings

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