

# GROWING LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES

## **Introduction:**

Much has been, and will be, written about leadership. The complexity is, at times, over whelming. The opportunity that the sabbatical gave me, was to clarify what I probably already knew; that is that there is no simple recipe for growing leadership capabilities, and for creating a culture of distributed leadership. It also gave me the time to read, and think and talk, and dream, and build on my knowledge and understanding.

When going into my sabbatical, I started from the belief that we needed to actively develop a culture and environment for staff that replicated our vision for our students – *"empowering our students (staff) for life"*.

We believed that we needed to develop a different way of working between staff and the existing hierarchical leadership structure, yet knew that for us there is a place for that as well.

Initially I had a narrow view of what I wanted to learn; and was going to focus on building capacity with coaching as a method of developing leadership capabilities, as research has shown that a culture of coaching and being coached leads to a culture of empowerment. We had at that time invested heavily into training leaders with the skills of coaching, but hadn't put the time and energy into planning how to develop a sustainable infrastructure for coaching. However, while this is essential for us, I realised over time that it was too narrow an approach because of our particular situation.

We not only needed to empower our staff through building a culture of distributed leadership, we also needed to change our leadership structure, and provide specific support and professional development to help both experienced leaders and individuals to step onto the *"leadership waka"*.

This report will summarize my learning, and briefly explain our planned developments for building an environment that empowers both staff and students, with a focus on distributed leadership. Please note, that this learning has built over a period of time, but was accelerated during the time I took for the sabbatical.

## **My Journey:**

Our challenges, after diagnosis 2012/13, were to:

- Restructure leadership systems by establishing new roles

- Appoint existing teachers to a significant leadership role; two of four were relatively inexperienced leaders

- Develop a new team of leaders

- Identify and provide appropriate professional development and support for:

  - Leadership capabilities

  - Specific skills related to the role

I will start my journey in 2010, although, as any principal will attest, my learning about leadership has been developing for ever!

Because I had been reading about distributed leadership, I had the privilege of attending a session with Professor Alma Harris in Sydney in 2010. Her messages resonated well with me, but also challenged my thinking.

Her messages that distributed leadership is a sophisticated system, and needs to be carefully orchestrated and implemented, that our professionals need to be fully engaged and have ownership in the process, and that the only way to improve outcomes is to focus on learning and teaching; i.e. change what happens in the classrooms, made me realise that the process of developing this culture was going to take considerable time:

- In understanding what was required
- In planning for the implementation
- In implementation

We knew that teacher leadership has direct impact on student learning. Changes in staffing in recent years meant we had few teachers with experience or confidence to become leaders at the “middle” level of leadership. Therefore we knew we needed to build leadership capacity with “middle” leaders.

Professor Alma Harris challenged my thinking with the concept that not only did we need to focus on building an environment of distributed leadership, but that we needed to consider what style of leadership was necessary for our school. She also made it clear that leaders/principals must develop themselves first, to build our own knowledge and capacity, and to be a model for learning.

About this time, a colleague told me about coaching, and the role it had in empowering others. I researched more about coaching, and then over the next two years, eight leaders in the school were trained in this skill. I was particularly excited with the potential coaching has for developing leaders and empowering all. In hindsight, we didn't change our infrastructure to support this initiative, so it was left to each of us to put these newly learned skills into practice when and how we wanted.

As part of ongoing review and revision, we had been looking at our appraisal system, along with developing plans to raise leadership capabilities. A reading I had done (can't remember who) suggested that it was necessary to identify the key leadership attributes that a school needed for future development. This to me seemed like a manageable and strategic approach for aspiring and existing leaders to start to develop leadership attributes, and for the school to be able to benefit from these. At the beginning of 2012, we identified five leadership attributes and broke them down into their key components. (Table 1)

As part of teacher inquiry/appraisal, leaders were then asked to reflect upon these, identify their own strengths, to choose an attribute, and an indicator for this attribute, and to develop a teacher inquiry for developing the chosen attribute. We saw this, along with other discussions and so on, as a starting point to help teachers both identify possible leadership capabilities and to developing these.

Crowther (2009) p84, talks about the need for potential teacher leaders to develop awareness of their leadership capabilities, and of the strength and nature of their leadership styles. He stressed how important it was for teachers to have

opportunities and encouragement to explore and express these talents in a safe environment.

Desired Leadership Attributes at Fernworth Primary	The ability to:
<b>Vision</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reflect upon the current situation,</li> <li>• identify a preferred future, (situation)</li> <li>• take risks</li> <li>• use initiative to develop an approach or way forward that aligns with the school's beliefs and values</li> </ul>
<b>Communication</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• communicate the vision in a way that has people "buy" into it.</li> <li>• Making sound judgements about who to involve in the development and implementation of the approach, and</li> <li>• what, when and who to inform/involve along the way,</li> <li>• reflecting, listening, consulting, and making changes as appropriate.</li> </ul>
<b>Passion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• maintain a high level of energy and focus on the vision/approach,</li> <li>• directing actions towards this,</li> <li>• driving others along with you.</li> </ul>
<b>Discipline</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work towards the vision,</li> <li>• being strategic in developing, implementing, reviewing and revising plans,</li> <li>• being flexible, and adaptable but maintaining the focus and passion,</li> <li>• managing time and work load strategically.</li> </ul>
<b>Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• make decisions</li> <li>• take actions</li> <li>• maintain these over time.</li> </ul>

Table 1

While on sabbatical I read a particularly influential book; *Developing Teacher Leaders*, by Frank Crowther. This made a huge impact on me. The book is a good balance of theory and practical information about how to develop teacher leaders. It makes it evident that, as Harris talked about with distributed leadership, it needs to be carefully orchestrated and implemented, and, takes significant time to develop teacher leaders.

This understanding has led to me being far more strategic in planning for developing leaders.

Harris talked about the necessity for distributed leadership to be invitational. In November each year we set aside a day to review the school year, and to start to make decisions for the development needed in the following year. Previously the senior leadership had directed this process to some extent.

In 2011 we encouraged the review discussion to follow a natural path, and then encouraged people to put their hands up to be involved in leading or contributing to the development of an area. We started to get people interested in developing areas other than straight curriculum areas. We have continued to encourage this approach, and in 2012 all staff, not just teachers, were involved in this process. The willingness and enthusiasm from the support staff is very exciting.

I am particularly interested in the challenge of invitational leadership, especially as it potentially "conflicts" with one of the leadership attributes we have identified as necessary at Fernworth Primary; that of *vision*; and its indicator *initiative*. Taking actions as I have described in the paragraph above provides opportunities to make

general invitations for people to put their hand up, because they have identified the need. I have also made specific “invitations” to staff for areas that are potential development areas.

My understanding is that encouraging staff to step up and use their initiative if they see an opportunity or need, is in itself an invitation. This is where the need to develop an environment where people are confident to step up comes into play.

A few years ago we had significantly changed our leadership structure in response to review from our existing “middle” leaders. These leaders struggled with the need to have feet in both camps; leadership and teaching colleague, and particularly struggled with the accountability aspects of their role. Review and hindsight has shown that the restructuring, while responding to the needs of the middle leaders, did not have a positive impact on student achievement, although it was not necessarily negative either.

In response to requests from teachers for them to work more in their levels (the year level of their children) for planning and professional development, and in response to the review of our leadership structure, we introduced the concept of Levels Leaders in 2012 as an intermediary step. In 2012 the leaders’ main role was to facilitate discussion and support for planning together.

In 2013, as a result of ongoing discussion with staff and research, we have raised the level of responsibility and leadership needed by these leaders. This is probably the most significant decision we have made in terms of restructuring our leadership systems.

We explained our initial thoughts for the job descriptions for these roles, and then offered these positions to all staff who indicated an interest. Once we had made final decisions on class levels (following feedback from staff) we realised that we needed to accept three indications of interest and also specifically invite a fourth teacher into this role. Initially we thought we may need to interview staff, but this wasn’t needed in the end.

We have actively involved all teaching staff in the development of the role of Levels Leader, and very specifically the Levels Leaders themselves. We have been very strategic about the development of this role, and understand that it will take several years before all leaders are able to meet the requirements of the role. Two key areas of development for the role are developing leadership capabilities, including providing feedback and facilitating discussions about student achievement (coaching being one way to have these discussions), and developing data analysis capabilities. We have put in place specific plans for the development of both areas.

It has been very important to have ongoing dialogue with all staff, as we endeavour to explain why we have taken such a strategic long term view to the development of teachers in this role; which includes all four being released for one day a week. This day involves time for everyone to meet together, including myself, where we undertake professional development, as well as other development.

We have followed Harris’ contention that school improvement needs to follow the 5Ds; Diagnosis, Development, Drive, Data, and Distributed Leadership. In

particular we are aware of the need to plan for drive – building in sustainability knowing it takes 5-7 years to establish “*deep rooted cultural change*”.

This is a challenge because as Robinson said in *Student Centred Leadership*, “*the ruler ----- is (the) impact on the learning of those students for whom the leader is responsible*” p18. And *National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services (2010) – 10 strong claims about successful school leadership*; Claim 9: Successful heads distribute leadership progressively; stated that “*there is a connection between the increased distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities, and the improvement of pupil outcomes*” p16. How soon will it take for this impact or connection become evident? How long can we afford to wait?

We took risks with this approach, because research told us that we needed to re-culture and re-vision our school first, and then build systems and opportunities for leadership. We chose to do both simultaneously, by making small changes in systems and opportunities that were able to be built on, while also initiating conversations and discussions about building a shared vision of an empowering environment, focusing on the moral purpose of the school, and endeavouring to make this live through all our actions and decisions.

Purkey and Siegal’s (2003) *Becoming an Invitational Leader* builds on the concept of invitational leadership being a type of distributed leadership, and specifically focused on parallel leadership which is built on trust, shared purpose and allowance for individual expressions. The message of trust and shared purpose is consistent in most research, and something we have taken deliberate actions to build and grow.

A challenge for us is to ensure we provide regular opportunities and expectations for deep reflection on our culture, and on what inhibits/develops leadership opportunities.

Purkey and Siegal challenged my thinking. They state that if we invite others to take on leadership opportunities then that presupposes that people are always motivated, and therefore we need to seek to unleash each person’s intrinsic energy. The key is the language we use; we need to offer/propose/encourage/consider .....

One exciting example of inviting others to take on leadership roles has led to our focus for development for the school for 2013. I read about the Cracker Jacks programme in the gazette in 2012, and had a conversation with a couple of teachers who were very interested. This led us to send teachers to observe this programme taking place in schools in Auckland, and a follow up discussion helped us realise that this approach would enable us to meet identified needs of our students through specific teaching, and also enable us to support teachers to deliver learning and teaching in a way that supported our revised curriculum delivery plan.

This has evolved into another new leadership role; again with a relatively inexperienced teacher. This teacher is also released, for a period of time, and joins with the Levels Leaders for professional development, including coaching, as well as other aspects such as curriculum design.

Yet none of this discussion so far has addressed the key purpose from my initial proposal; that of coaching as a means to empower others.

The success of all of the above centre around honest effective communication. The need to be honest, have courage and have respectful conversations (Purkey and Siegal) are about communicating positively.

Coaching is based on the premise that people are capable, and have the ability to solve their own problems. Coaching is non-judgemental and is a positive solutions based dialogue. It is only effective if it is based on trust, respect and courage. To me coaching is the oil that will not only ensure the car (school) is running effectively, but will also ensure that we move forward.

Therefore the relationship between a culture of distributed leadership and coaching is essential in order to build leadership capability.

To this end, as part of my sabbatical I spent time with very generous principals in the Bay of Plenty, who have established coaching as part of the way they do things. It was fascinating to spend time in other schools, and was blown away by their generosity of time and ideas. I also spent time with partners from *Coach Approach* which is the organisation that we had done the coaching training with.

This time enabled me to develop plans not only for continuing to grow our ability to coach, but also to grow leaders in other ways. We are developing a long term professional development plan for our leaders, and using *Coach Approach* expertise for a lot of this. Very fortuitously, we have also been offered the chance to be part of a MOE project *Learning and Change Network*. This will challenge us all to develop our ability to analyse and use data.

### **Summary:**

This opportunity has enabled me to build on understandings I had, which has taken me to the next level of "knowing": that of being able to apply and use the knowledge. For example, I knew how essential it was to have a big picture view of any area needing development. Now, though, I am able to use this to plan strategically.

In the case of this study, yes, a focus on coaching will lead to empowerment as people solve their own problems and become less reliant on others. But this narrow focus would not in itself build a culture of distributed leadership. We continue to re-culture and re-vision by focusing on developing the key values of respect, courage, honesty, as we also build systems and opportunities.

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