

PRINCIPAL SABBATICALS

SABBATICAL REPORT

RESEARCH TOPIC

To carefully consider the very critical role of personnel in positions of leadership and governance in New Zealand schools, and how they are directly responsible and accountable for influencing a school's culture and effectiveness for the better, and how can we actively learn from positive examples of this, as well as any negative examples, to reduce the need for statutory intervention and / or commissioners in our schools.

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TE RAPA PRIMARY SCHOOL

Hamilton

Sabbatical Period
TERM 4 2016

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I communicated with a variety of school personnel (past and present), and also selected number of Trustees who were either currently serving in the role or had previously served as a School Trustee.

These communications took place both prior to and during the sabbatical period (Term 4 2016).

Research was also undertaken through school internet websites and detailed analysis of readings. Media comment was also read and carefully considered.

Thanks to those colleagues who hosted me knowingly or unknowingly

- * Schools in the greater Waikato
- * Schools in Auckland and also South Auckland
- * Schools in the Bay of Plenty, Taranaki and Hawkes Bay

INTRODUCTION - SUMMARY

Through my research I found that many people associated with New Zealand schools have a different set of expectations of both themselves and other stakeholders, but there were also a number of common threads that they all seem to share around “what is” quality leadership in our schools and “how can effective school leadership” lead to successful school governance.

Often their thinking is understandably based around their own actual experiences in the education sector, rather than the knowledge they may have gained through professional reading(s) and / or the experiences of others.

The *common thread* that came through my research has come from open-minded individuals who were eager and willing to comment on their experience(s) of those people they had worked for or who they had worked with.

Whether these leaders or Trustees were effective or not depended on whom I asked.

If I asked the leader themselves they rated themselves as highly effective, but ask their followers or their colleagues and they may tell you a very different story.

What I did find to be the *common thread* was the importance of building and maintaining positive reciprocal relationships with others in a supportive team environment where individuals felt valued, were recognised, and were also fulfilled and satisfied in their work.

This all pointed to the need for effective *experienced* school leaders in our schools.

It was certainly very refreshing to see those school leaders and Trustees who refused to buy into any negativity within their schools too, and they actively embraced new personnel and were strategic when inducting them effectively into the culture of that workplace.

They knew that a toxic situation could lead to a damaged landscape which would then take much longer to navigate through, and would only create unwanted stress and anxiety for all. They looked to recruit and promote “good people” who were seen to be actively contributing to a positive environment.

The importance of positive reciprocal relationships between “school leaders” and those in Governance roles could not be overlooked either. Any school environment where there was an existence of an “us” and “them” mentality was significantly more likely to lead to a poor school culture, and future conflicts.

Adopting a team approach was best providing the leadership and governance lines were not crossed, and there were no gaps in the competence of the key players operating in these key positions.

This sabbatical report explores the dynamics of what is a good strong leader, and how building and maintaining positive reciprocal relationships promotes a successful school culture and with a dose of ‘common sense’ can easily avoid conflict situations.

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Exceptional leaders and great leadership is indeed a difficult thing to pin down and understand.

We kind of know it when we see it. We also know when we see poor leadership.

You know a great leader when you're working for one, but even they can have a hard time explaining the specifics of what they do that makes their leadership so effective.

Great leadership is dynamic, and it melds a variety of unique skills into an integrated whole. It seems to be a "gut instinct" thing too, and just like some people can *run fast* or *draw / paint well* some people have genuine leadership qualities ... while others just think they do !

Effective leaders tend to be narcissistic leaders, who have an exceptional interest in or admiration for oneself. They can be charismatic, and charming. They are confident and are well presented and have a high self-esteem. The impression they give is they are forward planners with a vision. They are outgoing, and their pride in their own accomplishments is influential and persuasive.

As a result narcissists appear likely to be highly effective leaders, and are therefore selected for leadership positions.

The **constructive narcissist** with moderate levels of narcissism is not only visionary but can also build a sense of trust, is well balanced, consultative and can show empathy. While they are larger than life in terms of their vision and profile, they do not feel they deserve special treatment.

Some leaders are reactive narcissists (high on narcissism) or shy narcissists (low on narcissism). Both can be equally devastating for the people they lead.

Reactive Narcissists

Reactive leaders in our schools have a grandiose sense of self and see themselves as special and better than everyone else. They can be seen to be obnoxious, blaming and lacking in empathy. They tend to have a strong sense of entitlement and will exploit others. They will stand on top of someone else to make themselves or their school look good. In their self-absorption and self-admiration they can come across as superior and arrogant. Reactive narcissists seldom take responsibility for failure, and will find someone else to blame. In their self-absorption and self-admiration they constantly seek positive feedback, see negative feedback as an insult and denigrate anyone they see as a threat. They rarely consult as a leader, manipulate others and might seek constant achievement to compensate for their own insecurities.

Shy Narcissists

While ambitious and self-centred these school leaders are often insecure and suffer from imposter syndrome not fully believing they deserve the job. They are hesitant when interacting with others and may reinforce their security through dealing with spreadsheets behind closed doors rather than interacting with others. The way they deal with uncertainty and fear of failure is by being a perfectionist, but when something goes wrong they experience intense shame reactions. They can become defensive and hostile if their vulnerability is exposed. They may also exploit others, but they will do this subtly.

Whether these types of leaders are effective or not depends on whom you ask.

It seems that conflict in our schools could easily be reduced if our aspiring school leaders had more tailored training at 5 year intervals eg. after 5, 10 and 15 years Principalship service. This would be offered by those who were effective school leaders with over 20+ years of experience.

Many principals tend to learn on the job, and if they are effective they tend to stay in a leadership role for a lengthy period despite some curved balls being thrown at them over time.

Those that are only there for a short time will have “gaps” in their leadership style, or they may have inherited a difficult staff member or an elected Trustee who was determined to make their life difficult. They may have also been resistant to good advice and guidance ... if it was offered.

These dilemmas are never easy, and are there to test us, but those with experience and a good team around them would have already navigated their way through these challenges. Even when they are out for the count ... they have the ability to get up off the canvas and keep going.

My research found that those school leaders who had managed to successfully stay in the top role for 20+ years had something special. They were a narcissist, but were lucky enough to have natural leadership abilities that worked well for them and they had astutely developed a good team around them.

This is hugely difficult for aspiring school leaders in small rural schools starting out. They are up against it, and if they can complete their 5+ years apprenticeship with minimal fuss, it is then very likely that they could continue to go from strength to strength over the next 10+ years.

A school's Board of Trustees is elected every 3 years, and therefore every 3 years New Zealand's school leaders up and down the country must tip toe their way through a potential mine field.

If the elected members are all “good people” it is a somewhat easier task, but if one or two come on board with an agenda and they don't have the skills to govern then conflict is potentially inevitable and this can lead to MOE intervention and then appointed LSMs and Commissioners.

It is disappointing that many aspiring school leaders have their careers squashed and even destroyed at this early stage of their journey. Many choose the Assistant Principal and Deputy Principal route to Principalship to avoid the risks associated with leading alone out in a small rural country school.

In the short term we must look more closely and critically at our leadership selection process and our leadership training programmes to determine the kind of narcissists we are selecting for Principalship, and in addition to this we must start the process of reviewing and eventually dissolving the current Board of Trustee governance model.

We can still promote and encourage parental involvement in our schools, but we must remove the power of a BOT to sit in judgement over our schools and the people who work there when they simply do not have the qualifications to do so. Principals need to be a school's competent leader and must assume the mandate to manage accordingly.

Poor performance would see tailored training implemented followed by a leadership change if there was no improvement.

Good performance would be seen as the “norm” and leaders who are in this category would certainly demonstrate a wide variety of leadership traits that would make them successful.

Our school leaders in New Zealand need courage. *“Courage is the first virtue that makes all other virtues possible.”* — Aristotle. People will wait to see if a leader is courageous before they're willing to follow his or her lead. People need courage in their leaders. They need someone who can make difficult decisions and watch over the good of the group. They need a leader who will stay the course when things get tough. People are far more likely to show courage themselves when their leaders do the same.

Principals must be effective with their communication. *“The more elaborate our means of communication, the less we communicate.”* — Joseph Priestley. Communication is the real work of leadership. It’s a fundamental element of how leaders accomplish their goals each and every day. You simply can’t become a great leader until you are a great communicator. Great communicators inspire people. They create a connection with their followers that is real, emotional, and personal, regardless of any physical distance between them.

Leaders also need a dose of generosity. *“A good leader is a person who takes a little more than his share of the blame and a little less than his share of the credit.”* — John Maxwell. They share credit and offer enthusiastic praise. They’re as committed to their followers’ success as they are to their own. They want to inspire all of their employees to achieve their personal best not just because it will make the team more successful, but because they care about each person as an individual.

Humility makes an effective leader too. *“Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it’s thinking of yourself less.”* — C.S. Lewis. They don’t allow their position of authority to make them feel that they are better than anyone else. As such, they don’t hesitate to jump in and do the dirty work when needed, and they won’t ask their followers to do anything they wouldn’t be willing to do themselves.

In communicating with others throughout my sabbatical research everyone highlighted the need to be self-aware. *“It is absurd that a man should rule others, who cannot rule himself.”* — Latin Proverb. Self-awareness is the foundation of emotional intelligence, a skill that 90% of top performing leaders possess in abundance. Great leaders’ high self-awareness means they have a clear and accurate image not just of their leadership style, but also of their own strengths and weaknesses. They know where they shine and where they’re weak, and they have effective strategies for leaning into their strengths and compensating for their weaknesses.

Treating people well is vital too. *“The way you see people is the way you treat them, and the way you treat them is what they become.”* — Jon Wolfgang von Goethe. Great leaders learn what makes people tick, recognise their needs in the moment, and adapt their leadership style accordingly. They don’t treat people how they themselves want to be treated. Instead, they take the Golden Rule a step further and treat each person as he or she would like to be treated.

Successful school Principals maintain a passion for what we do, but balance this with general enthusiasm and an eye to the future. *“If you just work on stuff that you like and are passionate about, you don’t have to have a master plan with how things will play out.”* — Mark Zuckerberg. No one wants to work for a boss that’s unexcited about his or her job, or even one who’s just going through the motions.

Great leaders know that having a clear vision isn’t enough. They are people who can transfer their “infectiousness” to those around them. *“The very essence of leadership is that you have to have a vision. It’s got to be a vision you articulate clearly and forcefully on every occasion. You can’t blow an uncertain trumpet.”* — Reverend Theodore Hesburgh. You have to make that vision come alive so that your followers can feel it, and see it just as clearly as you do. This inspires others to internalize the vision and make it their own.

Authenticity refers to being honest in all things, and this is important in a highly competent leader. *“Just be who you are and speak from your guts and heart -- it’s all a man has.”* — Hubert Humphrey. It’s not just what you say and do, but who you are. When you’re authentic, your words and actions align with who you claim to be. Your followers shouldn’t be compelled to spend time trying to figure out if you have ulterior motives, or if you are playing games. Any time they spend doing so erodes their confidence in you. Leaders who are authentic are transparent and forthcoming. They aren’t perfect, but they earn people’s respect by walking their talk.

Leadership is about approachability, so always make it clear that you welcome challenges, criticism, and viewpoints other than your own. *“Management is like holding a dove in your hand. Squeeze too hard and you kill it, not hard enough and it flies away.”* — Tommy Lasorda. Leaders know that an environment where people are afraid to speak up, offer insight, and ask good questions is destined for failure. By ensuring that they are approachable, great leaders facilitate the flow of great ideas throughout the organization.

“The ancient Romans had a tradition: Whenever one of their engineers constructed an arch, as the capstone was hoisted into place, the engineer assumed accountability for his work in the most profound way possible: He stood under the arch.” — Michael Armstrong. Our best leaders have their followers’ backs. They don’t try to shift blame, and they don’t avoid shame when they fail. They’re never afraid to say, “The buck stops here,” and they earn people’s trust by backing them up.

Leaders must have a sense of purpose *“You don’t lead by pointing and telling people some place to go. You lead by going to that place and making a case.”* — Ken Kesey. A sense of purpose refers to an understanding of where you’re going and why. People like to feel like they’re part of something bigger than themselves. Solid leaders give people that feeling.

I have felt that through my readings and my communication with those in the sector there has always been a significant piece of the jigsaw missing where there has been enough negativity in a school to warrant the MOE bringing in a LSM or a Commissioner.

I believe the missing ingredient(s) is around ‘leadership’ and also ‘relationships’. It’s about how we go about steering self and others in what is perceived to be the “best” direction.

It seems that those successful school leaders who have avoided conflict situations in their schools have the ability to read their audience(s) well and they have the people skills to navigate their way through a variety of different situations.

Having a set of skills and knowing how and when to apply these to different situations involving people eg. students, staff, parents, BOT members, PTA, MOE and others are all slightly different and will require a school leader to know how and when to use what could be a combination of many skills.

Bringing it altogether does not mean that you have to incorporate all of these traits at once. Focusing on one or two at a time may be enough.

This is how others will then measure if that school leader is being effective.

The MOE only bring in a LSM or a Commissioner when relationships have eroded, communication has broken down and the situation is beyond repair. It is disappointing that there have been examples of this possibly happening because of a rogue Trustee or similar who feels they are *seeking improvement*.

An MOE appointed “trouble shooter” (experienced / competent principal) with the power to do so needs to be tasked with removing that toxic person should their assertive, aggressive or public approach to *seeking improvement* prove damaging and destructive to the school and those who work / learn there.

In the past the education sector have enjoyed having persons employed in positions of responsibility assigned to a role similar to this, but at present the MOE do not seem to have an interest in adopting this model. It is also a concern that the MOE seem to lack the power to swiftly intervene and shut down a problem before it escalates, seemingly waiting to implement a complicated drawn out model to try and achieve a satisfactory outcome when the obvious simple solution is overlooked because it is not seen as professionally / politically correct.

It is sad that the media then race to “air the dirty laundry in a public arena” and everyone gets hurt, and the children, staff and the school suffer. This ‘hit’ to one’s reputation can take years to recover from.

Conclusion

From my research it is plainly obvious that the more you practice, the more instinctive you will become, and the more you'll internalise your leadership style as an effective school leader.

This is called *experience* which we don't seem to value as much as we should.

Successful experienced school leaders stay productive and in control because they know what they are doing and they become very good at it.

The Ministry of Education should make better use of these *experienced* school leaders who are well entrenched within our New Zealand education system. They are genuine assets in their schools, and it is obvious that many other schools could benefit from their knowledge and experience too.

I agree that curriculum leadership is very important, but "old school" people management is more crucial in schools to avoid conflict and MOE intervention ... followed by LSMs or Commissioners.

We place huge emphasis on the *First Time Principal Programmes* and we have a team of mentors tasked with helping these new school leaders into their roles, but there are many more "old heads" out there leading New Zealand Schools who already know the secret of good / sound school leadership.

We must not continue to overlook the 20+ years of "*Principalship wisdom*" these school leaders have.

They have been successfully leading and managing themselves and others for a very long time in a variety of different school settings and most importantly they have done all of this and always avoided conflict.

They are a wealth of knowledge, and they should be seconded out of their current roles for a set period of time to provide ongoing support and guidance to others, and this should happen before they retire and walk away from our profession.

To ask these people to support *schools in conflict* as LSMs or Commissioners is an oversight, because when this happens it means that the work was not done effectively by the Ministry of Education prior to MOE intervention being required.

We will always inherit and sometimes create difficulty in our schools, but those courageous leaders who have maintained continuity and achieved success already have the ideal model for successful schools.

They are living proof that things can work really, really well.

These people know how to avoid adversity before it starts, and have "been there" and "done that", and over time they have clearly sharpened their game.

They don't follow the safest path, the path of least resistance or the most challenging path. They are just naturally good, and simply have that innate ability to lead along any path.

It seems to me that we are under-utilising these people at the top of the cliff