

# **Leading School Improvement through Mentoring of Strong Middle Management; Lessons from Schools in New Zealand and the United Kingdom.**

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Executive Summary**

This research study explores the way a group of school leaders in New Zealand, England and Ireland lead school improvement, through mentoring of their middle management staff. It identifies a set of seven broad themes that are critical elements of the mentoring process as articulated by the school leaders interviewed. The themes that emerged were school leadership makeup, communication, vision, an achievement focus, structural and resourcing considerations, a theory underpinning their leadership and finally what I have termed letting go.

Educational leadership is a complex process, operated within complex and varying contexts. Effective middle management leadership adds greatly to the school's capacity to improve educational outcomes. Through effective mentoring of their middle management staff, school leaders can add greatly to their schools' effectiveness.

## **Purpose**

The intention of this sabbatical was to provide me with an opportunity to examine devolved leadership within New Zealand and British settings in relation to schooling improvement.

My school has made changes to its management structures and processes for leading curriculum delivery and improvement. This sabbatical offered an opportunity to examine successful improvement models and to discuss the ways school leaders sought improvement, through effective use of their middle management staff.

## **Rationale and Background Information**

The catalyst for this sabbatical study was the recent alteration to management structures within my current school, in response to a need to improve management practices, especially in relation to leading curriculum and establishing more robust quality assurance practices. It was apparent that the capacity of management staff to support these areas for improvement would be critical to the successfulness of the school in addressing these needs.

The School Board and I were eager to ensure that the school's management organisation, supporting job descriptions and appraisal processes were robust, led to improved teaching and learning, improved accountability and offered pathways for the professional advancement of staff.

In addition, my 2009 performance agreement included two objectives that were directly relevant to the intended focus for the sabbatical. The first focused on development of the school's leadership team and management, with a focus on management structure, job descriptions and performance appraisal. The second concentrated on the development of skills in delegation and change management.

Finally, it was intended that through the establishment of an effective management team within a new management structure, supported by better processes, the school would be better placed to implement the revised New Zealand Curriculum. Implementation would best occur under creative, professional and supportive leadership. This would not happen if it left solely to the Principal to drive change; a skilled, supportive management team would be vital to achieving our desire to implement the curriculum in a way that met the needs of our students effectively.

## **Activities Undertaken (Methodology)**

### **A Preliminary Reading (Literature Review)**

The initial focus of this study consisted of a brief scrutiny of relevant literature around schooling improvement through devolved leadership. My focus in this reading review was

to consider the way in which school leaders worked with their leadership staff to effect improvements in educational outcomes. The core resource used for this review was the Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration: School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why (Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd; 2009). The outcome of this review was to ensure that I refreshed my understanding of core elements of educational practice. Little direct reference is made to the elements arising from this review in the rest of this report. Rather, it framed my questioning and provided an underpinning of my understanding of the relevance of the elements canvassed with school leaders in the substantive stages of this research project.

## **B Interviews with New Zealand Principals**

After my preliminary literature review I visited with and spoke to three experienced and successful New Zealand Principals. This allowed me to develop my understanding of how they went about leading schooling improvement through their middle management staff.

## **C Interviews with Head Teachers and Principals in England and Ireland**

The final phase involved me in visiting and speaking to three Head Teachers in England and a Principal in Ireland. Once again, the focus of this section was to develop my understanding of how they went about leading schooling improvement through their middle management staff. In this instance I was also able to familiarise myself with structural elements in their schooling landscape that affected their capability to effect improvement.

Note: My original proposal included provision for attendance at an educational management conference in England. A change to the timing of this conference that occurred after travel arrangements had been made meant this element of my proposal was not able to be included. While disappointing, the rich experiences of the rest of the sabbatical meant this did not materially affect the benefits gained from the sabbatical.

## **Findings**

In carrying out this study, my conversations with seven Principals and Head Teachers in New Zealand, England and Ireland ranged across several elements. We explored the structural features of their schools such as school size, the makeup of their local community and in the schools in England and Ireland, the legislative constraints they operated under. Once this background information was understood, the conversations focused on the leadership beliefs, processes and approaches employed by the school leaders in working with middle managers to further the goal of school improvement.

While these conversations traversed a wide range of topics, by the end of my series of interviews, seven broad leadership-related themes had emerged. These themes were school leadership team makeup, communication, vision, an achievement focus, structural and resourcing considerations, a theory underpinning their leadership and finally what I have termed letting go. The core points that emerged within these themes are noted below.

## **School Leadership Team Makeup**

In all schools, leaders spoke about the makeup of their leadership teams: The people involved, the skill sets, strengths and professional experience of those members had a significant impact on the way school leaders operated. All leaders spoke of a degree of tailoring roles according to the strengths of team members. Those with particular skill sets were channelled into these areas. Successful school leaders are able to identify the strengths of their leadership team members and put these to good use; while they do not omit to explore ways to add to those skill sets, they ensure that there is a good operational fit between the skills held by team members and their allocated responsibilities.

Put plainly, there was recognition that leadership theory would always be mitigated by the actual leadership skills of the team. As a result, the effective school leader maximises the use of the skills at his or her disposal through a close alignment between task allocation and skills, while seeking to further that skill set over time, with a view to growing leadership capacity.

## **Communication**

School leaders recognised two distinct but complementary elements of communication in relation to working with their leadership team to effect improvement. Most leaders spoken to stressed the importance of regular, frank and supportive communication with their management team both individually and collectively. Communication was seen as a vital way of ensuring that all members of the team were “on message”. In other words they all knew what was happening in the school and they knew where their involvement fitted in relation to school direction. They were on board with the school leader’s expectations and the part they played individually and collectively in furthering the school’s goals.

The other element that school leaders recognised was the view that communication with their leadership team offered them a primary source of information about what was happening in the school. They recognised their reliance on receiving accurate, current and relevant information from their leadership team about all aspects of teaching and learning in their schools. The leadership team is often the eyes and ears of the school leader, informing and amending the leader’s judgements about the overall health of the school, its students and its staff.

## **Vision**

Successful school leaders are very aware of the big picture. They know the educational landscape of their local and national context. They know where their school should be headed and they know the challenges they face in moving their schools forward. They also know that their schools operate within a local context formed by their community makeup, their guiding values and ethos as a school, and in Catholic schools, within a particular charism, usually referenced to their founding order. They are mindful that their leadership team need to understand the visionary underpinnings of the school and work within the spirit of that vision.

Leaders spoken to also recognised that it can be easy for middle management staff to lose sight of the school's overall purpose, in the daily business of pursuing the accomplishment of specific tasks. The school leader needs to ensure that middle management staff have their sights raised at times to see the view beyond the immediate landscape of daily demands; to re-sight the horizon of the school as it can be, rather than remaining stranded in the school as it currently stands.

### **Achievement Focus**

All school leaders interviewed spoke explicitly or referred less directly to the overall purpose of their leadership of their management teams; to lead the teaching staff in furthering and strengthening student achievement.

Good leaders set achievement targets that act as a focus for school-wide improvement. They ensure that those targets are well known and shared amongst school stakeholders. School leaders ensure that the attainment of achievement targets remains a central focus for every teacher, supported actively and creatively by a responsive and supportive management team.

Conversations between middle management team members and the teachers in their teaching syndicates about student achievement, including conversations about the learning of individual students, was noted as an important element of effective, improvement-focused middle management performance. Good leaders care about the progress of every student. The collective improvement of achievement in a school is the sum of individual gains in achievement. Good leaders know this and support their leadership teams in focusing on achievement for all students in the classes in their syndicates.

### **Structures and Resources**

While recognising the importance of ensuring the big picture is articulated, leaders also ensured that the supporting structures and resources necessary for the achievement of the school's vision were in place. They also noted the impact that externally imposed structural features could have on school effectiveness and on the capacity of middle managers to deliver improvements in teaching and learning. It was in this area that the greatest difference was noted between New Zealand and British schools.

School leaders noted the need for clear documentation relating to job descriptions, performance agreements and appraisal processes for middle managers. Clearly articulated responsibilities and processes for assessing effectiveness were seen as necessary to ensure clarity of purpose for those charged with leading schooling improvement.

It was noticeable that there was much greater freedom in New Zealand than in Britain to frame job descriptions and performance agreements to suit individual schools. School leaders in Britain spoke of the need to frame job descriptions on the basis of externally-provided expectations and templates that have the approval of national, local or industrial interests. New Zealand school leaders are much freer to develop documents that reflect their school's strategic priorities.

A core element of support for middle managers rests in providing them with time away from teaching responsibilities. Where middle managers combine their management responsibilities with responsibility for teaching a class, challenges continually arise, as they strive to balance the competing demands of these roles. Several school leaders noted that the expectations they could place on a manager with classroom responsibilities was significantly mitigated by their twin roles; they just could not expect as much from a teaching member of their management team as they could from their fully released managers. Strategic decision-making about the provision of release time for managers is a core function of the school leader's role in leading through middle management.

Two significant differences exist between New Zealand and English schools as far as the provision of staffing is concerned. The provision of teaching staff at differing rates dependent on the age of students in New Zealand results in much lower student to teacher ratios than occurs in England, where there is far less consideration given to a need for lower student numbers in the younger age groups than occurs in New Zealand. This results in significantly higher numbers being present in English classes for younger aged children than in equivalent classes in New Zealand. The other noticeable difference lies in the much higher provision of teacher assistants, or teacher aides, in English schools, where a full time teacher aide is shared by no more than two classes, compared to no entitlement provision of such ancillary staffing in New Zealand schools for main stream classes. These two staffing differences significantly alter the management landscape for school leaders in their respective countries, together with the attendant differences in supervision expectations carried by their middle management staff.

I was interested to note that none of the schools visited had undertaken major changes to their management structures. Certainly none had attempted the type of changes carried out in my own school, where a shift away from the traditional Deputy Principal, Assistant Principal and Senior Teacher roles occurred, with these roles being replaced with Directorship and Co-ordinator roles. In discussing the changes made in my own school, several expressed surprise that such a process was possible within existing New Zealand educational employment conditions. It seems likely that few schools have tested the entitlement to undertake strategic management restructuring available to schools. It would be interesting to know whether schools operate under existing management structures out of preference or because they are the structures they have inherited and they alterations are possible.

### **Underpinning Leadership Theory**

School leaders are busy, practical people. They get things done and they accept the need to make compromises to make progress. However, it was evident that several of the school leaders spoken to operate from consciously held and articulated theoretical positions that act as the basis for their leadership: They know what is being said and written about and they draw on educational theory to shape their response to the changing demands of their roles.

This was particularly evident in conversations with two of the school leaders in New Zealand. They frequently cited educational research from named researchers and theorists and noted

academic works as an important part of the rationale for the leadership processes and school direction they pursued. It was also noticeable that research-based theories for improvement were included in their school documentation, with appropriate attribution.

This not only lent theoretical support to the positions adopted but offered a signal to their leadership staff that they were engaged in important work that is the subject of academic research and debate. This link to research was a further element in their mentoring of middle management staff, through a conscious attempt to raise the sights of leadership team members from a task orientation to an improvement focus, based on sound educational and change management theory.

### **Letting Go**

The final element of leadership through mentoring of middle management related to the realisation from school leaders that they had to provide their managers with authentic leadership opportunities. They had to let go of aspects of leadership, to allow their middle managers opportunities to make decisions, to implement those decisions and to see them through.

For many, this aspect of leadership is the most difficult. Successful school leaders are used to doing things well and to having close control of the outcomes of their leadership actions. As one school leader said “The buck stops here” and they are ultimately accountable. To let someone else take charge and to see outcomes that differ in standards, process and in attention to detail can cause the school leader discomfort. There is often a suspicion that a better outcome might have emerged if they had retained closer control of the process. However, leaders recognise the need to let go as a core part of capacity-building in their schools. They accept the possibility of a slightly different, even diminished outcome, if the process results in enhanced leadership capacity within the school.

Most school leaders walk a fine line between seeking these opportunities to support the development of leadership capacity, while retaining some measure of risk mitigation. This mitigation usually takes the form of testing through questioning, rehearsal prior to difficult conversations, acting as devil’s advocate and most importantly, by backing the outcome, with a view to the eventual development of increased leadership capacity. Good leaders allow authentic opportunities to lead and support their middle managers during those opportunities.

### **Implications**

School leaders in New Zealand, England and Ireland operate within very different legislative, social and demographic contexts. The provision of resourcing within their respective educational systems is regulated in different ways and the accountability processes they are subject to differ in scope, intensity and frequency.

However, in these three different educational settings, there is a shared commitment to provide high quality education, within a professional, supportive environment. All leaders

spoken to shared the goal of providing high quality education for every student in their school. Furthermore, they all spoke of the important part played by their middle managers in achieving that goal.

School leaders work with and through their middle management teams to further school goals. They ensure that strengths are utilised and added to, they ensure that effective communication underpins school leadership processes and they work to ensure that actions are based on a vision for improvement, rather than the day to day demands that emerge.

Effective leaders ensure that leadership is firmly focused on improvement and underpinned by credible theories for improvement and sound academic research. They provide appropriate resource support to empower their leadership staff to carry out their work successfully and ensure that expectations are clearly articulated. Leaders demonstrate a readiness to allow middle managers credible and authentic opportunities to lead, while offering support throughout the leadership process.

Effective leadership though mentoring of middle management requires a skilful blend of these attributes. Effective leaders are always looking for ways to strengthen the capacity of their leadership teams to lead school improvement and bring a blend of the attributes noted above to bear in a responsive and flexible manner.

## **Benefits**

If we are to further the leadership capacity of our middle management staff, school leaders must offer authentic opportunities to lead, supported by the elements noted above. Our schools will benefit greatly as a result.

Our schools will benefit from effective leadership that reaches very closely into the classroom. Most school leaders do not include regular classroom teaching obligations in their job descriptions; they operate at a greater remove from the classroom than their middle management staff. To shift effective leadership practices and understanding of school vision closer to the classroom will enhance school effectiveness.

Improved school leadership capacity across the school sector will offer broader benefits. As leadership capacity is developed, a greater pool of leadership is available to the education sector. As these people develop their capacity to lead, they will become credible candidates for promotion to other leadership positions, eventually including the role of school leader. This is vital if our schools are to continue to improve.

## **Conclusion**

Educational leadership is a complex process, operated in a context of change, fiscal and legislative restraints and high levels of accountability, within a close relationship with local



communities. The ability of school middle managers to exercise effective leadership adds greatly to the school's capacity to effect improvements in educational outcomes. Through effective mentoring of their middle management staff, school leaders can add greatly to the organisational effectiveness of their schools.

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