Leadership Skills

The ingredients of effective leadership

Talented headteachers come in all shapes and sizes, but there are certain qualities which, when brought together, make for a truly transformational leader. What are they, and how can they be developed? **Graham Handscomb** launches his four-part series on leadership that makes a difference with some key guidance for aspirational leaders.

When aiming to bring about improvement in schools, leadership is proclaimed as having the biggest influence. High quality leadership is one of the key factors in the development of successful schools, and there is compelling evidence that leaders can have a significant positive impact on student outcomes. In fact, Leithwood and Seashore Louis make the bold claim that: 'to date, we have not found a single documented case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership'.[1]

Such is the status and importance of leadership that some have declared this to be the 'golden age' of school leadership: 'Policy, officials and researchers are consumed by its potential and the public believes it is what schools need more of'.[2]

This importance is reflected in the time and resources that have been invested into understanding the nature of school leadership. This series of articles will explore the contribution that leadership makes to transforming practice, looking first at the ingredients of successful leadership, how leadership can be used to make a difference, the development of leadership for teaching and learning, and finally, how the underused

resource of teacher leaders can be nurtured and developed. Each piece will include a range of professional learning tasks to help you reflect and apply this material to your own context and practice.

What makes an effective leader?

As has been established, leadership matters; it is a key factor in improving schools and makes a difference to pupil outcomes. Given its significance then, are there things we can say about what constitutes effective leadership?

Leithwood and colleagues identified a set of seven strong claims about successful school leadership[3], and these are listed in the box below. This was used to inform a three-year investigation into the impact of leadership on student outcomes which, in turn, confirmed and built on this original list to generate ten strong claims.[4]

From this research, it was clear that leaders of successful schools defined success not just in terms of test and examination results but also in relation to personal and social outcomes, pupil and staff motivation, engagement and wellbeing, the quality of teaching and learning, and the school's contribution to the community. The practice of successful leaders, particularly headteachers, was reflected in strategies outlined in these strong claims, but their success lay not just in what they did. It also depended on how they went about it, how they adapted the strategies to their own specific context, and most of all, who they were – their values, virtues, dispositions, attributes and competences.

Professional learning task: Strong claims about leadership

A list of the original seven claims is given below. Reflect on these and choose three which you think are compelling and significant. Then access the full publication in the link below and read the sections related to the claims you have chosen. From your experience, explain why these are particularly relevant and powerful.

The seven strong claims
1. School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning.
2. Almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices.
3. The ways in which leaders apply these basic leadership practices – not the practices themselves – demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work.
4. School leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions.
5. School leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed.
6. Some patterns of distribution are more effective than others.
7. A small handful of personal traits explains a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness.

See the following link for the full publication, 'Seven strong claims about successful school leadership': **www.aede-france.org/Seven-strong-claims. html**

The balance of morality v. politics

Leadership is not a value neutral activity. A core feature of successful school leaders is that they have a keen sense of moral purpose, and this is closely associated with key educational principles, particularly a sense of service and advocacy for children. This often involves headteachers and other leaders balancing the demands of accountability, especially that of the external political kind, with what they perceive as being the overarching moral imperative of leadership.

So, for instance, Day reported on research across many countries which showed that despite the pressures from multiple policy implementation accountabilities, successful headteachers are those who place as much emphasis upon people and processes as they do upon outcomes.[5] Headteachers were, therefore, aware of the tensions in their roles in mediating government policies. They accepted their responsibilities to do the best they could for every pupil in reaching their full potential in terms of the government testing and attainment agendas – flawed through they found them to be – while simultaneously being highly critical. They also held that the moral and ethical commitments to ensuring pupils' holistic development were vitally important.

These leaders combined and implemented both accountability and ethical commitment within 'an over-arching agenda in which they were committed to the principles of equity and social justice'.

Developing a personal reservoir of vision and values

This approach appears to be a common feature, even in schools in the most challenging circumstances. (The next article in this series will look at this in more detail). Much of the research into leadership of schools facing challenging circumstances highlights a contrast between the stark external performance accountabilities demanded of them and the higher order vision and moral purposes maintained by headteachers. They saw their role as not just improving standards against performance leagues tables, but as bringing about a more fundamental transformation. This included an emphasis on values, the ethical dimension and 'people' related factors, such as creating an inclusive community and building a collaborative identity to which all can subscribe.

So, successful school leaders were primarily driven by individual value systems. Said Day, 'It seemed that moral purposes, emotional and intellectual commitment, and ethical and social bonds were far more powerful levers of leadership than extrinsic agendas'.

This is reflected in ten themes which characterise successful headteachers and other leaders, gained from this research:

1. Performativity and vision – managing the tensions
2. Building and sustaining an inclusive community
3. Narratives of identity
4. Values, beliefs and the ethical dimension
5. Renewal of professional trust
6. Moral purpose, agency and culture of courage
7. Expectation and achievement
8. Leaders who learn
9. Building internal capacity through collectivity
10. The passion of commitment.

What this means in practice is that the leader's moral code informs and drives both the transformational vision for the school and day-to-day transactional – for instance, granting the same liberty and opportunity to others that one claims for oneself, telling the truth, keeping promises, distributing to each what is due, and employing valid incentives or sanctions.

Indeed, some commentators see the leader's moral

code and framework as a well from which they draw to face pressures and replenish their leadership energies. It becomes 'a reservoir which provides the calm centre at the heart of the individual leader, which preserves their personal values and vision and which continues to allow effective inter-personal engagement and sustainability of self-belief in the face of external pressures'.[6]

Professional learning task: What is your moral purpose?

Click on the video link below and watch Ken Robinson talking about his vision of education.

He illustrates that his passion regarding creativity is at the core of his sense of moral purpose for education. Reflecting on this and on the material above, how important do you feel it is for leaders to have an overarching moral purpose? If you were asked to identify the elements of your own moral purpose in leadership, what would they be?

See the following link for Sir Ken Robinson speaking on education and creativity in 2006: **www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=ga2CYYCrtNE**

It's not what you do, but *how* you do it

So, what makes a successful leader? Are there certain approaches that are key to success in school leadership? Do all effective leaders adopt the same behaviours and do the same things? Interestingly, the answer to these perennial questions is not a straightforward yes. There are indeed some features that we can identify with successful school leaders, but there is no particular magic formula. Indeed, the crucial factors appear to be not what strategies such leaders use, but *how* they use them and, most important of all, the personal qualities that make leaders the people they are.

Successful leaders emerge as those who are adept at securing a balancing act between a whole range of pressures and expectations, while fundamentally ensuring continuing commitment to a set of both personal and professional values. They are able to take the demands of external accountability and focus these to the school's own performance objectives. Yes, they set direction and goals, but they do this through caring for and developing people.

This is perhaps best encapsulated in the research into successful leadership of challenging schools in the United States by Jacobson, Johnson, Ylimaki and Giles, where they identify three prevailing leadership features: the accountability principle, the caring principle and the learning principle.

They concluded that: 'People need to be nurtured and developed if they are to have both the capacity to produce at high levels and the willingness to do so. Our seven principals, each in his or her unique way, were exemplary at modelling the behaviours and practices they desired.'[7]

The overwhelming evidence from a range of research suggests that although a small handful of personal traits explain a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness, 'the ways in which leaders apply these basic leadership practices – not the practices themselves – demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work.'[8]

So, the typical leadership characteristics that help sustain the performance of successful principals are vision and passion, appropriate leadership style, clear and articulated values, personal qualities and skills, ability to build relationships, being highly engaged and connected to the school and community, and managing change. Above all, it is how the principal goes about the job and relates this approach to the particular school context that is vital.

Similar conclusions are made about successful teacher leaders. Intriguingly, the traits most frequently mentioned in research conducted in six secondary schools was 'quietness' – being unassuming and soft-spoken were highly valued. The next most frequently mentioned specific traits were: having a sense of commitment to the school and/or the profession, having a sense of humour, being a hard worker, and possessing an appreciative orientation to others.[9]

Personal qualities, credibility and integrity

Throughout the world there is an emphasis on the importance of personal outlook and qualities of successful school leaders. For instance, in the UK, it was found that 'heads in more effective schools are successful in improving pupil outcomes through who they are – their values, virtues, dispositions, attributes and competences – the strategies they use, and the specific combination and timely implementation and management of these strategies in the unique contexts in which they work.'[10]

Adept leaders build trust with colleagues, which in turn fosters a belief in the leader's integrity. They need to be perceived as effective in communicating their values by staff, and this is founded on two credibility components: 'first, the credibility that comes from expertise and the ability to do the job; second, the credibility that comes from the character and integrity of the individual.'[11]

These personal qualities of leaders are fundamentally linked to the sense of a moral imperative explored above. They provide the basis for vision and also the practical tools for dealing with the stresses and challenges of leadership.

Professional learning task: Characteristics of an effective leader

Think of a leader who has inspired you and was effective. Try to identify what it was about the characteristics of the person that so impressed you. How do you think these characteristics might be nurtured and developed in others?

In the next article...

We will explore how leadership can make a difference to pupil outcomes, especially in schools in challenging circumstances, before examining what can be done to develop leaders to make such a difference.

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Graham is also the editor of our acclaimed sister publication, Professional Development Today.

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