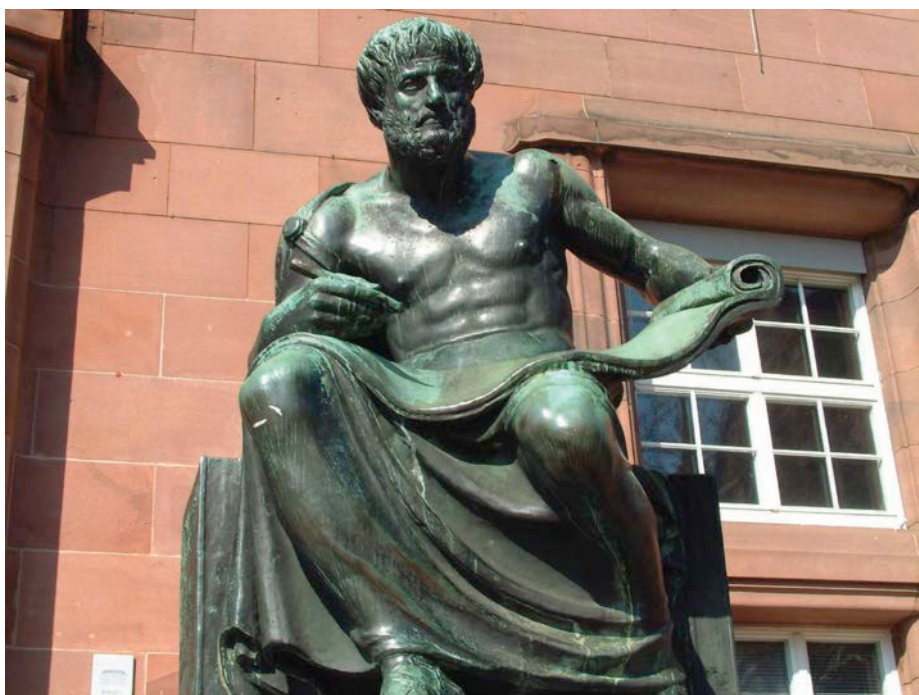


Learning leadership

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The more you know, the more you know you don't know.

Aristotle

There are known knowns, things we know that we know. There are known unknowns, things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns, things we don't know we don't know. Learning to be the leader who has final responsibility and accountability in a school has all of these elements.

To be selected to lead a school indicates that others have recognised your talents, skills, and ability (the known knowns), and also your potential (the known unknowns). No amount of prior learning however can prepare new principals fully for the role. The unknown unknowns present early and last long, and even if the unknown is named, the way in which these affect our leadership is still an unknown.

Bohn (2013) identified four challenges that define a principal's first year and which are likely to make the difference between surviving and thriving. These

challenges are things that early career principals might be aware of, but until you're in the chair, the extent of the challenges are largely unknown.

- 1 Imbalance – More negative than positive input lands in your office. Although principals do receive positive feedback, there's an imbalance between the incoming negative and positive input, skewed strongly toward the negative. A principal's daily decisions often centre on resolving problems or conflicts. This imbalance can be difficult because whilst new principals are eager to have everyone happy and make a good impression, adjusting to the frequency and volume of being solutions focussed takes a mental toll.
- 2 Decisional volume – You are required to make hundreds of decisions every day. Sometimes it is a decision about which decision-making process to use, and sometimes it is about what to do and what not to do. One of these regularly required decisions is whether to speak up about a particular issue or strategically wait before speaking. You are aware that you are new, and that

you may not know the full picture but you are uncomfortable with the status quo. You have to decide if you even signal this, or wait or act. You also know that if you are seen to accept something, then others watching you will deem this as acceptable also. You will get what you tolerate.

- 3 Misperception – Not just sometimes, but often, others will misperceive your actions. Frustratingly still more, is that two separate staff will have completely differing misperceptions. Much of this derives from the lens or filters of the staff member, or from their previous experiences with school leadership or simply 'how' they heard you. Whilst you will be working hard at transparency and ethical conduct, your behaviours, values and intentions will be misconstrued often. This fades over time as they learn you, and you have had opportunity to learn individuals and in doing so, anticipate how varied constituencies might perceive your words or actions.
- 4 Data rich, information poor – Reviewing the enormous amounts of data available is overwhelming in itself, but discerning where problems exist isn't enough; you have to come up with a credible way to improve where needed (paraphrased from Bohn, 2013).

The success criteria of the first days of office centre around how you as the new leader: learn the people (especially the power brokers); are systematic and focussed in your learning; are deliberately being visible; put out your values – what do you stand for?; discern the expectations of your supervisor; live the behaviours of credibility. As a new leader of a school it is a difficult in the presence of continuous scrutiny and as the focus of extensive conversation, to balance being:

- Demanding but able to be satisfied – You challenge staff to make realistic commitments and then hold them to account. But you avoid appearing as if you are never satisfied.
- Accessible but not too familiar – You

are approachable, but in a way which preserves your authority. You are not available indiscriminately.

- Decisive but judicious – As a new leader, you show you are ready to take charge, but don't jump at decisions. You make important decisions when you know enough to make them.
- Forceful but flexible – You focus on the key issues, but are open to consultation and input from others. You show that you are willing to consider more than one possible solution to a challenge.
- Active without causing commotion – You create momentum, but you don't overwhelm your people with multiple simultaneous changes.
- Willing to make tough calls but remaining humane – You don't flinch from making difficult decisions, for example on issues of performance and capability. You do so in a way which seeks to preserve individuals' dignity and that others see as fair (Watkins, 2013; NCSL, 2012).

Obviously there is much to learn in the first several years of leadership. Eraut (2010) in discussing a typology of early career learning indicates that the majority of this learning involves learning from other people as workplace issues are dealt with. Interestingly, the success of this learning is largely predicated on the quality of relationships in the workplace. The best learning early in the career of a new principal is mainly through: participation in group processes; tackling challenging tasks and roles; problem solving; and trying things out. This working alongside others allows new leaders to observe and listen to others at work and hence to learn new practices and new perspectives, and in doing so, to become aware of different kinds of knowledge and expertise. This mode of learning, which includes a lot of reflection and discussion, is extremely important for learning the tacit knowledge that underpins routines and intuitive decisions and allows leaders to then transition to the next stage of learning, *coaching and mentoring*.

Within this context, Robertson (2008) stresses the need for

this process to include reciprocity, relationships and reflection-on-reality – as the basis for professional relationships and coaching about leading. She emphasises the need for the coach and the learning leader to interact, and for the learner to take responsibility and ownership of the process.

In essence we learn the basics of leadership on-the-job with peer support and interaction, and then enhance these capacities with critical reflection and challenge through a more experienced colleague.

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Dr Ken Avenell – Dip Teach, Dip Theol, B. Ed., Grad. Dip ECE (Hons), M. Ed. Admin, Ed D, FAIM, FACEL, FQIEA, MAHRI, MACE, JP (Qual) was a Principal for 20 years and then District Director and Assistant Director General in state education. He has been for several years, the Manager of Professional Learning and Leadership in Brisbane and now Toowoomba Catholic Education. His main areas of work are in coordinating professional learning across Catholic Education and in forming individuals, teams and organisational leadership.



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