

## The heart of leadership

Leadership is a dance – ‘the challenge is to begin dancing on the edges of your scope of authority on behalf of something you care deeply about and maintaining positive and productive relationships’

Conceptions of leadership often focus on external behaviour, concentrating on what the leader should do. However, it is critical to consider who the leader ‘is’ and develop consciousness around vulnerabilities, connections, fears and powers. Educational leaders must interrogate their emotional lives in order to “*form an infrastructure for becoming a real person*” (Ackerman, Ostrowski, 2004, p.316). This article looks at two elements that comprise the heart of leadership:

- 1 Relational leadership
- 2 Understanding self.

### Relational leadership

Relational leadership involves understanding the role of relational trust that is necessary to improve teaching and learning. Educational leaders must maintain quality relationships with staff, students, parents and The Board. Emotional engagement and interpersonal relationships are foundational in emotional leadership.

Relational leadership is displayed in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals. In the leadership standards, principals must develop “*personal qualities and social and interpersonal skills*” through active listening, authentic collaboration and building relational trust (AITSL, 2014). In the professional practice standards, principals must “*develop self and others*” which is best facilitated by quality relationships.

Beatty emphasises the importance of placing relationships and emotions on the agenda in training and equipping future school leaders. “*Emotion matters in educational leadership*” (2007, p. 62). Emotional engagement through relationship and connectedness is critical for effective leadership. Inner leadership requires a focus on mental and emotional capabilities in order to develop ‘social capital’ and promote ‘social cohesions’ within schools (Beatty, 2007, p. 44). A relational approach to leading stems from authentic engagement and a foundation of trust. Cooperation, mutual respect, honesty, regard,



openness and trust amongst staff have positive flow on effects “*most accurately envisioned in exponential terms*”.

Many educational leaders today are passionate and committed, but experience “*emotional isolation and disconnection*” (Beatty, 2007, p. 60). Leaders frequently experience loneliness and isolation and therefore adopt the position of ‘emotional silence’ through denial emotions in an attempt to present as competent and resilient leaders. However, “*knowing the score intellectually is not enough*”; leaders must engage with emotional meaning making (Beatty, 2007, p. 60). Leadership is a dance – “*the challenge is to begin dancing on the edges of your scope of authority on behalf of something you care deeply about and maintaining positive and productive relationships*” (Degenhardt, 2013).

Wounding experiences are also significant in relational leadership, as they provide an opportunity for emotional learning (Ackerman, Ostrowski, 2004). Through crisis, leaders develop greater capacity to behave more “*skilfully, compassionately and courageously*?” (Ackerman, Ostrowski, 2004, p. 325). Developing the whole person through the inner ex-

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perience of emotion is paramount to the reflective process in making sense of leadership. A wounding experience impels leaders into a state of dissonance from which they must adapt. Wounding experiences may lead to vulnerability, isolation, fear or ambiguities of power. They are also opportunities to learn and develop fully as a person “*with strengths, vulnerabilities and all*” (Ackerman, Ostrowski, 2004, p. 326).

### Understanding self

The heart of leadership necessitates a deep understanding of self. Understanding self as a leader also connects to the Australian Professional Standard for Principals. In the professional practices standards, the notion of ‘developing self and others’ and ‘leading improvement innovation and change’ is most effective when underpinned by a deep understanding of self as a leader (AITSL, 2014).

Cranston (2013) promotes knowledge of self through the lens of professional responsibility. School leaders should seek professional self-reflection that is characterised by internal professional responsibility. Externally imposed accountability is less effective than a grounded professional responsibility, supported by educational values (Cranston, 2013). School leaders can make a significant difference to student achievement and wellbeing. However, educational priorities should be a greater driving force than external, standards-based agendas of the contemporary context.

Cranston (2013) explores three catalysts that stimulate debate about school leadership professionalism. The first factor is “school leadership for what and about what”. School leadership should be perceived as a morally responsible activity, rather than driven by external accountability agendas. The second factor is a shift in the debate from accountability to professional responsibility, placing an emphasis on the internal and moral aspects of leadership by focusing on the best interests of students. The third factor is profession leading debates and setting agendas. School leaders must ask difficult questions and display professional transparency in order to combat mistrust.

Collins (2005) advocates that deep understanding of self is central to Level 5 Leadership. Level 5 leaders at the executive level embody “*personal humility plus professional will*” (Collins, 2005, p. 4). This blend of “*extreme personal humility with intense professional will*” is very countercultural (Collins, 2005, p. 2). Humility is displayed through a compelling modesty, quiet and calm determination where ambition is for others or the company at large, rather than for self.

Steadfastness in Level 5 Leadership is achieved through inspired standards, near-ruthlessness, iron will, stoic resolve and a desire to build an enduring great company. The window and mirror concept

is central to Level 5 Leadership. Leaders who are inherently humble do not attribute the success of a company to themselves; they look out the window and apportion credit to others. Conversely, they take responsibility for poor performance; they look in the mirror and assign responsibility to themselves. This humble understanding of self is central to contextual leadership.

Duignan (2012) also upholds knowledge of self as critical to contextual leadership. He describes authentic presence as essential for educational leaders as they seek to inspire and transform those they lead. Leadership can essentially be distilled down to the extent of influence in relationships. “*Authentic leaders generate powerful fields of influence*” through morally purposeful and enriching relationships (Duignan, 2012, p. 1). Authentic leaders bring out the best in those around them by inspiring a hope of possibility, building team capacity and imparting shared responsibility for change and innovation. Educational leaders must build a community of trust, based on respect and unconditional acceptance in order to maximise their influence.

Central to authentic leadership is the concept of presence. Presence is the “*soul texture of the person*” and is contingent on being physically present and fully conscious in each moment (Duignan, 2012, p. 10). Attention and sensitivity to others is a good indicator of authentic presence. Integrity and honesty are also critical for leaders who seek to enhance quality and authenticity of presence in their relationships. School leaders in our contemporary educational context are often scrutinised for their core values and ethical standards. Contextual leadership demands honest leaders who display confidence and courage manifested through authentic presence.

### References

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