

Making a Difference

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by *Managing Dilemmas*

The most challenging problems for school leaders are those which recur and display the characteristics of a leadership dilemma: with tension between a concern for organisational goals and a concern for collegial relationships. A critical competency in school leadership is the ability to manage such dilemmas. To do this, leaders must be able to recognise and articulate dilemmas, reflect critically on their own problem-solving beliefs and actions, and learn skills which enable them to apply strategies which result in positive, lasting solutions. Principals can become aware of defensive approaches which block both personal and organisational learning. They can learn how to make a transition to productive approaches to problem-solving which are the foundation of effective dilemma management.

Recognising leadership dilemmas

This dilemma between individual needs and organisational demands is a basic, continual problem posing an eternal challenge to the leader (Argyris, 1971).

Why are educational problems complex and challenging?

Educational problems are inherently complex because schools are characterised by a multiplicity of tasks, purposes, and expectations. Conflicting expectations make leadership problems highly complex because they create tensions between values and goals. The tension between a concern for the needs of the organisation and a concern for the needs of individuals creates a fundamental *dilemma* which surfaces when leaders at all levels have to reconcile these two sets of needs to bring about change that impacts on the quality of learning and teaching.

The nature of leadership dilemmas

How do we know that we are dealing with a leadership dilemma? We all have a general understanding of what dilemmas are. Invariably they place one between a rock and a hard place and present two equally unattractive choices. So a common assumption is that when you find yourself on the horns of a dilemma you are in a very uncomfortable position.

A natural reaction to a dilemma is to assume that both horns

cannot be equally well addressed. In fact, people often take the stance that this is the type of problem that cannot be resolved and, therefore, belongs in the "too hard basket".

Most difficult, recurring problems in schools are "people problems" which involve professional relationships. They are also often leadership dilemmas because, when we examine them closely, there is evidence of goal or value tension. Leaders might find themselves pushed to decide between doing what is best for the person and preserving collegial relationships and doing what is best for the school to meet expectations of professional accountability and external stakeholder relationships.

An example of such a problem is one that often arises in the context of performance appraisal. On the one hand we are concerned because a staff member is continuing to perform way below an expected standard of professional behaviour, in spite of communication of concerns. Yet, on the other hand, we know that this person is under considerable stress because their partner is suffering with a very serious illness and we wish to be supportive. This is a classic leadership dilemma.

You will know that you have to deal with a leadership dilemma when:

- a problem you hoped you had solved recurs, and
- the problem challenges you to consider both collegial relationships and school quality goals.

An example of a leadership dilemma

A TYPICAL LEADERSHIP DILEMMA:

*a problem with a staff member
who is not performing as expected by the school*

Organisational concern

On the one hand the leader is concerned because the needs of students are not being met in a manner expected by the school:

An experienced teacher is not meeting the expectations held of him/her in relation to planning and evaluation of teaching. Other staff, the syndicate leader, and team members, have complained that meetings are not attended and that agreed tasks are not being carried out.

Interpersonal concern

On the other hand the leader is aware that the teacher has a personal burden which is impacting on performance:

This staff member has been at the school for 12 years and has always performed well in relation to teaching and team expectations. His/her partner has a terminal illness; sensitivity and great consideration have been shown by colleagues over the year.

The dilemma for the leader is that

On the one hand:

Something must be done to ensure that the expectations of the syndicate are met.

On the other hand:

The leader wishes to support the teacher as much as possible during this difficult period.

Typical ways of dealing with dilemmas

Remember that all complex problems are dilemmas of one sort or another! Many of these dilemmas lie dormant unless we are prepared to push them to the surface, or they surface themselves because the problem has become acute. When leaders are faced with difficult “people problems”, generally related to improving performance, the research consistently reveals that they tend to respond in one of three typical ways (*see notes*).

One of these three approaches is usually adopted in an attempt to deal with a dilemmas especially when we do not recognise all the complexities of a problem. Typical approaches are:

- **avoidance** (doing nothing)
- **soft-sell** (being nice)
- **hard-sell** (being nasty)

The first response to dilemmas is *avoidance*—and this is very common, especially when a leader has not recognised that they are dealing with a dilemma. This response takes two forms. Either the issue is suppressed totally and not dealt with—often in the hope that it will go away. Alternatively, the organisational and individual strands of the dilemma are polarised and attention is paid to one horn of the dilemma at the expense of the other. Either way, “doing nothing” to meet dual dimensions of a dilemma ensures that it persists.

When the response is to polarise the organisational and individual dimensions of a dilemma, further typical avoidance responses have been identified, especially in the way principals and senior managers approach the task of having to give someone negative feedback about their performance.

The second response is the *soft-sell* approach. In this approach the emphasis is on being “nice” and the driving concern is to be non-threatening. The common activity is pussyfooting in order to protect others and oneself and to be indirect in communicating problems. In these cases, the individual teacher or manager is protected and the organisational goal to improve practice remains unachievable.

The third response is the *hard-sell* approach. Sometimes this is used when the soft-sell approach fails to bring about change. In this approach the leader adopts an authoritarian stance, hauls the teacher over the coals, refers to policies and higher authorities, and asserts in no uncertain terms that performance is unsatisfactory. In this approach there is seldom two-way communication of information. In fact, evidence to back up claims may not be available and a bullying stance is a strategy for protecting oneself from having to reveal this. The problem with this “nasty” approach to dilemmas is that it is unlikely to secure genuine commitment to change. Although the organisation’s goals may be met in the short-term, collegiality is inevitably eroded and agreement is often of the “paying lip service” variety.

Dilemma management: a productive approach

A conscious choice must be made to deal simultaneously with both horns of a dilemma if it is to be managed and resolved (Cardno, 1994).

I believe that effective dilemma management is a critical leadership competency. To be effective, leaders must confront dilemmas rather than avoid them, and they must attend to both horns of the dilemma without compromising either one.

To do this teachers will need to develop a particular set of problem-solving competencies which include:

- understanding about dilemmas and defensiveness;
- ability to recognise and articulate dilemmas;

- critical reflection through engaging in double-loop learning which involves:
 - discovering the personal theories which guide problem-solving practices,
 - becoming aware of how one might be personally implicated in maintaining problems;
- learning skills to manage dilemmas (and un-learning skills which act as barriers).

This is a theory of dilemma management and it is based on the belief that to be effective school leaders need to resolve recurring complex problems in ways that ensure that they remain solved. Choosing between alternatives is sometimes not an option for leaders who may be placed in the position where they are obliged to deal with multiple strands of tough issues that are both organisationally and interpersonally oriented. A conscious choice must be made to deal with both horns of a dilemma if it is to be effectively managed and resolved.

Undoubtedly, a basic competency at the heart of dilemma management is the ability to provide high quality communication. Yet, all organisations appear to run into barriers when they attempt to provide valid feedback because of the defensive nature of people’s responses to the evaluation of professional practice.

Understanding about defensiveness

Communication barriers arise in the course of attempting to deal with complex quality issues. Appraisal activity, in particular, is tailor-made to give rise to a high degree of anxiety. It is usual for people to adopt a defensive approach when situations which are threatening or embarrassing arise. Chris Argyris (1985) contends that we are taught to be defensive in our earliest stages of life, rationalising this defensiveness as caring for and protecting ourselves and others. So we develop a repertoire of strategies which are consistent with defensive reasoning.

For example, we become expert at:

- giving indirect or mixed messages,
- cloaking negative feedback with a positive opener,
- deflecting attention from ourselves to the deficiencies of others, and
- excusing ineffectiveness rather than confronting it.

Because dilemmas are such extremely difficult problems, they exacerbate one’s defensiveness and heighten the defensiveness in others when they are tackled about issues. But we can learn to overcome defensiveness in learning how to be competent dilemma managers. The type of learning associated with dealing with dilemmas and defensiveness is called *double-loop learning*. Chris Argyris (1997) differentiates this type of learning from *single-loop learning* because it attends to problem sources at the deep level of fundamental beliefs about effective practice. It consequently requires consideration, not only of external factors, but also an examination and alteration of the values that guide our understanding about what is effective in managing dilemmas. This is a challenging activity and requires us to engage in critical reflection about our fundamental beliefs about effective problem solving.

Critically reflective practice

What kind of reflective practice is demanded?

In order to become critically reflective about the way in which dilemmas are managed one has to participate in a highly demanding form of self-analysis which leads to double-loop learning. The first step in this revealing process requires us to personally examine the bundles of beliefs and values which guide our behaviour.

Everyone has hundreds of these sets of beliefs about what constitutes effective action in a given situation. We can also describe these beliefs for

others when we are asked to give accounts of what we have done, or when we ponder ourselves on the result of an encounter with others. This level of understanding our behaviour deals with espousals—what we tell others we do.

At another level we can find out about our beliefs by actually observing what we really do in practice. We need to get to this level of understanding ourselves in order to make changes in our practice when we have to deal with dilemmas.

The challenge in double-loop learning lies in discovering and modifying practices that act as barriers to the resolution of complex problems in which organisational goals and interpersonal goals are in conflict. We use particular strategies, guided by particular beliefs to achieve our goals. For example, we tend to draw on a particular strategy when we have to give someone negative feedback, or when we are faced with a very defensive person in a conflict situation.

An example of single-loop learning is the ability to learn a new strategy for suppressing defensiveness in an effort to be effective. Beliefs about what is effective practice in a single-loop learning mode are governed by values of winning and avoiding unpleasantness. Whenever a new strategy is adopted it is guided by these same values. If one strategy fails, if an error is detected, or if we become aware of a mismatch between an intent and a pre-determined outcome, a single-loop learner will change the action. However the value base that guides a range of actions is not questioned in single-loop learning.

Single-loop learning in relation to the dilemma I have outlined might involve the leader in finding different ways to support the teacher, without ever revealing to the teacher, in a forthright way, that the other staff in the syndicate are under considerable pressure because he/she is not pulling his or her weight as expected. In essence this is a defensive approach to dilemma management.

In a double-loop learning approach a new learning loop is evident. This extends to a re-examination of the foundation values in which beliefs about effectiveness are grounded. Double-loop learning would occur when we become concerned with the surfacing and resolution of defensiveness (the sources of threat and embarrassment) rather than its suppression. Dilemmas are not likely to be resolved in single-loop learning approaches because they are complex and multi-dimensional problems and therefore an alternative set of beliefs about effectiveness is called for. If one is prepared to engage in double-loop learning, then one is prepared to operate on a changed set of values. These will include the search for valid information as a paramount value that sustains genuine commitment to seeking and monitoring solutions jointly so that they are long-lasting.

In a double-loop learning approach to the dilemma we are dealing with, you would need to examine your personal resistance to stating the full nature of the problem to the teacher. You would need to move beyond protecting the teacher and protecting yourself from unpleasantness—to a position in which you can state that there are multiple strands to the problem and that both school concerns and collegial concerns need to be openly addressed and resolved.

In other words, truth telling about both horns of the dilemma is demanded, in ways that make it possible to work towards a common understanding of the nature of the problem. In addition, a joint solution which meets both organisational and interpersonal needs will need to be developed and monitored.

Double-loop learning challenges one to move out of a cycle of responses that are dictated by a *defensive* and controlling set of values and to operate on a set of new values which are associated with a *productive*, information-generating approach. The following table illustrates the values which lead us to adopt either defensive or productive strategies.

Values and strategies in defensive and productive reasoning

DEFENSIVE REASONING	PRODUCTIVE REASONING
<i>is concerned with blocking information which we personally feel will create unpleasantness or lessen our control of a situation.</i>	<i>is concerned with generating information in an effort to increase the possibility of critical reflection-in-action.</i>
Guiding values	Guiding values
— win—don't lose	— seek and give valid information
— avoid unpleasantness	— share control and solutions
— maintain control	— monitor solutions jointly
Strategies	Strategies
— not checking assumptions	— checking assumptions
— giving indirect or mixed messages	— being forthright
— not explaining reasoning	— disclosing reasoning
— using questioning to control	— asking questions as genuine inquiry

Critical reflection: steps to successful dilemma management

A reflective practitioner is a keen observer of events. He or she carries on “conversations” with situations, observing, comparing notes from previous experiences, taking experimental action, observing the results, and continuing until the situation takes on the desired shape (Razik & Swanson, 1995).

Making a personal commitment to deal with (rather than to defer) difficult relationship problems is no small challenge for school leaders. What I am advocating is the development of skills for *reflective learning* in preparation for dealing with really complex problems that have the characteristics of leadership dilemmas. This is not a new notion by any means, although my research, current consultancy work in schools, and teaching of educational management in UNITEC programmes has helped to refine it and make it more accessible to educational leaders.

Un-learning defensive responses in an effort to apply productive reasoning

Capable people are highly skilled in the use of defensive approaches because we are all conditioned from our earliest years to be protective of ourselves and others. Highly skilled and capable leaders are also particularly adept at achieving goals by controlling the environment in which they operate. In order to become double-loop learners, we actually have to learn when it is *not* appropriate to use single-loop learning which is guided by values of control and avoidance of unpleasantness. This is no easy task and requires the un-learning of skills which have contributed to professional success!

I am not suggesting that the skills you already possess in single-loop learning are redundant. Far from it. These skills are absolutely necessary and relevant in many management situations, especially when it is easy to be collaborative and when there is no conflict. But they have been proven in many research studies to be inappropriate when dilemmas are present. In attempting to manage a dilemma, defensive routines merely produce ineffective results and the consequence is that the problem persists.

To un-learn defensive approaches you have to become a reflective learner. You have to learn how to slow down or *stop* when you become aware that your normal approach is not producing a desired result.

You will also be required to learn skills which enable you to adopt a new approach involving critical reflection on whether or not you are using a non-defensive way of dealing with a dilemma. In my research I have

developed what is called the Triple I approach, to help leaders memorise some simple rules which help to internalise skills of productive reasoning.

The Triple I approach

INFORMATION

- focus on giving and getting quality information,
- disclose your position or your concerns fully at the outset,
- give and get information that lets you deal with emotions.

ILLUSTRATION

- always illustrate by explaining the basis used for making judgments and by providing examples to illustrate your reasoning and evaluation of a situation,
- seek explanation of others' reasoning and evaluations by asking for illustration.

INQUIRY

- ask relevant questions to seek information, to check others' views and to test your own views,
- do not ask questions that control the response of others,
- ask questions that check your assumptions about the facts and the emotional responses of others.

Reflective practice levels

I want to remind you, that an initial challenge in managing a dilemma is to understand its nature as a particular type of problem.

Donald Schon has a wonderfully graphic way of describing what he calls "the landscape of problems". He talks about a topography in which there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp:

On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solutions through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern.

It is in the swamp that one is likely to encounter real-life problems that are characterised by ambiguity, complexity, and value conflicts. These are the dilemmas that leaders must manage if they are serious about attending to quality issues in schools.

If a technically rational approach does not help us to resolve really difficult "swampy" problems, then Schon suggests that reflective practice might be a better alternative.

Reflective practice is about focusing on action. It involves us firstly in *knowing-in-action*, that is, being able to understand and describe what we know we do in a given situation. This is usually *tacit* knowledge—seldom stated or examined. Take for example the actions involved in tightrope walking. The walker seldom explains what he or she instinctively does.

Most practitioners also engage in *reflection-on-action*, that is, they are able to stop, stand back, and think about what has happened. A tightrope walker is likely to do this *after* he or she falls off the tightrope.

The most difficult and challenging level of reflection occurs when we are able to think about what we are doing while we are doing it and are capable of changing our actions *in mid-performance*. This is called *reflection-in-action*. A tightrope walker might be able to recover balance if this kind of reflection is used quickly enough.

Conclusion

Becoming interpersonally effective in a way that impacts on the capability of a school to deal with difficult "people problems" is something that all leaders should aspire to. I am suggesting that the learning of skills that enable leaders to become critically reflective should not be a matter of choice but a matter of *necessity*. Senior managers are key players in school improvement and in most cases they are closely involved with the appraisal of staff—and this is an arena in which they can make a significant impact on school quality.

Understanding difficult interpersonal problems is the first step towards recognising dilemmas and dealing with them by adopting new non-defensive approaches to benefit both the school and relationships with professional colleagues.

Notes

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The quote on leadership dilemmas is from page 175 of:

Argyris, C. (1971). The Individual and the organisation: Some problems of mutual adjustment. In W. G. Hack, W. J. Gephart, J. B. Heck, & J. A. Ramsayer (Eds.), *Educational administration: Selected readings* (pp. 159–78). Boston: Allyn & Unwin.

That the tension between the conflicting needs of an organisation and individuals creates a dilemma for leaders is noted by:

Cardno, C. (1995). Diversity, dilemmas and defensiveness: Leadership challenges in staff appraisal contexts. *School organisation*, 15 (2), 117–131.

That polarising organisational and individual dimensions of a dilemma leads to avoidance responses regarding negative feedback is noted by:

Beer, M. (1987). Performance appraisal. In J. W. Lorsh (Ed.), *Handbook of organisational behaviour* (pp. 286–300). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Bridges, E. M. (1992). *The incompetent teacher*. Lewes: Falmer Press.

McLaughlin, M. W. & Pfeifer, R. S. (1988). Teacher evaluation: Organisational change, accountability and improvement. In E. S. Hickcox, S. B. Lawton, K. A. Leithwood, & D. F. Musella (Eds.), *Making a difference through performance appraisal* (pp. 113–140). Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education Press.

The disadvantages of a "hard-sell" approach are noted in:

Cardno, C. (1995). Schools as learning organisations: A challenge for quality improvement. *The Practising Administrator*, 4, 34–37.

The quote on conscious choice when dealing with a dilemma is from page 6 of:

Cardno, C. (1994). *Dealing with dilemmas: A critical and collaborative approach to staff appraisal in two schools*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, The University of Auckland.

That we are taught to be defensive in our earliest stages of life is noted by:

Argyris, C. (1985). *Strategy, change and defensive routines*. Boston: Pitman.

For more details on the development of strategies for defensive reasoning, see:

Cardno (1995), see above.

The differentiation between double-loop and single-loop learning is noted in:

Argyris, C. (1977 September–October). Double-loop learning in organisations. *Harvard Business Review*, 115–125.

The quote on the reflective practitioner as an observer is from page 175 of:

Razik, T. A. & Swanson, A. D. (1995). *Fundamental concepts of educational leadership and management*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Studies which have shown that skills learnt from single-loop learning are inappropriate when dealing with dilemmas include:

Argyris (1985), see above.

Cardno (1995), see above.

Robinson, V. (1993). *Problem-based methodology: Research for the improvement of practice*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

The quote on the "landscape of problems" is from page 3 of:

Schon, D. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

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