

**TOWARDS THE EMINENT SCHOOL:
THE IMPORTANCE OF PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP**

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Introduction

It’s a truism that Tomorrow’s Schools created more demands than ever on school principals and key staff members faced with the myriad tasks of managing school affairs while providing educational leadership (if they have time!) Teaching and school leadership aren’t easy! Yet, effective school leadership is central to any “good” school. I’ve thought a great deal about what makes a good school? “Good” is an easily understood term; we all know a good school when we see one! However, my thinking is always further developing. Today, I’m not at all sure that “good” is enough! I’ve searched my Thesaurus for a suitable term: effective, great, succeeding, high performing, reputable, front rank, popular, celebrated, distinguished, excellent, renowned and world class. I’ve settled today on the “eminent school.” **How eminent is your school?** How can you tell? What makes an effective leader (and eminent leader?) of such a school? Is eminence realistic and attainable? What can you and your colleagues do to make your school a more eminent place? For me, some key components of an answer lie in the remainder of this paper. The answer has a great deal to do with children, teachers and school leaders; something to do with teaching, learning and support. Administrative systems (and administrators!) are only of use to the extent that they support teachers and learners and promote better performance (eminence!) by both groups. For me, at the very heart of this comment lies the concept of **“professional educational leadership”** - the topic with which we are concerned for the next two days.

First, Involvement with COEC

For the last nine years or so, I have been delighted to participate in this particular aspect of COEC’s activities. Unfailingly, COEC brings together a large group of people who challenge and teach me and I am grateful for both! My experience with COEC is that the focus of their (ie Darrell Latham’s) interest lies in a commitment to action and better teaching and learning in educational places - a commitment, with its emphasis on reality and action, with which I fully concur. So, my COEC link is certainly not just one way - it has been important in my own professional development, too, and I especially value COEC’s emphasis on developing more professional teachers and leaders for today’s (and, more particularly) tomorrow’s schools.

Part 1: Effective Professional Leadership

A Picture of this Work

My view of the work of principals, in particular, and - perhaps - many other professional educational leaders, in general, is that four elements are important. First, is the task of **managing the business** which involves ensuring that day-by-day tasks are done, that routines are followed, plans formulated and reports made. It's easy to become trapped in such tasks. They are important but - for a leader - they constitute only a small part of the job. Second, is the task of **working with people** which includes being aware of peoples' needs and abilities, motivating and supporting them, helping them to grow and to work as a team. Again, this shouldn't be the total focus of the job. Third, is the task of managing and developing programmes - the teaching and learning aspect and its promotion and improvement - **guiding the curriculum**. Educational leaders typically know a great deal about this area - ways of teaching, curriculum planning and evaluation, etc. Other demands often get in the way of our involvement in these activities.

Fourth, is the task of **leading towards the future** which involves the development of the vision for the school's future, the nurturing and development of the school's corporate culture and the management of the process of change. From such activity should emerge the strategy for strengthening, improving and "growing" the school. This dimension involves looking beyond today and into a more distant future which is not easy in the busy life of a school. But a priority on this dimension means that the person is functioning more as a leader than a manager; acting in a proactive rather than a reactive fashion. People with this orientation seek new ways of doing things and better performance by everyone. They think about the kind of school in which people are working and living. They reflect upon the true effects of the school - its central values and activities; its special feeling. They picture the future and then move steadily towards it.

For reflection

How do you see the job of educational leadership? What are the components of the job, for you, in practice? What are the constraints? What are the priorities which you pursue?

At this point, you might take a look at my simple pyramid - a model (and only a model) which endeavours to give some sense of scope and priority to the tasks in which professional educational leaders might most productively be involved. You will see the emphasis on the lower tiers and on the distinction between leadership and management. The important thing is not my model, however, but how you see your function and work as a professional educational leader. You might have your own even better model! What emphases do you have in your job? What gets in the way of doing your job effectively as a professional educational leader?

Part 2: Effective Educational Places

Importantly, The Concept of the “Eminent” School

It is very likely that you all have a clear answer to the question, **“What makes a “good” school, an “eminent” school?”** You have all been to school, you work there and schools are significant places in the lives of each one of us. I believe that the question is well worth addressing as a means of “evaluating” your school and of thinking towards the future. You will probably readily understand the perspective of Roland Barth, (1990)

...my conception of a good school is one where I would like to teach or be a principal; it is the school that I would be proud to be remembered for helping to create. It is also the school that I, as a parent, would like my daughters to attend.

Barth goes on to talk about such ideas as vision, the acceptance of diversity, the principal being the “head learner,” the importance of commitment, and the opportunity to take risks (with safety nets). What is your picture of the good/eminent school? What are its qualities? Who should sketch that picture for your school? Perhaps I can briefly list some features which seem important to me:

- An emphasis on teaching and learning as the central activity of any school for the greatest majority of the time.
- A climate of support (in which we feel valued as team players and recognised for our efforts) and of high expectations (by which everyone feels that their thinking and talents are challenged).
- Feedback by which everyone gets to know about their performance.
- Well managed resources of which the most effective and efficient use is made.
- A sense of ownership and equity where people feel involved in decisions and where they are able to participate actively in moving towards worthwhile and shared goals; where power and control are shared so that responsibility and autonomy are realities - but where people feel that accountability is worthwhile, too.
- A strong culture of shared values and ways of doing things - a feeling which is largely in the mind and is not normally embraced in written statements.
- A place where reflection, critical thinking and vision are valued with opportunities to learn from the experience of the past, to ask “Why?” and to dream new futures.
- The provision of staff development opportunities where staff professional needs are assessed and staff improvement is not “hit and miss” but is celebrated and an on-going part of school life.

The success or not of such features depends, too, on the way in which we see the tasks of “leading and managing schools.” You might be familiar with the booklet Good New Zealand Schools (Education Review Office 1994) which summarises the ERO reports of 44 “good” New Zealand schools.

For reflection

For you, what is an “eminent” school? What changes would you make to my list? Why? Why is it important to think about the question of “eminent” schools? What do various stakeholders consider are the criteria of an “eminent” school?

Part 3: Effective Team Leadership

Collaboration, Cooperation, Consultation and Consensus

Quite simply, the rapid technological advances of the 1990s and this decade mean that no one person is likely to be the expert on everything. In my own case, I constantly find that other people have knowledge and abilities which I don't have and - more than ever - I readily seek that assistance and share the leadership task. The Drucker Foundation's most recent book (1997) sums this up very well with the advice that the leader can't be expected to solve all problems: "...the best organizations create a culture of leaders." In doing so, the organisation makes use of the "4C's" noted above. **Collaboration** brings people together to share ideas in work teams or task forces in order to capitalise on the mix of peoples' strengths. **Cooperation** promotes the idea of sharing thoughts and aspirations rather than competing with each other. **Consultation** involves actively seeking the views of other players while **consensus** is the process of moving our views a little here and there in order that we can generally accept or adapt to a position rather than having to make "black and white" choices which force people apart in the making of decisions.

The 4C's are really the basis for best utilising the synergy of the group (the staff and/or the board, for example). **Synergy**, for me, is the explosion of the power of the group. It isn't to be compared with "group think" and its dangers. Rather, it is the burgeoning and release, the multiplier effect, of the group's combined abilities. How is it achieved? By such processes as sharing, contact and communication in an environment which lessens threat and sees value in difference.

However, the vitally important notion, again for me, is that of "**partnership**." This comes back to shared vision and an understanding of the interdependent nature of complex organisations in which many people can play significant roles in certain circumstances. This returns us to the team approach on which the Drucker Foundation book (1997) comments about "the superior use of teams,"

... the organization needs to equip its people with all the necessary skills. Depending on the situation, people will find themselves as the leader on one team, a peer on another, and a subordinate on a third, the roles being defined by the nature of the work.

Team sports coaches commonly comment in a slightly different way, "We wanted a champion team, not a team of champions." (Management 1997) Edgar Schein in the first book of the Drucker Foundation (1996) considers that leaders of the future will require more of the willingness to share power and control according to people's knowledge and skills - to permit and encourage leadership to flourish throughout the organization.

This means that issues of **power and status** have to be addressed (if only in other terms!) so that abilities are considered together with roles and their purposes and responsibilities and, of course, the issues of performance and accountability. I often wonder whether many of us have thought about these things let alone brought them out into the open for discussion and resolution. But

“partnership,” with its connotation of each of us making a valued and fairly specialised contribution to the overall picture (or team?) seems to me to be a much more fruitful way of conceptualising this major issue rather than talking about dichotomies or dilemmas. The power of lay and volunteer commitment and perspective can’t be underestimated; when combined with professional skill and perspective, we have a powerful combination for the driving of any organisation!

For reflection

In which “team” situations do you participate in your educational place? If so, then what are the strengths and weaknesses of the team(s) and what sorts of situations lend themselves readily to teamwork? Conversely, when is teamwork not appropriate? In addition, how can effective teamwork be enhanced and what advice would you give for the process of team building?

Part 4: Reflection on Our Own Practice

What do I mean by reflection?

Reflection is, what I call, “focussed review” or “reminiscent thinking.” It is the opportunity to look back over the shoulder - to see where we have been - in order to ask three questions:

Where have we been?

What did it mean?

What can be learned?

Reflection is a kind of mental SWOT analysis in which we look for causes and effects, implications and new learnings from what we have experienced. New ways are likely to emerge as we begin to examine “if...then” questions. Teachers typically encourage their students to be reflective but it’s a valuable asset for a leader, too. The opportunity to attend courses such as this one provides the chance to be reflective - to stand outside but to think about our own schools and what goes on and the way they work. There is, of course, a danger associated with short-term courses: that no change in our behaviour actually occurs. We need to constantly ask the critical question, “So what?”

For me, reflection is important. It’s not just a way for learning from the past but it’s also an important tool for thinking about the future. There is value in reflecting on performance, seeking new ways of doing things or solving problems and identifying new fields to conquer. Reflection about our actions and experiences in our own contexts produces vision - the picture of what might be attainable. I like this description,

Like...the wildflower, reflective practice celebrates the organic above the artificial. It emphasises the primacy of experience....(It) engages the teacher in a cycle of thought and action based on professional experience. It generally portrays the teacher more as creative artist/designer than as engineer/technician.

(Wellington 1991)

For reflection

I'd better let you design your own questions for reflection at this point!!!

Part 5: Organisational Culture and Effectiveness

More than Just an Environment: The School's Culture

You don't have to be in a school for long before you gain a sense of what the place is like: it is difficult to define or describe or measure; it is more intangible and it concerns the feeling of the place which might be referred to as the "**ethos**" or "**atmosphere.**" It is commonly called an organisation's "**culture**" in the literature today.

Culture is the shared values and norms which provide the crucial foundations of an organisation and which bind together a group of people over time. Think about this idea in relation to your family compared with the family next door or that of your own siblings. Think about the distinctions between your school and the one down the road - primary schools of similar size and location in the New Zealand education system but each of which is distinctly different in its "way of life" or "way of doing things" to the neighbouring school.

Culture is usually implicit and unconscious and seldom written down. Yet, it guides our understanding of what is acceptable and what is promoted in each of our schools. It lies at the heart of the work of principals, key staff members and, I think, key board members. These people largely determine the kind of place which our school is. You might think about the important underlying features (the values or beliefs, the ways of doing things) which give your school its unique and special character. You are thinking about your school's culture.

In the early 1980s, the successful companies reported in books like In Search of Excellence (Peters and Waterman 1985) were committed to belief systems about what was important for their success. These values and beliefs were actively alive in those places. Managing a change activity, for example, has greater chance of success when we understand the prevailing culture and when we have an awareness of how best to move values and norms in new directions without causing (excessive) anxiety, disruption, alienation and opposition.

"**Strong**" cultures (Bolman and Deal 1982) usually exhibit shared values and consensus on ways of doing things; their leadership embodies those values; they regularly celebrate key values and they balance autonomy and control, tradition and innovation. Perhaps they are well summed up in Peter Senge's (1990) term as "**learning organizations**" in which key leaders function as stewards of the vision and direction of the place; designers, thinkers and planners for action; and "teachers" who promote learning for everyone in the interests of organisational improvement.

In The Changing World: Adaptability and Creativity

I shall be brief on this point which concerns two further values which seem important in organisations which successfully cope with a changing environment. I shall simply add a few comments to all the above. The successful organisations of tomorrow - including schools - will be strong, the literature tells us and results show, on such features as:

- **Flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness** to a rapidly changing environment;
- **Innovative and creative thinking** in efforts to solve problems which might never have been experienced before.

But organisational action and improvement in the school setting is presented with a vital issue which must be resolved.

For reflection

What would a newcomer know in order to feel “at home” in your school? How might they best “get inside the fabric” of your school? What important ideas does your school promote? Whose ideas and values are they? Who promotes them? How? What stories do people tell about your school? How strong is the culture of your school?

Part 6: Vision, Direction and Effectiveness

The Concept of a Shared Vision

The picture shouldn't be that of just one “leader!” A **vision** is a statement of possibilities - what might be possible and attainable. My perception of this concept has remained firm:

A vision is a dream, an amalgam of experience and hope. It is not simply some mystical, unattainable ideal. Rather it is a broad picture of what a school can be and where it might be going in doing its job. It is a statement of what people want to achieve.

(Edwards 1992)

The “picture” should be the product of discussion and explanation; it should be understood and shared by the various stakeholders; it forms the basis for day-to-day decisions and action. Developing the vision is a major part of a leader's task as Warren Bennis (1989) explained of his sample of leaders:

Leaders manage the dream....Not all the leaders who I spoke with had all the characteristics which I am about to describe, but they all had this one....The single defining quality of leaders is the capacity to create and realise a vision....Vision is a waking dream.

In my 1980s South Island professional development programme - The Aoraki Management Project (Edwards 1991) - the most significant session occurred when the participants, the senior management team from each school, sat down and created their shared vision for their schools. Participants later talked about this discussion as being powerful and very worthwhile in creating the future direction of their individual schools. This course gives your group similar opportunities

For reflection

Can you explain the vision for your school? Whose vision is it? How was it developed? How “real” is it? To what extent do people accept the vision? How is it communicated?

Part 7: Leadership: A Contemporary View

Shared Leadership in the New Millennium

In addition to shared leadership, then, my perspective is one of “**servant leadership**” - being in the role to create an environment in which the people can flourish - as illustrated by Jo Brosnahan, now the Auckland Regional Council’s CEO, (1996) during her leadership studies in USA. She has a delightful quote (from a second source) in which,

The leader of a jazz band is an expression of servant leadership. The leader has the beautiful opportunity to draw the best out of other musicians. We have much to learn from jazz band leaders, for jazz, like leadership, combines the unpredictability of the future with the gifts of individuals.

Nearer to home, the our yachting skippers certainly knew about this, too; as one writer described, (Management 1995)

Here was the skipper who knew the value of letting the team ‘own’ the campaign, who encouraged them, to refine and redesign their yacht from sail to stern until it too was part of the team; who put together a vision statement that included “to be squeaky clean and to play exactly by the rules”; and who, finally, won every member’s loyalty and respect by working as ‘one of the boys’ grinding away on the winch. As one team member says, “We would walk over broken glass to do anything for him.”

Shared leadership and servant leadership (without meaning “soft” leadership!) go hand-in-hand, for me, with the idea of schools as “communities” about which Sergiovanni wrote, (1995)

Communities are concerned with ties and connections not contracts. Communities are organized around relationships and felt interdependencies that nurture them. They are defined by their centers of values, sentiments and beliefs. Members live their lives with others who have similar intentions. Empowerment focuses more on commitment, obligations, and duties that people feel toward each other and toward the school.

Increasingly, I see the schools of tomorrow in this way. This, in essence, is the “good news” which I offer in response to many of today’s challenges and pressures on school leaders.

For reflection

How is leadership exercised in your school? Is this the best way for moving towards your school’s goals as the 1990s draw to a close? In what way(s) do you contribute as a professional educational leader? How effective are you? Could you be more effective?

In Conclusion

So, the future of leading and managing schools? In answer, I hope that I have sketched a picture of possibilities.

The task of professional leadership in today’s (indeed, tomorrow’s) schools will not be any easier or any less demanding or complex than it is today; but it can be tremendously exciting, invigorating and worthwhile. It must be a truly shared enterprise!

My short answer really lies in the ideas of reality and action. (Remember, I like these ideas in relation to COEC.) Robert Ringer (1995) describes both simple ideas. They relate to focussing on the real world and “getting on with it” in order to make a difference. He lists a number of roadblocks to action: feeling overwhelmed, resisting change, waiting for something to happen and self-doubt, to name a few. Hopefully, our contact in these two days has sparked off a number of challenges and strategies for you in your work in the educational enterprise.

Two of my own professional experiences of recent years - each of which has impacted strongly on my thinking were my involvement in two national reviews of aspects of our education system: first, the evaluation of the Education Review Office (Achieving Excellence 1997) and, second, the review of the length of the school day and year. (Towards the Learning Culture 1999) The former experience, for me, drove home the importance of effective school leadership which focuses on providing better teaching and learning - with schools “led by principals (and I would add, “others”) who are committed to functioning as professional educational leaders.” The latter experience provided me with a similarly deep impression in which it seems to matter little how long people spend in schools whereas the important thing is the quality of what they do when they are in those learning places. This report concluded with, “... a focus on learning and achievement and strong research informed professional school leadership” which promotes real improvement from within.

The opportunity which you have, by working as **professional educational leaders**, in this programme - to share ideas, to expose difficult issues to think of the futures of your schools – is potentially very powerful. From today’s reality and your aspirations for the future should come the “dreams of the day” from which will emerge the vision to be coupled with action to take your schools into their new realities which await us in our schools of tomorrow. The payoff could well be a strong surge towards becoming an eminent school. Is this realistic is your school? **How eminent is school?**

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