National College for
School Leadership

Leadership: learning to live with contradiction

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This paper draws on some common messages from research studies into leadership, school self-evaluation and school improvement to contend that effective leadership is distinguished by the ability to understand, and put to creative use, the multiplicity of perspectives that characterise schools as learning communities.

As we moved ceremoniously from one millennium to the next, we also slipped seamlessly from the vocabulary of management to the lexicon of leadership: leadership for the 21st century. Management is an altogether crisper notion. It offers direct advice and prescription. Leadership is a more elusive concept. Management conveys a neutral, technical tone. It carries within it notions of efficiency and order, clear goals and targets achieved through application of sound principles. The appliance of science. Leadership inhabits a more ambiguous value-laden world. It has religious and political resonances. It evokes images of a world stage on which we have, in our lifetimes, witnessed heroic successes and ignominious failures.

The larger-than-life quality of leadership makes it a challenging field for researchers and policy-makers, or for anyone seeking its defining competences. Is there in fact an identifiable cluster of skills which can be learned and passed on? What do effective leaders do? How much can we learn from observing their behaviour? To what extent do we need to probe their inner desires and dilemmas to understand what leadership really means?

When we undertook our first foray into research on leadership – a four-country study of headteachers and their deputies – we took as the entry point what people expected of their leaders. What did parents, pupils and school staff expect of heads and senior managers? What, for them, were the defining competences? It was only one of many doors into leadership that we could have opened, but it took us to some interesting and unpredicted places.

For school leaders themselves, expectations proved an important and useful point of departure. Expectations were seen, by some, as a glue that held them in their place, fixing them in their hierarchical position. It was only the brave who could stray too far beyond the boundaries of others' expectations, and only the most foolhardy who would defy those expectations completely. Some heads spoke of attitudes, behaviours and dispositions which they 'put on' as the vestments of office. These defined them not as a person but as a position.

The author Peter Senge describes what he calls "organisational learning disabilities", beginning with "I am my position": I am the headteacher, I am the deputy, I am the head of department, I am an unpromoted teacher. When I speak, I speak from that status position. What I hear is filtered through accordingly. What I see, I see from that vantage point.

To view oneself in this way is not only personally disabling but inhibits the growth of the school as a learning community. If growth is to occur it means confronting our collective habits of

seeing. We have been socialised into respecting position rather than people, deferring to the authority of status rather than the authority of wisdom. It is hard to break free from this when the structure of our schools is a constant day-to-day, minute-to-minute reminder of positional authority, all the more powerful by its invisibility and apparent inevitability. The following is salutary advice to leaders and would-be leaders:

> You can disempower somebody but you cannot empower them. They will really begin to change, taking initiatives, take risks, provide real feedback, learn from mistakes and accept responsibility for what they're doing when they feel sufficiently confident to do so and are provided with a clear framework… Achieving this type of relationship is not easy. It requires much effort, openness and willingness to learn – and some humility. It feels uncomfortable, particularly for leaders in organisations where this style is not the norm. It requires a high degree of self-belief and a willingness to try. (Binney and Williams, *Leaning into the Future*, p 69)

Know thyself

The exercise of leadership requires, first and foremost, clear expectations of self. Perhaps there are successful leaders who are little more than the sum of their constituents' expectations – highly political, amoral, value-neutral operators. But it a perilous proposition for school leaders who work in a morally charged context, their day-to-day dealings open to the scrutiny of teachers, pupils and parents: astute observers and decoders who know integrity when they see it and can detect incongruence from afar.

The exercise of leadership requires a thoughtful analysis of the spontaneous self and the organisational self. It is, however, a path that school leaders have travelled before as neophyte teachers, having to discover new conceptions of self. "Be yourself" is possibly the most unhelpful piece of advice ever given to a beginning teacher. Teachers have to learn to be themselves in the classroom, a feat that can take years – for some, even, a lifetime. It means, in the first instance, recognising 'self' as perceived by others and identifying the latitude of the organisational self . Not all psychological theory has justified its place in teacher education, but the Freudian concepts of id, ego and superego have valuable applications for the classroom and school leader, struggling to identify the appropriate self for different contexts and relationships. The Freudian tripartite self is an analogue for the spontaneous, the organisational and the moral self. Achieving the blend is a balancing act which is learned through time and error, and with a generous supply of feedback.

For the teacher, being yourself means accommodating to the expectations and authority carried by the role, but also learning over time to help pupils move from respect for the authority of position to respect for the authority of the person. With time, good teachers learn how to relax, how to talk less and listen more. With confidence in self they can open up more to their class. They become learners in their own classrooms. They foster leadership among their pupils. They are able to hear dissenting voices and to respect differences of viewpoint. They help their pupils to enjoy the contrariety that gives classroom learning its value and vitality.

The parallels between classroom and school leadership are not far to seek. In our study for the National Union of Teachers into what makes a good teacher, children of all ages put to their top of their lists, teachers who listen to you, teachers who respect your opinion. In the parallel leadership study, English, Scottish, Danish and Australian pupils, teachers and parents all agreed on one pre-eminent attribute of effective leaders: the ability to listen well. In Steven Covey's famous treatise on the seven habits of highly effective people (and principle-centred leadership in particular), he rates the fifth habit most highly of all: "seek first to understand before seeking to be understood".

Self-knowledge was not only a precondition of leadership but also a prelude to acknowledging the expectations and perspectives of others. It contained the paradox that self-knowledge is gained through openness to the perceptions that others have of you, yet dealing imaginatively with those perceptions presupposes a degree of comfort with who you are and what you believe.

The ability to be comfortable with multiple contradictions and at ease with intellectual tensions appeared to be one salient quality of effective leaders. They recognised the tensions between the spontaneous and the organisational self, between expectations of self and expectations of others. They were alive to the differences within and between the three key stakeholder groups – pupils, parents and teachers. How they responded to these in thought and behaviour distinguished the growth-promoting from the growth-inhibiting leaders. An acid test of this was their response to perceptual data from pupils, parents and teachers. It spoke volumes about their capacity for learning and for change.

Seeking consensus and living with contradiction

In a number of research projects in the last few years we have worked with schools, helping them collect the views of teachers, pupils and teachers, feeding these data back to those who supplied them and engaging them in the interpretation of the findings. While these data were often surprisingly and gratifyingly positive, particularly from pupils, there were very commonly some hard and unpalatable home truths. There were, in the majority of cases, wide perceptual gaps on issues as viewed by teachers, by middle management and by senior management . Heads and senior management teams were consistently more optimistic about aspects of school culture such as communication, decision-making and professional development. The three examples below represent aggregated data from 36 secondary schools and are fairly typical of any individual school (although not characteristic of primary schools in the study):

n = 36 UK secondary schools (1997)	**Senior managers**	**Middle managers**	**Teachers**
Decision-making processes are fair	41	46	79
Staff participate in important decision-making	29	38	80
There is effective communication between the senior management team and teachers	46	48	87

(from MacBeath, J and Mortimore, P (forthcoming), Improving School Effectiveness, Open University Press)

It might be argued that this is an endemic feature of secondary schools, reflecting the nature of hierarchy, and confirming the view that I see from, speak for, and indeed am my position. When these data were fed back to heads and senior management teams it was not untypical for the response to be “they would say that, wouldn’t they?”. Embedded in the very language was an assumption of positional distance, an implicit acknowledgement that status is accompanied by its own version of reality. There were, however, differences among leaders in their beliefs about the inevitability and immutability of school culture. Some believed that things could be changed, that effective leadership could make a difference. The variations in the size of the gap from one

school to another already gave the lie to the contention that these were simply a reflection of structural features of secondary schools.

Freudian concepts are again helpful in categorising the varying responses of school leaders to the data. Some took the path of denial: “I don’t accept any of it as being valid”. For some it was rationalisation: “It was, after all, conducted on a Friday at the end of a hard term”. For some it was projection: “I know what they are trying to say and are simply using this as a vehicle to say it”. One head famously phoned us to report that our data was wrong as she had personally spoken to every single teacher in the school and not one had admitted to making negative comment about school management.

There were others, though, who saw in the data immense possibilities for dialogue. They saw it as a tool, a tin opener, with which they could explore the inner life of the school. They grasped this as an opportunity to embark with their staff on a mining of the data, helping to identify common values and diverging insights. Some saw it as a quest for consensus. A very small minority came to value the nurturing of creative dissent.

The author Habermas describes the search for consensus as the “dissolution of contradictions”, the extinguishing of dissent, the trumping of the individual voice by the weight of the collective.