

Reflections on headship: grounded leadership – lessons from the field

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It is at those moments in human history when individuals or groups confront what had been thought to be a limit or constraint – a fear of falling off the end of the earth... – and cast it aside, that new horizons open up, or perhaps they are altogether redefined and redesigned. (Gardner, 1993, p 263)

Since I was appointed director of the London Leadership Centre I have spent many hours in thought, read dozens of books, uttered countless words in discussion, at conferences and through keynote addresses, and written thousands of words on the role of the headteacher as a leader.

My own research into effective leadership in schools suggests the following propositions (Collarbone, 1999):

- Leadership is an essential ingredient for school improvement and for raising achievement both of pupils and staff.
- Leadership in our schools is an essential ingredient of any attempt to reinvent our education system. One aspect of this reinvention must be a serious consideration of what is leadership.
- The ability to lead and to manage change is the essential generic capacity required of the school leader of the future. The key leadership functions of the learning organisation are to create, manage and, if necessary, re-engineer the culture.
- There is a distinct and essential difference between the skills and qualities required for leadership and those required for management. The effective and efficient school leader requires both leadership and management skills and abilities.
- Excellent school leaders demonstrate a high level of cognitive and technical skills associated with the task. This is complemented by a high level of emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills.
- Leaders are required at all levels of the school and not just at the top. Leadership is a collective function involving collective group and team activities building on agreed meanings, shared vision and direction of the organisation.
- Leaders are good communicators and use sophisticated emotional radar techniques and information-processing skills to scan the environment. These same leaders radiate passion and commitment, underpinned by strong personal values and moral integrity.

Yet the one ingredient which all leaders share in common is explained by a simple natural law. Leaders require followers. Leadership does not exist without followership – stakeholders prepared to buy into a vision, create a shared vision and deliver.

It has been a long journey to reach the stage where I have been able to clarify for myself, and am able to justify with reasonable confidence to others, the principles and developments necessary to play a crucially important role in improving both the quality of school leadership and the future education system of this country.

This article attempts to link my own practice as a headteacher with the theories that I have developed and expounded on since leaving Haggerston School. A fuller account of my journey as a headteacher can be found in 'A journey of a thousand miles ... the Haggerston journey' (Davies and West-Burnham, 1997).

Background

I was appointed headteacher of Haggerston School in April 1990, the first secondary headteacher appointment by the newly-formed Hackney Unitary Authority. As a new headteacher, I inherited a school which had neither a development plan, nor a strategic vision, nor a process for planned consultation on change and development. Having already served in the school for several years, I was aware of both its strengths and its weaknesses, and of the need to inject fresh approaches and challenging perspectives into the management of the school.

(Educational) leadership is about creating a domain in which human beings continually deepen their understanding of reality and become more capable of participating in the unfolding of the world. Ultimately, leadership is about creating new realities. (Peter Senge, 1996, p 6)

Further learning

It was this perspective which led me to enrol in the MBA course at the Leeds Metropolitan University. I quickly discovered to my delight the complementarity of management and leadership, and the fascination of leadership studies. Initially I had been sceptical of theoretical studies. I was looking for improved management practice. That scepticism was quickly turned around by the high quality of the lectures and the excellent tutorial support. Two clear lessons I gained from this period were, firstly, how much I didn't know and, secondly, how much I and others in education had to learn from leaders from business and industry, who regularly gave outstanding lectures on the course.

When I first joined my MBA colleagues I felt a certain unease. Several were experienced headteachers from prestigious and highly successful schools. Haggerston School was an underperforming comprehensive school in East London. My worries proved groundless. My colleagues were wholly supportive. We gelled quickly as a team, and came to value Little's definition (1982) of collegiality as "serious joint work", both in Leeds and on a group visit to summer school in the USA. This positive experience led me later to explore the nature and advantages of high-performing teams in my MBA dissertation. I quickly gained in confidence, was able to formulate a shared vision for Haggerston, and came to appreciate how scholarship and research can inform good practice.

Progress at Haggerston

Effective leadership requires a combination of strategic and analytical thinking, vision and detailed planning, and action and follow-through. The leadership challenge facing us at Haggerston School was very clear. We needed to tell and show the pupils that we believed in them and that they had unlimited potential. And, as well as raising standards and achievement in Haggerston School in particular, we had a wider responsibility to help raise generically the profile of inner-city schools and to celebrate, share and disseminate our successes to other schools and educators.

The school established a national and international reputation for all-round excellence. Pupils' self-esteem burgeoned, exam results (5+ A*-C) rose to almost national averages from a baseline of around 20 per cent, and the school was recognised as one of the fastest-improving schools in the country. Confidence and morale among staff were high. The school was commended highly in its Ofsted inspection report in September 1996, which stated "the school is led with vision, integrity and determination". It continued, "the school has a positive ethos characterised by clear vision, firm direction and constructive relationships".

The school's national and international reputation was enhanced through a series of four annual educational conferences held there on the theme 'Raising achievement in the inner cities', which featured inputs from key educational thinkers from the UK and abroad. These brought together academics from this country and abroad, teachers, headteachers, business partners, local and central government officers, parents and pupils to share and engage in dialogue about wide-ranging aspects and issues of school improvement. This stimulated creativity and innovation, and raised the self-esteem and confidence of staff at all levels, as well as of pupils. These factors played a significant part in raising standards at the school, and heightened its leadership profile both nationally and internationally. We were one of the first schools to achieve Beacon status. One important initiative to emerge from the conferences was the setting up of the national pupil network Schools Beyond 2000. Its vision continues to impact and its influence to expand.

As these conferences involved international guest speakers, they required sponsorship. In developing sponsorship arrangements we were keen that our patrons, particularly those from business, should extend their involvement beyond sponsorship into partnership. Active partnership enabled all members of the school community to benefit from new perspectives and opportunities. It also provided the opportunity for business partners to understand some of the issues facing schools, and vice versa. This particular aspect was reinforced by our work with Business in the Community through its Seeing is Believing programme.

Throughout my career in education I have tried to encourage the professional development of colleagues. I consider high-quality, carefully targeted professional development as an oxygen mask for the effective learning organisation. I regard every member of the organisation as a learner, and this applies particularly to school leaders. To substantiate this principle I have endeavoured always to lead by example. Through my own advanced studies and the nurturing of a collaborative culture of learning I have tried assiduously to promote the role of scholar-practitioner.

Communication

Good communicators listen to understand, demonstrating respect, trust and caring, and affirmation and appreciation of the achievements, views and opinions of others. They register the emotional cues of others and attune their messages appropriately to their audiences. They foster open communication, promote dialogue and are receptive to all information – bad as well

as good. I believe that the effective communicator is skilled in suasion and is able to shape new mindsets. Being an adept communicator is the keystone of all social skills, and is a prerequisite to being able to inspire new beliefs and possibilities, as well as to reassure.

The effective headteacher is first and foremost a good storyteller, but also develops the skills of tact, diplomacy, negotiation and representation. At Haggerston good communications, both oral and written, were important. We ensured that we developed an ethos in which pupils and adults could work together in a climate in which the school's values of mutual respect, reasoned discourse, inter-cultural harmony and the importance of the individual were implicit.

Self-management

Headteachers today are required to establish and develop an organisational infrastructure which acknowledges the importance of value for money and public accountability with respect to finite resources. The infrastructure needs to be open, transparent, effective and efficient. The delivery of high-quality performance targets certainly requires trust – but trust continually underpinned and strengthened by clearly defined expectations and effective quality-assurance procedures.

In April 1992, with the introduction of local management, Haggerston School became self-managing. In the period leading up to the delegation of the budget, I and two other members of my senior management team had made major contributions to the development of the LEA's scheme. This placed the school in a strong position to take full advantage of the opportunities which arose from delegation. In outsourcing maintenance, cleaning and catering, the school secured contracts which improved service delivery at much reduced costs.

The outcomes not only provided a more efficient service but resulted in savings which could be invested in a premises development plan leading to direct improvements in the learning environment. These included the development of a multimedia learning resources centre with new opportunities for self-directed learning, and a refurbished school hall with appropriate audio-visual resources. The school developed an entrepreneurial flair, establishing its own trading company and charity. The school ensured, through its development planning, that the focus was continually on learning and that resources were allocated in accordance with explicitly identified curricular needs and related staff development.

Conclusion

One thing I learnt about myself a long time ago is that I prefer not to work alone. Socratic dialogue, a free flow of meaning among a group of people, is my preferred learning style. In my experience, when ideas are allowed to flow, a synergy occurs which is seldom found in any other form of human activity. Dialogue helps to refine thoughts through its shared approach to inquiry and learning.

In any quest there are roads with dead ends, there are milestones, there are moments when self-doubt and despondency take over. And there are moments when energy is restored, as light dawns. The key to success in any quest is perseverance.

My reflections on my research and my practice have led me to believe that, in an era of turbulence and rapid discontinuous change, the successful organisations are learning organisations which combine a systemic, holistic vision with attention to detail. Strategic thinking and planning provide a focus for stakeholders' contributions, actions, thoughts and learning. A learning organisation is powered by a synergy of critically reflective purpose and focused effort. It is my considered belief that such synergy is a prerequisite to raising the achievement of all stakeholders in the learning organisation.

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