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## **LOOKING AT LEADERSHIP DIFFERENTLY: IDEAS FROM OUTSIDE, IDEAS FROM INSIDE**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores how we might look at educational leadership differently by drawing on three different sources for ideas. The first part of the paper examines some of the key leadership learnings from recent research with a number of prominent Australians— all from non-education sectors. The second part of the paper then examines recent national and international research to identify emerging trends in school and educational leadership. The final part of the paper then draws together the commonalities across these two different yet complementary approaches (outside and inside) to thinking about leadership, identifying some critical dilemmas that need to be considered.*

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## Introduction

There is little doubt that the roles and responsibilities of school leaders in most countries across the world have become more complex and challenging in recent years (Billot, Goddard & Cranston, 2007; Cranston, Ehrich & Billot, 2003). In large part, this has resulted from the discontinuously changing contexts and day-to-day dynamics within which principals lead their schools. Old ways of thinking about leadership need to give way to new thinking as we ask how we can conceive sustainable school leadership for the future as we seek new solutions to the emerging dilemmas now commonplace in the lives of school leaders. This paper explores some of the answers to such questions. It draws on three different sources for inspiration and ideas.

The first part of the paper examines some of the key leadership learnings from recent research with a number of prominent Australians— all from non-education sectors. As we look for inspiration in our schools at a general level, and more specifically as we focus on leadership, these outstanding Australians offer some powerful insights for educational leaders as they ponder new solutions to the challenges and dilemmas they have faced in their own work contexts. The second part of the paper then examines recent national and international research to identify emerging trends in school and educational leadership. What are the big messages here? What do current and aspirant school leaders need to think about? The final part of the paper then draws together the commonalities across these two different yet complementary approaches to thinking about leadership, identifying some critical dilemmas that need to be considered as we look to the future and to new sustainable leadership thinking.

### Leadership learnings from some prominent Australians

Ten prominent Australians were interviewed and invited to offer their thoughts about leadership, and to reflect on some of their life and professional experiences that have shaped their thinking (Cranston & Ehrich, 2007). The ten prominent Australians include a high court judge (Justice Michael Kirby), a Nobel prize winner (Professor Peter Doherty), an Australian of the year and medical scientist (Dr Fiona Wood), an Aboriginal government minister from New South Wales (Linda Burney), an internationally acclaimed environmentalist (Ian Kiernan), a leading public servant (Christine Nixon, Police Commissioner, Victoria), a prominent humanitarian (Tim Costello, CEO of World Vision); an ex-Lord Mayor of Brisbane (Jim Soorley); an entrepreneur (Sarina Russo); and founder / artistic director of a dance company (Maggi Sietsma). In an endeavour to synthesise the leadership stories of these Australian, the work of Kouzes and Posner (2002) is used as an organising framework. These writers consider five key “leadership practices”: *modelling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act* and *encouraging the heart*.

It is clear that each of the ten leaders *modelled the way*, whether it was through words or actions. Each of them was very clear about what they stood for, what they expected of themselves and what they expected in, and of, others. Despite the fact that Michael Kirby took a highly critical view of leadership, particularly in the political domain, there was no doubt that from the broader leadership views he expressed and from the examples drawn from his own practices, he was deeply committed to social justice and humanitarian principles. He was not alone here as other leaders, for example, Tim Costello, Jim Soorley, and Linda Burney, articulated similar values and beliefs. All of the ten leaders demonstrated considerable modesty in their conversations during the interviews, arguably surprising perhaps, given their prominence, outstanding achievements and distinction. Despite this, it was evident that they were certainly *modelling the way*, whether among, and for those with whom they worked closely, or others less directly associated with their work. They each demonstrated levels of excellence in their own endeavours, providing

clear and unambiguous *models* of their values, their beliefs and their visions. Linda Burney reflected:

*the most valuable attribute [of] leadership ... for me it is the capacity to understand and value humbleness and the second attribute that I would list is loyalty*

Tim Costello reflected that:

*Leadership is about power questions and spiritual questions. My leadership style is trying to tell an alternative story that gives people energy hopefully to harness their best instincts for justice; their best instincts for a world where if they could dream idealistically and shape it they would say everyone has opportunity and everyone has access and everyone gets afforded justice. ... if people are motivated by a story that illuminates what's their truest and deepest aspirations then that's what a good leader does, unlocking that and setting that free.*

Fiona Wood put it this way in moving towards a purpose or vision:

*I know quite clearly in my mind where I want to be - where my skills are - what gets me up in the morning.*

This notion of vision leads on to the next leadership practice, *inspiring a shared vision*. For some of the ten leaders, this was possibly the most significant of all the five practices, where they were strongly and overtly committed to a vision, pursuing it with belief and considerable enthusiasm. This drive towards their vision was coupled with an awareness that they needed to enlist others to it. Ian Kiernan recognised the importance of leaders engaging others to their vision if they wanted to achieve their desired outcomes. Fiona Wood and Christine Nixon re-iterated these notions, seeing leadership as driven by passion and commitment to make a difference, to do better, to strive for excellence, and, in Fiona Wood's case to answer the difficult questions in the field of medical research. Although operating in two different contexts (i.e. the world of local government and the world of creative dance), both Jim Soorley and Maggi Sietsma articulated clear visions for their respective contexts and described their work with passion, commitment and strong convictions. To be noted again are some of the cautions raised by Michael Kirby regarding the need to learn from the lessons of history and that while leaders may have a vision, they can choose to act for evil as well as for good. This raises yet another interesting point and that is, is the vision a worthy one?

The search for answers to the difficult questions leads seamlessly to the next leadership practice, *challenge the process*, where leaders seek innovative ways to change and improve, experimenting, taking risks and learning from mistakes. Peter Doherty likened this practice to a journey of discovery, of seeking answers to challenging questions. Christine Nixon certainly created new paths for women leaders in an organisation dominated by a strong male culture and Sarina Russo lamented on several challenges and hurdles she has faced in her quest to become a successful entrepreneur. Ian Kiernan reminds us that we may need to take a longer term view to achieving our vision, if on-going challenges are evident. His leadership story is replete with challenges and obstacles, requiring persistence and risk taking in seeking pathways through those challenges. Providing a sobering reality check for this leadership practice, Linda Burney reminds us that in the quest for achieving one's vision, there may be a personal cost.

Linda Burney also argues strongly that leadership is not a sole activity. It draws on, and develops from, others. This is the fourth leadership practice, *enable others to act*. Here,

leaders need to understand that achieving one's vision is a team effort. Such teams are built on collaboration, trust and strong relationships. Linda reflects

*leadership is about the people that have coalesced around you; the people that you coalesce around yourself - what happens is only a reflection of your capacity to build people's confidence and build things*

Fiona Wood echoes these sentiments, seeing leadership as a team-based approach, where the collective skill sets of the team are harnessed to solve the problems and meet the challenges at hand. Peter Doherty similarly believes that genuine collegiality among, and respect for all team members is critical in achieving desired outcomes. He notes:

*Leadership that works ... is direction by walking about. The best directors ... go and have coffee with the cleaners and the professors and it's about communication and about really valuing everybody at every level in an organisation for what they do and it doesn't matter whether they're people who clean the floors and wash the glassware or the people who run the research programs. If you've got that sort of mutual respect I think that's what you need in true leadership.*

Finally, and emphasising the significance of empowering others and fostering collaboration and teamwork, Ian Kiernan argues that enlisting others may be required at multiple levels to achieve the vision.

The fifth leadership practice, *encouraging the heart*, requires that leaders recognise the achievements and contributions of others – people are valued and successes are celebrated. Of all the five leadership practices, this one is less evident, at least in an overt sense, among the ten leaders. Certainly it was there in some ways in the comments of some of the leaders, such as Fiona Wood. However, it is clearly embedded more broadly in the strong people and relational focuses the leaders identified as critical underpinnings of successful leadership. Perhaps it reflects a cultural matter, whereby success is often, at least among some, tempered by modesty and humbleness.

In consideration of the ideas highlighted above, there are a number of overall messages and learnings we might take from the leadership stories of these outstanding Australians (Cranston & Ehrich, 2007, pp. 108-109). They are presented here as challenges for school leaders to reflect on as we seek new learnings for the future.

*Leadership is not a concept to be considered simplistically nor in isolation* – it is not to be defined by a formula nor can we propose a recipe for its development. Leadership takes many forms, is understood in different ways and enacted in different contexts. Despite this, there are a number of commonalities that can be brought to our understandings.

How leaders talk about *leadership*, how they understand its nuances and its practise *is deeply embedded in their own life forces and experiences, their personal values, beliefs and driving principles* and the fields of endeavour in which they work.

*Leadership must be about something!* It *must be vision-driven*, it must enliven commitment and passion not only within the leader as an individual, but also among those with whom the leader works. We need to be reminded that leadership can have both good intentions and otherwise – we need to be aware of the leadership lessons of history.

*Leadership is an on-going journey.* It is not easy, being constantly confronted by challenges and barriers. Risk taking and creativity are often required to overcome these in the quest for achieving the vision. Commitment and conviction are mandatory.

*Leadership is not a singular activity* – leading with and through others is not just rhetoric, but the reality.

*Leaders need to be accountable*, while at the same time demonstrating understanding and compassion in the drive to do better tomorrow than today.

As we consider our new solutions for emerging dilemmas for school leaders, what can we take from these reflections as inspiration for the future? There are clear and strong resonances here for those of us working in education, despite the fact these learnings are drawn from non-education sectors. Perhaps one of the significant challenges they offer is that we, in education, need to increasingly look “outside” for both new ideas as well as “confirmation” of our own contextualised thinking.

### **Key messages from the national and international literature**

This part of the paper now moves the discussion back into the school and educational context. How do the learnings identified above align with the education literature and research. Here the paper draws on two key sources. The first is a major review of the literature undertaken recently as part of one Australian system’s review of its leadership framework for principals (Cranston et al, 2007). The review included examination of key journal articles, books and leadership statements by Australian and overseas education systems. A number of leadership messages were synthesised from the review (Cranston, et al, 2007, pp.11-13) . They include:

*Leadership needs to be contextualised* - given the complex, changing and challenging contexts (local, national, global) within which schools now operate and the resulting impact on the educational leaders of these institutions, it is not surprising that there is a need to conceptualise our thinking about leadership within these contexts. New ways of learning, of schooling and the overall impact of technology and globalisation are key notions here: the “past” does not necessarily prepare us well for the “future”. To illustrate this, Leithwood notes: “ ... leadership cannot be separated from the context within which (it) is exerted. Leadership is contingent on the setting, the nature of the social organization, the goals being pursued, the individuals involved, resources and timeframes and many other factors.” (cited in Davies, 2005. p.9).

This theme suggests that educational leaders need to:

- have a sound understanding of emerging local, national and international developments in education and related disciplines/areas of interest – in this way they are able to take a “global” view of where their school and their students’ learnings are located and where these might need to be positioned for a socially sustainable future, taking account of key trends and developments;
- use such understandings to engage (and lead) their school communities (teachers, parents, other community members) in discussions about schooling (eg. new forms) and learning (eg. curriculum content, delivery, assessment) for the 21<sup>st</sup> century – in part, this requires a futures orientation to the visioning and thinking for school leaders;
- have the capacity to work well with different individuals and groups locally and more broadly, establish networks and alliances with various educational, community and other bodies, and engage relevant individuals and groups in the “life” of their schools;
- have the capacity to lead effectively in a time of discontinuous change and uncertainty, drawing on deep understandings of the organisational culture of their schools to effect change; and,

- at times, take an advocacy role for their school communities, offering input to policy development systemically as well as seeking to maximise availability to resources for their schools.

In a broad sense, educational leaders need to be managers of meaning, providing a key interface between the rest of the community and their more immediate school community. Educational leaders have a key role in the development of the vision for their schools – understanding where their school “fits” in the “bigger picture” for the now and in the future.

*Management is important* - the management aspects (including accountability) for educational leaders must be attended to competently and are a vital element of the broader roles of such leaders. Management aspects are seen to include that leaders are competent in:

- human, financial and resource management – issues of equity, social justice, balance, fairness and collaboration are relevant here;
- holding sound knowledge of system-level expectations, policies, pedagogy, legislation, legal considerations/implications and so on;
- management of external relations;
- accountability requirements – including meeting system requirements such as expectations about policy implementation, assessment and reporting of student learning.

It should be noted that the processes by which many of these are enacted in practice, often require sound leadership capabilities.

*Educational leadership is about learning* – in conceptualising leadership, there must be a fundamental emphasis on learning and development. This focus on learning is what distinguishes educational leadership from leadership in other contexts.

Key issues about learning and educational leadership to be emphasised include:

- educational leaders ensuring that student learning and development (academic, social, whole-person development) remain as the fundamental focus of their school's endeavours;
- educational leaders seeing themselves as critically reflective life-long learners;
- educational leaders being able to make the theory-practice links; i.e. learning is important per se, but it is especially important in so far as it contributes to effectiveness of, and improvement in, students' learning – the question to be answered is “what does it mean for practice?”
- educational leaders acting as leaders of learning in their school communities eg. of teachers and others in the community;
- consideration of the career stages and ambitions of principals – these are likely to be different across the career phases of principals, such as aspirants through to long-serving leaders; and,
- educational leaders engaging in quality formal and informal professional development opportunities, including formal tertiary programs, one-off targeted sessions, mentoring, peer coaching, professional reading and action learning/research.

The vision to be fostered by educational leaders here is on developing the learner-centred school that values learning for all. The fostering and development of learning communities, seeing the school as a learning resource and hub for the community, are key challenges for educational leaders.

*Educational leadership as a purposeful values-driven “activity”* - while learning is the *raison d’être* of schools, educational leadership ought to be a purposeful values-driven, moral and ethical activity. Educational leaders need to be aware of their own values, beliefs and principles as well as those of their school, system and community, and be driven to develop their schools as socially just and inclusive institutions.

Educational leaders operating in this way see their schools as holding community-service and social responsibilities, seeking to develop young people as mature individuals who are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to create a better, more just and sustainable future.

Key values underpinning educational leadership ought to include:

- learning-centred focus
- equity, social justice, fairness
- inclusiveness
- empowerment
- tolerance
- compassion
- whole-person development
- ethics and ethical behaviour

*Educational leadership as a distributed “activity”* - distributed, shared, and multiple leadership notions have emerged in the last decade or so as one of the most significant leadership agendas. Notions of empowerment, working with and through others are key principles here. Crowther et al (2002) have developed the notion of parallel leadership which draws on these agendas and earlier teachers-as-leaders ideas.

Such collaborative, inclusive and co-leadership notions require educational leaders to operate in non-hierarchical, trusting and mutually respectful ways. To do so, requires that educational leaders know their staff (strengths, weaknesses) and their communities, and can communicate effectively with them, to maximise the leadership capabilities in their schools.

*Educational leadership as a relational “activity”* - the significant people-nature of what educational leaders do requires that they have excellent interpersonal skills, and are adept at developing sound relationships with diverse individuals and groups within and external to their school communities. Managing meaning for self and others, visioning, gaining commitment and developing collaborative partnerships are core responsibilities of educational leaders. Educational leaders also need to be astute managers of the micropolitics of their communities, especially as these relate to key leadership teams, such as senior management and executive teams.

*Leadership qualities and capabilities* - various leadership qualities and capabilities have already been noted and the literature is replete with lists of skills, knowledge, attitudes and dispositions with regard to educational leadership. Listed here are those that have emerged as the more notable in recent years – as such, the ideas below are not necessarily exhaustive.

One of the most significant capabilities to emerge in recent years has been that of understanding self or self awareness. [In some areas of the literature, this is referred to as “emotional intelligence”.] For many writers, and this also is evident in some of the leadership frameworks, awareness of self (and others) is fundamental to educational leadership.

It is argued that it is only with self-awareness, maturity and wisdom that educational leaders can lead and manage others in their communities.

Qualities and capabilities for educational leaders include:

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|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| ▪ modelling the way         | ▪ challenge and risk taking    |
| ▪ influencing others        | ▪ optimism and confidence      |
| ▪ adaptable, responsive     | ▪ intuition                    |
| ▪ commitment                | ▪ passion                      |
| ▪ creative, innovative      | ▪ personal responsibility      |
| ▪ courage                   | ▪ relational capabilities      |
| ▪ resilience                | ▪ self-confidence              |
| ▪ tough-mindedness          | ▪ compassion and fairness      |
| ▪ integrity                 | ▪ political & legal astuteness |
| ▪ acting ethically          | ▪ micro-political astuteness   |
| ▪ managing diversity        | ▪ advocacy                     |
| ▪ leading & managing change | ▪ visioning                    |

One underpinning capability noted earlier is that relating to wisdom. That is, the capacity to bring a certain sagacity (from life experiences, knowledge, worldliness) to complex decision-making. Such wisdom contributes to sound ethical decision-making in difficult and complex situations often faced by educational leaders. Duignan (2004, p. 18) argues that capable leaders need to have the capability to make sensible and wise judgments when faced with new and changing situations, often involving dilemmas and conflict.” He argues that many leaders may have the skills (eg. interpersonal) but do not perform well, seeming to lack the confidence, commitment, character and wise judgment to apply these skills in unfamiliar and changing circumstances.

To round out this section it is instructive to reflect on the key international research findings as identified recently by the National College of School Leadership in England (NCSL, 2007). The NCSL holds a preeminent place internationally in school leadership research and professional development. The College recently released a summary document of their work across the past five years, including commissioned research, practitioner enquiries, seminars, think tanks and literature reviews. The document provides a succinct summary of the key leadership messages that their work has unearthed. There are considerable similarities with what has already been noted in this paper. In brief, they noted that school leadership could be captured in seven key findings:

- context matters
- learning-centred leadership is critical
- distributing leadership matters
- leadership in schools is changing
- the core tasks of school leaders are clear
- school leadership is hard work & rewarding
- leadership development and succession planning has never been more important.

Perhaps it is only the last of these that has not been noted earlier. However, it is significant within the theme of this paper as we look to the future and has been the focus of an increasing body of research in recent years (see for example, Cranston, 2007).

It is clear there is a powerful resonance in these leadership learnings with what we have already noted above.

### **Identifying some paradoxes, tensions and dilemmas as we seek sustainable school leadership**

In reflecting on the learnings from the prominent Australians and that evident in the literature a number of paradoxes, dilemmas and/or tensions are evident when the real day-to-day operational context for educational leaders is considered. Ethical dilemmas, for example, are common for educational leaders such that they need capacities to act ethically in challenging contexts where decision-making options appear equally appropriate and attractive (Cranston et al, 2006). That is, while developing ideas about leadership is an important task as we have done in the early part of this paper, it is the enactment of leadership where the reality of the dynamics of school and their communities arise. And it is here that a number of powerful dilemmas emerge for school leaders. They include the need to (Cranston et al, 2007, p. 14):

- respond to both local and system level demands/priorities when they might not always be compatible;
- be seen and act as the leader while empowering others for distributed, shared, multiple leadership roles;
- achieve work-life balance when the professional and personal demands of being an educational leader are significant;
- drive a future-oriented sustainable vision for their schools in discontinuously changing and challenging times while managing the reality of “the now” of schools;
- continue their professional learning journey, keeping abreast of educational and related developments and trends while managing the significant competing demands on educational leaders; and,
- allocate limited resources in effective, efficient and equitable ways to maximise the learning of all students.

None of these is simple. None is easily resolved. Indeed, principals frequently walk a tight-rope of tension as they struggle with such dilemmas.

We are all working with complexity, with paradoxes, with tensions and uncertainty – working with and through others, on-going learning with, and from each other (formally and informally) - are some of the most effective keys we have in unlocking the door to better leadership practice in our schools. And learning is at the heart of the challenges we face in schools and school leadership. As noted earlier, leadership is not to be defined by a formula nor can we propose a recipe for its development. Leadership takes many forms, is understood in different ways and enacted in different contexts. One of our on-going challenges as researchers, writers and practitioners is to continue to explore new ideas from the usual, but also the less usual sources. As schools become increasingly more “open” to their local and wider communities, we must adopt the stance of writers such as Pascale who almost two decades ago argued that “we must break the chains of the old mindset if we are to grapple successfully with the task of managing adaptive organisations” (1990, p. 88). Indeed, as Hiefetz similarly argues we must continue to seek answers to the new questions as the future unfolds:

*Leadership is needed for problems that do not have easy answers. The big problems of the day are complex, rife with paradoxes and dilemmas. For these problems, there are no once-and-for-all answers ... (they) require us to learn new ways. (Hiefetz cited in Fullan, 2001)*

This paper has attempted to catalyse a journey of ideas of sustainable school leadership for the future. That journey has only really just begun in these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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