

Walking on water or drowning in it? The risky business of the principalship.

By Louise Bywaters

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This is how some educators describe the process of taking up the principalship...an odyssey of excitement, challenge, physical and mental contest, drama and sometimes, intrigue.

For some new initiates into the role of school leader, it can be a time of stress, confusion, self doubt and anxiety, and they are carried through it on a high of adrenalin and massive energy output; physical, intellectual and emotional. On the other hand, some people seem to take on the mantle of leadership with relative ease, as if they were born to lead, and as if they were impervious to the stresses and pressures of the job. Their demeanour is calm, composed, and even in the most crisis-driven moments, they appear to have an aura of authority, initiative and 'follow-ship.'

Why is this so? Is there some particular leadership style or type of personality that is more suited to the principalship than others? Is there a development program that can equip people with the necessary skills, dispositions, demeanour and knowledge? Is there an ideal pathway to leadership that slowly builds these capacities over time so that the final transition to the principalship is a completion process rather than a commencement one?

Some would argue that leadership capacity and effectiveness is just a training course away. I would argue that whilst learning about leadership, organisational development and management is essential for success, the process ideally starts at the beginning of an educator's professional life. Indeed, learning about the school as an organisation should be a part of pre-service education and training. After all, educators work in schools for a large part of their lives.

Furthermore, it is now accepted that teaching is one of the few careers where leadership skills and vision, as well as a repertoire of management capabilities are required immediately an educator walks into a classroom with students. The way a

teacher leads and manages the classroom community is surely indicative of how they are going to conduct their professional lives from there on.

Building a school-wide view of teachers' work and taking on a personal commitment to contributing to whole school leadership as a member of a team of practising professionals allows educators to view and critique leadership through an aspirant's lens. Educators can gather an essential, whole-school perspective throughout a career. They can see the totality of the schools operations and can consciously establish and work within a wider sphere of influence than a single classroom or faculty.

This process is driven by a commitment to shared leadership by the school community. It is a group effort which is driven by a culture of willingness, collaboration, inclusion and support. It is a process that nurtures the abilities and skills of participants and leads them into responsibilities and challenges that, over time, builds leadership capacity and capability of the collective as well as of the individual.

For individuals, this process begins a long time before they declare their hand as a potential candidate for a formal leadership position. It is a conditioning or tempering process that involves continuous information gathering and sorting, psychological and emotional positioning and a willingness to seek out or make different opportunities for leadership practice and skill building.

The process focuses potential candidates on the ultimate purpose of the principalship and the function of the school in the community, and starts to engage them in profile and reputation building and networking, public engagement and relations.

Unfortunately, not all schools work on such a capacity building model, and not all practising leaders are generous in creating expectations or opportunities for developing leaders across the board. Gender and racial bias, conservative traditionalism, insecurity, and a plethora of other reasons, including the inability of the profession itself to conduct skilful and informed conversations about leadership, means that the journey to the principalship is often a lonely and covert one.

Others are 'fast-forwarded' into the role by emergency circumstances, and struggle to orient their minds and their energy into the right place to make a strong, confident start, having had little or no preparation or orientation to the role and often no carefully scaffolded management training.

My theory is that those people who take the principalship confidently in their stride have had long-term career intent. In ideal cases, that intent has been nurtured and developed in a number of ways, consciously or subconsciously. That process has enabled them to prepare themselves. The aspirants have the support of others to prepare either through leadership development programs or through mentoring and coaching relationships that have ensured the right opportunities and experiences are placed in their way.

Whatever the pathways taken to leadership, there is a curriculum of knowledge, skill development and disposition building that is essential to the long-term success of a person in executive leadership in schools. I do not intend to describe these here. There are numerous texts, standards frameworks and programs with which aspirants can engage through formal leadership development programs.

What is important is the establishment of a set of professional habits that sees principals and other leaders practise with personal commitment, routine and rigour. The following list describes a set of activities that reduces isolation, facilitates debriefing,

builds a shared understanding of the roles and the work, identifies common experiences, works on new strategies for leadership and enables leadership coaching and teaching in an intimate and timely fashion.

The items on the list are what I call professional risk management strategies. They are critical to the long-term mental and physical wellbeing of those in leadership. For those who are thrust into leadership before they feel they are ready, these habits become the survival strategies until time, experience and learning fill the gaps in confidence that inevitably show with new appointees.

Here is the list:

- *Develop a personal leadership statement that outlines your own values, beliefs, standards, and bottom lines about your professional work...this will be like a safety net during tricky times.*

Keep it in your journal, and open it up when the going gets tough. Keep it as a visual reminder of the things you stand for, and as measures of what you will and won't do as a leader. Display symbols of your values in your office. Give strong messages about your respect for, and the place of, children and young people. Make your leadership expectations explicit.

This needs to be worked on over time, and used to help people understand how you tick as a leader and how you work. My hunch is that people are most stressed when they are doing something that is intrinsically different or contradictory to their values or ideals, to their standards or beliefs. When that is not clear, even to your conscious self, distress sets in.

- *Keep your focus on the core business of schools.*

In today's busy work world, there are competing forces that take leaders away from the true work of educational leadership—the productivity and effectiveness of teaching and student support, the efficacy of learning and the achievement of educational outcomes for all students.

Management tasks should enhance the quality and performance of leadership, not detract from it or consume disproportionate amounts of time. Learn how to achieve acceptable compliance to bureaucratic demands, avoid perfectionism and procrastination driven by anxiety about these things. Keep the focus on classrooms, students and their teachers, as well as school culture and ethos.

- *Form or join a network of others in the same position, preferably with a mix of experiences.*

Make a set of dates at the start of each year. Organise a quiet, well-serviced meeting place with good coffee and food. Use skilful protocols and processes to share successful experiences and deconstruct problems. Work on learning new things together; bring in speakers or coaches. Keep proceedings strictly confidential. Don't let anyone join unless you have an agreement about new members.

- *Read good texts or undertake a program on time management and personal organisation. Design a plan for your day, week, term and year.*

Use work time for planning and reviewing your work. Use reflective reports to review your work and plan the next phase. Insist on a professional supervision session at least twice a year with your line manager, in a group or individual setting. Use the time management grid in Covey's First things first (1994) to ensure that your long term and strategic priorities are not overrun by the urgent and important.

- *Work on a realistic strategic plan of what is important and possible in a school year, and stick to this religiously.*

Work on your ability for strategic thinking and action. Make choices that are within the agreed scope of the school plans. Don't let the enticing and attractive opportunities that come your way every day escalate your work load to the impossible.

- *Write down a set of steps for a 'problem solving under pressure and duress' strategy*

Keep this somewhere accessible and follow it religiously when you are under siege. Share this with your leadership team and get them to work through it with you if necessary. It will calm them down and keep them on track as well as maintaining consistency of process.

- *Establish a life-line colleague*

We all need someone who can drop what they are doing and talk you through a crisis or urgent problem that has emerged. Arrange this early in your appointment and negotiate the terms that you will both work under.

- *Do a study of power in leadership and know how you tick in relation to power and how you get it most effectively.*

Power is the energy of leadership, and it must be used wisely and ethically, strategically and with multiple intelligences at work. Know how others use power in the school and how they get it, and where the centres of power are on the staff. Make a formal study of the rules for engagement in conflict, and how best to build good resolutions for all involved, as well as when and how to draw the line safely and courteously for all concerned.

- *Join a professional association that broadens your network and stretches your perspective.*

Make a contribution in some way. Think profession, not job.

- *Mix with people from other walks of life, share their knowledge and learn and teach in a new context.*

Remember that educators are not the only busy people with big responsibilities in the community. Contribute your share of social capital to your community and environment and keep away from negative thinkers. Keep your morale in an upward spiral. (Zander, B and Zander, R 2000.)

- *Learn about systems theory and its relevance to schools. Apply systems thinking to your work.*

If you are going to improve or systemically change anything for the better in a school, it is essential to get a fix on the meta design of your workplace and how it operates, to determine where the locus of influence is, where effective teams are operating, where the standard operating procedures are effective and how the communication networks function. Not having a big picture approach to thinking about a school will result in overwork on minutiae and too little strategic and effective effort.

- *Understand chaos theory.*

Understand how modern organisations best work in terms of communication, organisation and productivity. Give up trying to control, and work on strategic influence

- *Gather a tool kit of processes.*

Start collecting a range of good processes for building dialogue, problem solving, creative thinking and participative decision making, and use them to get others to work with you in the learning, in project design and management for change. Become the facilitator of good decision making and give yourself the best information base for taking those decisions.

- *Start the conversations about leadership and shared community building in your school. Build leadership capacity in others.*

Invite others to share responsibility, enjoy responsibility and make a contribution. Teach people how you want them to behave. Give them time to learn and practise in a supportive and educative way. Learn how to delegate to other adults and students in a way that builds their confidence and capacity.

- *Work on a long term leadership development plan of your own.*

Write it down. Set up mentoring and coaching relationships that allow you to work strategically for the future. Make sure the professional development time you use is of maximum value. Say no to demands on time that are not convincing in this regard. Review plan regularly and include it in supervision sessions with your line manager at least once a year.

- *Make your private relationship and your home your haven and personal space.*

Don't let the job consume your life, damage your precious partnership and dismiss your family to the diminishing gaps of time between work obligations. These are the most precious people in your life. Ensure your relationship is underpinned with commitment. Make and follow rules about time, defined home /work routines and scheduled recreation time. They are your centre, your source of energy and emotional nurturance.

As a member of the principal class, you are responsible for good example in work/ life balance—in your own life and in the life of the school. This work starts at home.

- *Spend time learning about what drives you.*

What do you need to be happy and content, safe and secure, effective and successful? Work out your learning and leadership style; get a trait analysis done to examine how you tick. Uncover your emotional, physical and psychological vulnerabilities. Dig deeply into your motives about leadership and power. If it is to gain approval, be liked or noticed, in control or to get your own way, think again and get counselling. Leadership work might make you sick!

- *Go to a financial planner and work out what you can do to maximise the benefits of earning a leadership salary.*

Salary sacrificing, mortgage minimising, investing in good recreation, and other savings plans mean that you can make good choices about what you do next, and which way you move in your career—up, sideways, down or out!

Never feel you have to stay in leadership because you are trapped financially into a higher earning bracket. You should do it because you enjoy it, gain happiness and personal satisfaction from it, and because it achieves your personal professional mission.

- *Take regular doses of humour and don't take yourself too seriously.*

Be silly, have fun, play and take time to like and enjoy the company of children and young people. Live in the moment. Create spaces and places where you can relax and laugh regularly.

- *Use time and space for reflection and planning, documenting and analysis of data, writing and creating new things.*

Work on the spirit level and ensure there is sufficient opportunity to retreat, recommit, reframe and recharge.

This might seem like a list of the luxuries of leadership. My proposition is that without each of these risk management strategies, you are destined for dangerous times. The way forward is a matter of choices, self discipline and review to ensure you are self managing and accepting of your limits, respecting those of others and remembering the needs you have for a happy, satisfying life.

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