

School leadership and the art of politics

Could political leadership provide us with a new model for cultural change in schools, asks PAUL D. WILLIAMS.

THE very mention of the word 'political' in an education context is likely to generate one of two responses: one either girds one's loins and flees from images of factionalised staff rooms; or one stiffens for combat, adamant that politics have no place in schools.

A long-held misunderstanding

But such responses come only from a misunderstanding of the term. When we remember that politics is essentially the resolution of conflict and the distribution of resources, the term 'political' school leadership assumes a much more accessible dimension. The terms becomes even more appropriate when we consider US President Dwight Eisenhower's definition of political leadership as *'the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he [sic] wants to do it'*. Here, we can see the intrinsically persuasive power of leadership. Little in human relationships is more overtly political than the art of persuasion, and few settings require more diplomacy and gentle persuasion than schools.

Clearly, leading a group of people in any setting is inherently political, but the difference between 'political' school leadership, as I see it, and other models canvassed below is two-fold: 'political' leaders are conscious of their capacity to precipitate real change and, second, they are cognisant of the strategies most appropriate to varying circumstances to induce that change. Indeed, the 'political' should hardly be anathema to good educational leadership. Of course, the term 'teacher leadership' has become something of a buzz phrase in recent years. It seems we all should know what it means, what it comprises, and have some predilection to participate in it. But how many classroom teachers, principals and administrators can confidently define this commonly-used term, let alone claim any expertise in it? Education Queensland, in its guide to teaching principals of small schools, offers useful insight into the composition of effective teacher leadership. Five key areas, critical to the development of well-rounded school leaders, are identified. It is unsurprising that three – educational, organisational and intellectual – should be included: such elements appear fundamental. Yet two others – the 'personal' (being able to self-reflect on professional practice, and to manage stress and other workplace pressures), and the 'relational' (being able

to establish rapport with all stakeholders including staff, students and community) – are too often overlooked. Yet they should not be, especially when we remember that small schools and their teaching principals are the 'hothouses' in which future large school leaders are cultivated. Indeed, one quarter of all Queensland schools have fewer than 100 students and, therefore, a teaching principal. Across much of regional Australia, these five elements are at the core of what it means to be a school leader today, and into the future.

Anecdotally, any phrase that includes 'leadership' is a potential deterrent to group members who might otherwise prove capable participants. The very word conjures up a vision in which a single individual leads, alone, the amorphous masses. Too few of us, it seems, have neither the time nor inclination to lead from the front. To use a performance metaphor, 'leadership' here might be likened to singing solo before a large and critical audience, ready to pounce on the first flat note. But 'leadership', especially the 'participative' variety discussed below, need not be an 'all or nothing' scenario. Especially in an educational setting, it can also be a forum where everyone contributes to decision-making according to strength, expertise and resources. To continue the metaphor, this type of leadership should be seen as a choir – a collaborative effort in which participants can perform, with confidence in numbers and shared responsibilities, without fear of flat notes. Leadership, then, is not just a two way street, it is often a multilane freeway.

Types of leadership

Understanding a range of leadership definitions goes far in understanding how each member of a school community can contribute to the betterment of that institution. Those who lead groups, according to James McGregor Burns (1978), can be split into two broad types: the 'transactional' (those who maintain the status quo by brokering deals just to 'get by'), and the 'transformational' (those rarer leaders who transcend obstacles and move their group forward). Education researchers Leithwood and Duke (1999) offer a more detailed taxonomy of six types: 'instructional' (what teachers actually 'do' in the classroom), 'transformational' (see above), 'moral' (ensuring optimal outcomes for each student), 'participative' (shared, group experiences and decision-making), 'managerial' (administrative), and 'contingent' (how members respond to challenging circumstances). To this list I add a seventh type: the 'political leader': the person who is conscious of her/his power to invoke change, and knows how to go about it by, as Eisenhower declared, getting people to do things because they want to do them. York-Barr and Duke (2004) assert

that a key element to effective educational leadership is the ability to execute 'cultural change', that is, a shift not just in learning and teaching practices, but also the beliefs and attitudes behind those practices. Because ingrained beliefs are perhaps the most difficult to challenge – and a key impediment to real 'cultural change' – a shift in a school's base belief system, through effective political leadership, can remove that impediment. Importantly, that change need not be rapid or seismic; it might well be incremental and subtle. Whether resistance to change lies in simple reluctance or in a more seriously conflicting array of teaching philosophies that see school staff pulling in opposite directions, school 'culture' – that indefinable 'flavour' of the institution – will require constant monitoring.

Fullan (2002) further explores the concept of 'cultural change' and finds that 'moral purpose' is central to any transformation in educational values. This implies that educational institutions are morally impelled, first, to lift learning outcomes overall and, second, to close the gap between lowest and highest performers. The reconciliation of these two demands – the need to oversee 'cultural change' and the need to fulfil 'moral purpose' – requires perhaps the most nimble leadership of all – the self-aware 'political' type: the knowledge among school leaders that they can, and should, induce regular change.

Leading by doing

Political leadership, again as Eisenhower might remind us, includes encouraging often reluctant group (staff) members to embrace change – and to do so because they want to. Yet experience tells us this is perhaps the most challenging of leadership tasks. But that same experience points to a simple yet effective strategy for the successful engagement of leaders with followers, and to induce that sought-after cultural change: leading by 'doing'. Truly inspiring political leadership cultivates followers' potential by stoking enthusiasm, by connecting with the group, and by winning confidences – goals achieved most effectively by modelling appropriate behaviours. In short, principals as school leaders can, and should, lead by example – by doing what teachers do best: teach. It is too easy for principals ensconced in frenetic administrative roles to forget they were – and are – professional educators. And yet little is simpler in lifting group morale, and in facilitating cultural change, than in occasionally re-entering the classroom as a positive model for the group.

The benefits of principals delivering lessons – and in attending school camps and other extracurricular activities – should be self-evident. First, principals can keep their skills sharp and, in the case of technology, heighten their professional expertise in rapidly changing fields such as 'e-learning'. Second, teachers can improve their own skills and knowledge by observing principals as 'master teachers' in action. Third, teachers are reminded that their school leaders are first and foremost teaching professionals and not mere administrators. The fact students have an opportunity to see their principal in a new light, and benefit from expert teaching skill and alternative perspectives on

subject matter, is a fourth benefit. Similarly, a fifth positive outcome will emerge when parents, who engage with the principal as teacher, develop a new confidence in their school leader as a competent practitioner. A last benefit is that teaching principals can empathise with credibility when listening to teachers' classroom frustrations. Importantly, the teaching principal experience need not be restricted to guest lessons: co-operative teaching should also be encouraged as a means to fostering healthy collegial – indeed political – school relationships. Importantly, that sense of mutuality and trust that co-operative teaching inevitably cultivates extends farther than the classroom: staff meetings will take on new and livelier dimensions as staff see their school leaders as genuine colleagues – as political equals – sharing genuine experiences. As a result, group members are more likely to work collaboratively with leaders, be more receptive to challenging ideas, and more likely to participate in the process of real cultural change. There are, of course, drawbacks to the teaching principal model. Time-poor leaders already stressed by my administrative and community duties both within and beyond the school may well balk at precious hours devoted each week to the preparation and delivery of classroom activities. Less-enlightened departmental chieftains, too, may condemn the plan, arguing principals are paid to lead, not teach. Such a response, of course, ignores the very elements of leadership discussed above. Such issues should not be ignored but rather overcome via negotiation – again, the very essence of political leadership.

Summary

Political leadership is not confined to parliaments, cabinets and councils. Indeed, politics is at the very core of all human relationships, and rarely more so than in the workplace. Schools are especially so as they remain multi-tiered hierarchies with complex levels of power, authority, responsibility and accountability. The teaching principal – where 'leading by doing' is the very model of grass roots participation in schools – is a powerful example of political leadership that can, in turn, lead to important cultural change. Effective school leadership therefore can, and should, be embraced as a form of 'political' leadership where participants are empowered to assist in the management of a change that is, by very definition, inevitable.

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