



# Good leadership

GOOD LEADERSHIP CAN MAKE OR BREAK AN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION, BUT WHAT DOES GOOD LEADERSHIP LOOK LIKE? VIRENDER KAPOOR OFFERS SOME TIPS.

It's often the case that the leaders of educational institutions are appointed on the basis of their academic credentials rather than their capacity for leadership. While academic excellence is important, a thriving educational institution is one in which the leadership has a hands-on role in learning, sometimes called an instructional leadership role, and a close involvement in the day-to-day administration of the institution.

The development of a cohesive professional team in an educational institution is as important as it is for any corporation. An educational institution is a living entity. The bricks and mortar are the hardware, but the people, their goals, plans and practices are the software that drives it.

Morale, team work, motivation and handling people appropriately, getting things done, identifying solutions to problems: these are what makes any organisation tick. The leader's role is to enable these by building a culture where teachers and other staff can give their best.

No amount of formal training can equip us when we take on the leadership of schools or

colleges, but there are several ideas that we can put into practice.

## Create a warm milieu and a strong culture

A school should be a cohesive and a compact unit. A good leader can make it a closely knit family, but school principals deal with two different entities – students and staff – and they have to be handled differently. This makes leading a school more complex than leading a corporation of similar employees.

A school leader's job is to ensure that members of staff are engaged and look forward to coming to work. Retaining good talent involves having confidence in, respect for and commitment to your staff. This depends on having a mindset in which you as a school leader believe that the ideas, knowledge and skills of your staff are assets that should be used to maximise your school's programs. Rather than acting unilaterally, strong leaders develop processes that draw on the ideas, knowledge and skills of staff. Whether these processes involve consultation or delegation, the leadership act of sharing decision-making power sends a real message to staff: 'You are vital to the effective running of this school, and your ideas, knowledge and skills are valued.'

The organisational culture of your school is built over a period of time, not simply as a

result of what you say, but of what you do. This includes how you lead the rest of your leadership team to ensure that they consult or delegate and demonstrate the same confidence in, respect for and commitment to your staff as you have.

Presenting certificates and awards to staff is an option, but more fundamental is the development of an environment of trust, equality and security in which staff feel confident that their ideas, knowledge and skills are of use, so long as they are sincere and hard working in their application. This is especially important when it comes to identifying issues, critiquing processes and making complaints. Strong leaders have an open door policy where anyone can speak with you about a problem with confidence that processes and behaviours will be addressed. Strong leaders redress grievances quickly and judiciously, with a focus on behaviours and processes rather than personalities.

## Articulate the vision: where are we going?

Having a clear vision is fundamental to leadership. In education, your role as school leader is not simply to articulate the vision but to develop it through collaboration and consultation, and then realise it by implementing effective programs and processes.

Your vision might be to improve student outcomes by developing professional learning communities with a focus on curriculum

and assessment, or using and interpreting data to inform teaching strategies. Your vision might be to maximise the effectiveness of high-quality teachers using action research to investigate effective teaching practices. Your vision might be to develop individualised learning and assessment using a blend of face-to-face classroom resources and online resources.

The purpose of your school vision is to identify goals that then guide the development of strategies, programs and processes, and to identify major mile stones against which to measure progress towards achieving those goals, and to identify changes to strategies, programs and processes that may be required along the way.

Good leaders 'live' their vision and own it with passion, so that it touches a chord at an emotional level and impels staff to drive relentlessly to achieve it. This is not simply a matter of rhetoric, but of establishing and being involved in the working groups that develop the strategies, programs and processes and implement them on a day-to-day basis.

### Exercise discipline – over yourself

No politics please. Politics in an organisation is a damaging thing and the most difficult to handle if you allow it to breed. Unfortunately, politics starts from the top and often rebounds on the leader, eventually damaging them.

Your job as leader is to make it loud and clear that your focus is on making decisions that are well-considered and supported by robust evidence, not favourites, biases against people or for particular programs. Do this and half your problems will disappear. Your staff will work hard in the interests of the organisation when they don't have to watch their backs all the time, but you have to do what you promise: no politics means no politics.

Accept that in becoming the school principal you have moved from being a specialist to a generalist: your role changes from teacher to a guide. You have proven your excellence as a teacher, and that is why you are the school principal, but now you have a much larger role to play.

Dr Abdul Kalam, before becoming the eleventh President of India in 2002, was a rocket

scientist of repute who then became Principal Scientific Advisor to the Government of India. That changed his role from research and development to monitoring and evaluation to drive national projects worth billions.

As a school principal, your job is to seek advice and support from your staff; put otherwise, you need to lead them in doing their job, rather than insisting on doing that job yourself. If you were previously involved in student assessment, for example, the temptation could be to second guess the incumbent now responsible for student assessment. Your job now is to lead them in doing the best possible job in providing support to all your teachers in their student assessment efforts.

Your staff look to you for solutions. If you avoid this responsibility, they will go to someone else, you will lose the respect of your staff and that will be the end of the story for you. According to Colin Powell, Former United States Secretary of State and four-star general in the US Army, 'The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help them or concluded that you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership.' As a teacher you helped your students and cared about them; now your job is to help and care for your teachers and other staff in addition to your students. Keep in mind that identifying solutions, doesn't mean that you have to do all the work; rather, it means that you have to be involved in the issue that requires a solution. Oftentimes, your involvement is enough to stimulate the conversations your staff need to have to identify the best solution themselves.

Always act with integrity. Living with integrity is a matter of choice; once you so choose, you will be able to stand up for your values. Integrity earns you the respect of your team, and helps to stop you slipping into a political approach.

Delegate. It is not only the case that you can't do everything yourself, but that leadership requires that you develop the capabilities of those in your team. Delegating authority and responsibility is the fundamental way of getting the maximum bang for your buck. Your

job is to delegate objectives and responsibilities to appropriate staff, and provide adequate support and resources, and clear instructions and schedules. Then let go and don't micro manage. Let your staff take ownership and let them achieve the objective.

Many situations require a decision which may not be covered by an existing rule. Leadership involves discretion, literally, being able to decide what to do in a particular situation, as long as your decision is prudent and not reckless.

Be accessible. Making yourself available to your team is a necessary art. People need to consult you, either for your information, advice or approval. If you are not available the whole system gets jammed; remember, the bottleneck is always at the top of the bottle. You may be occupied with many tasks but you need to give sufficient time and on time to the people who work for you.

Anticipate. Visualising what is in the pipeline is a critical leadership skill. If you can identify problems in advance, you will be better prepared to respond than if you are facing the problem for the first time. This doesn't mean that you must identify the solutions, but that you must be involved in the process of identifying issues that may require a solution, consulting and seeking advice, and delegating.

The leadership skills required by principals and others in the school leadership team are not difficult to cultivate, so long as your effort in cultivating them is mindful. You first have to recognise the leadership skills that you want to develop, and then practise these on a day-to-day basis. There are many effective school leaders, most of whom had much to learn when they first started in the role. The good news is that they learned. We can all do that.

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