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 flee[s] 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 twofold: ‘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.

Anecdotalty, 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 ‘transactional’ (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), ‘transactional’ (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
invariably 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
leading principal model. Time-poor leaders already
stressed my administrative and community duties both
within and beyond the school may well bulk 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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