

DIGGING DEEPER

For further insights on the predictable set of professional challenges that new leaders face and strategies for dealing with them read “First time in a position of authority” by Barry Jentz (*Phi Delta Kappan*, September 2009). Compare this article with John D’Auria’s “The superintendent as teacher” (*Phi Delta Kappan*, September 2009) to shift perspective to the newly appointed superintendent’s role in managing difficult conversations.

And it’s not necessarily the case that we fall into this because we think too highly of ourselves, although that does happen occasionally. More typically, we’re operating with the best of interests. But we land in one of two places:

Either, “My staff are too busy, so I’m going to do it myself.”

Or, “My staff are okay at this, but I’m even better at it – so I’d better do it.”

The result is that staff never have a chance to learn. They never have a chance to grow. There is a dependency culture built up over time – a culture in which staff might be given management tasks to carry out, but not true leadership and accountability.

Can you elaborate? What does distributing accountability and leadership look like as opposed to distributing a management task?

A. Well, a management task might be to oversee the implementation of a new behaviour policy in the school. The principal leads the design of the policy and a member of the team

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“In praise of the incomplete leader” written by Deborah Ancona et al (*Harvard Business Review*, February 2007) addresses the myth of the complete leader. The authors argue that “no leader is perfect” and that the best ones don’t try to be and provide an approach leaders can use to understand their own strengths and find others who can make up for their limitations.

is asked to oversee the implementation. That’s a task.

What would be more interesting and valuable would be to have the team member oversee the design of the policy, working collaboratively with others, shaping and developing the policy with the help of the principal as a critical friend, and taking it to the school board to have it approved. And then making it happen – doing the implementation and being held accountable for it.

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Providing supports to help Ontario’s educational leaders develop into the best possible instructional leaders is a goal of the Ontario Leadership Strategy (OLS). Refer to *Ideas into Action*, Fall 2009 at www.ontario.ca/eduleadership to learn about the five Core Leadership Capacities (CLCs) that are essential to effective leadership:

- 1) setting goals;
- 2) aligning resources with priorities;
- 3) promoting collaborative learning cultures;
- 4) using data;
- 5) engaging in courageous conversations.

How does the leader decide where and how to hand off this accountability?

A. I think this is gradual. You stay very close, initially, when the person is new to the role. You do give them accountability but stay very close. Of course, this will progress as you develop more confidence in the individual. You’ll feel the need for fewer meetings, for example, and have more confidence that the individual will check in with you when they need advice and support.

But I think the principle is an important one – the principle that you’re constantly seeking to move toward leadership and accountability for your team, rather than just delegation of tasks.

There are obvious benefits for the school team – particularly those who aspire to leadership positions. How does this benefit the principal?

A. It's positive for the principal in three respects.

First, it frees up time. Too often, leaders complain that they don't have enough time. They're too busy. But what you find is that they're too busy because they're delegating tasks, rather than delegating leadership and accountability.

There are two very different leadership roles here. In the first, the leader is providing support, monitoring progress, and mentoring a team member who is leading. In the second, the leader is leading and getting ideas and advice from the team. That's much more time-consuming.

The second benefit is that the leader can now be more strategic. The leader can prioritize time more effectively and really focus on those areas where he or she alone can truly add best value.

Thirdly, one of the things we know works well is authentic leadership. People are more likely to follow you if they believe in you. They'll believe in you for two reasons. One is that you have credibility – that some of the time, you know what you're talking about. But the other is that they believe in you because you're genuine. You're honest about what you can and can't do. You're a real person, with strengths and weaknesses.

If you want authentic leadership, the notion of "imperfect" leadership goes with that territory. The key is not believing you're perfect, but embracing that you're imperfect, and going out of your way to find people who are better than you at the things you're not so good at.

What does authentic leadership look like in practice?

A. You welcome challenge and debate with your team. When you have a collaborative leader, there's a sense that you don't just have to say what the boss wants to hear. There's a genuine welcoming of other ideas and perspectives.

The leader goes out of his or her way to find different ways of thinking about things or addressing the issue. It's a more inclusive culture. People feel empowered and listened to.

And that doesn't just apply to the senior team. It applies to the way the organization functions. When you have genuine collaboration, people feel they're helping to shape what happens. They're not just recipients of what has to happen from on high. More people, even at a junior level, are given whole-school responsibilities and opportunities to make things happen. Risks are taken. And the culture encourages and allows those kinds of risk to take place.

So it's a very different culture than the culture in which there is a bottleneck of decision-making at the top.

This style of leadership clearly has a positive impact on succession planning and developing new leaders.

A. Very much so. First, because it directly supports professional learning and distributes genuine accountability.

But also indirectly, because it will attract more people to leadership positions. As long as we remain with this concept that leaders need to

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Succession planning and talent development are integral to the Ontario Leadership Strategy. To learn more about succession planning in Ontario and how school boards are addressing the challenges in building a cadre of outstanding educational leaders visit the Institute for Education Leadership's (IEL) web page at www.education-leadership-ontario.ca/research.shtml.

be perfect, we won't get any new leaders. And so there is a system-wide impact.

If we say that our leaders have to be perfect, it puts people off. They tend to think they're not up to it, that they can't do it. And that's no way to nurture a leadership system.

Another interesting aspect of this is that the portrayal of perfect leadership discourages women, in particular, from assuming leadership positions. This is very well-documented – there have been a number of studies on gender issues, not just related to leadership, but to applications for senior positions in general. The research indicates that men – as a broad group – are more likely to think they're up for the job, apply for it, and then worry afterwards about whether or not they can do it. Women are more likely, on the whole, to have more self-doubt about whether they can do the job and that can put them off applying.

And as long as we need perfect leaders, we will have fewer leaders in general and fewer women leaders in particular.

Can this style of leadership – authentic leadership – be learned?

A. Definitely. It's shaped by the cultures you've worked in. If you work in a culture that is collaborative, and you feel genuinely empowered, you're far more likely to develop that approach yourself.

If you work in a culture that is not collaborative, you might adopt that culture yourself or you might say “under no circumstances am I ever going to behave like that, because it's not the kind of culture I want.”

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Consider the proposals about “leadership learning” made in *What we know about school leadership* at www.nationalcollege.org.uk and also the “learning is the work” perspective described by Michael Fullan in the Fall 2008 issue of *In Conversation*: “Leading Change” at www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/InConversation.html.

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In Ontario, a wide range of supports are being implemented within the Ontario Leadership Strategy (OLS). Examples of these supports include Mentoring for Newly Appointed School and System Leaders and the Premier's Leader-to-Leader initiative. To learn more about the OLS, refer to the ministry's leadership web pages at www.ontario.ca/eduleadership.

Either way, you learn by watching other leaders work.

Your approach to professional learning, then, appears to be heavily weighted to learning on the job.

A. Yes. There was a time when we believed in the U.K. that leadership development should be predominantly course-based. We believed that the secret to developing good leaders was developing great courses.

Training does have value. But a number of problems are created if training courses are seen as a solution on their own.

The first problem is that, if you take individuals away from their organization, train and develop them, and then put them back into the organization, the culture of the organization will win over the individual training – unless the individual is fully in charge of the organization and can shape the culture. So the culture of the organization will dissipate the training very quickly. And that's a very important point. If you're looking at spending taxpayers' money on professional learning, you need to look at the organization as well as the individual.

The second problem is that, when you are developing skills and behaviours, they need to be practiced in a real context, not just in role play. You learn best and most powerfully in a real job.

And so our conclusion in the U.K. is that about 30 percent of leadership development should be course work and 70 percent should be learning on the job.

You mentioned earlier that the cultures and leadership we encounter in our careers may vary from school to school. How do you deal with that issue?

A. That's true. You can't just say "right, I'm going to learn on the job" because you may be lucky, and have outstanding practice all around you, or you may not – and you need to experience it elsewhere. So there needs to be exposure to outstanding practice, other than in your own context.

One of the ways you develop leaders is by exposing them to opportunities to visit other places and see other practice, especially high-quality practice. That could be a week-long placement, or a day-long shadowing, or a term- or year-long secondment. There are many ways to do it. But exposure to outside practice is crucial to leadership development. It has to involve more than learning on the job – unless you happen to be learning on the job at a fantastic place – otherwise your expectations will be too low.

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Refer to *Seven Strong Claims about School Leadership* at www.nationalcollege.org.uk to deepen your thinking about how successful leaders respond to the contexts in which they work.

How do you go about selecting placement opportunities, particularly identifying opportunities to be exposed to high quality practice?

A. We select which schools are asked to provide placements. We have an inspection system in England that judges the quality of school management. You can't be a placement school unless you have a good evaluation.

That's the starting point. Then, you have to demonstrate that you've been developing your staff within your own organization and that you have coaching and mentoring skills. So you apply to be a placement school, and within that process you demonstrate that you have a track record of developing people and that you have some training on mentoring and coaching.

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Read more about the important role a mentor or "critical friend" can play in supporting continued leadership development in the Winter 2009 issue of *In Conversation*: "Values-Driven Leadership" at www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/InConversation.html.

Secondly, even if it's a good placement with good leadership, the attitude of the person going on the placement is important. If the attitude of the individual is wrong, if they're negative and don't take up the positives – even if the positives are "we do it in our school better than they do" – there won't be a successful placement.

So every person has a coach who will talk with that individual, determine what their needs are, provide guidance on how to approach the placement, and hopefully help them go into the placement with the right attitude.

Coaching and mentoring clearly play an important role for you.

A. Yes. We've determined that, in addition to learning on the job and being exposed to outstanding practice, you need access to coaching and mentoring from credible peers, and that this has to be built in. At certain times you may need both mentoring and coaching, depending on your role.

And my own experience bears that out. One of the most valuable learning experiences I've had as a leader came at a time of great challenge. I had gone to work as Director of

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Learn more about the Knowsley success story and the strategies used to bring about its turnaround in *Sustainable Leadership* by Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink, 2006 and in *Leadership and Sustainability*, 2005 and *The New Meaning of Educational Change (4th edition)*, 2007, both by Michael Fullan.

Education and Lifelong Learning in Knowsley, Merseyside which, at the time, had the second worst exam results in the country. After a year of my leadership, we had the worst exam results in the country. That experience of early failure, of not achieving success, of serious challenge, of people calling for my resignation, of feeling that you've let people down, is a very powerful learning experience. And there are few great leaders who haven't had some of that. But I had a great mentor who helped me and profoundly influenced my progress toward success.

Are there any other critical success factors you have identified?

A. Yes, you need time for reflection. Because even if you are learning on the job, at a good place, you won't get the full learning unless you build in time to reflect on your experiences.

That means time out. Time away from the day job. It could be attendance at a seminar or course. It could mean time to discuss with your peers. But it certainly means time away from the job.

So you need to put all of these things together – combined with some international research, just to be sure you're benchmarking against the best. That's how we put the jigsaw puzzle together in the U.K. Learning on the job, placements or experiences of other outstanding practice, time for reflection, international comparison, peer group discussion and mentoring and coaching – these are some ways to get it right, in our view.

How does training fit into this model? How do you identify training opportunities that will also be of high quality and benefit?

A. In most cases there will be a diagnostic – to analyze what the individual's strengths and areas for improvement are, what their learning needs are and also how that fits into the organization – that is, what the individual's learning needs are within the organization itself.

Then you have a coach who would work through this with the individual and help to identify the most effective opportunities.

And the individual is able to personalize that – there is choice. For the individual, that means it wouldn't just be a course you'd go on. You'd be able to identify the things you need to work on, the kinds of training that would be beneficial and the kinds of placements you need to address your learning needs. So it's very personalized.

Based on your experiences in Ontario, do you have any observations that might inform our own thinking and future development?

A. I think there are some things you're doing in Ontario that are significantly better than the way we've gone about doing things in the U.K. You seem to me to be a much more aligned system. There's a much greater sense of common purpose and a common understanding between teachers, schools, principals, superintendents, districts, federations and the government.

There's alignment on what you're trying to achieve. A sense of all being in it together. There has been genuine consultation and dialogue. It appears to be less top-down. And the profession in Ontario has been respected in a way that has not happened as much in our system.

And that's really about leadership. Leadership from the minister to the officials to the superintendents and the principals. The quality of leadership at senior levels is very high. And I think there are some lessons the UK can learn from the Ontario system.

On the other hand, one thing I also observed is that the role of the middle leader is not as

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In England, middle leaders include those who are designated as department and subject heads, primary school curriculum coordinators and middle managers. The role of middle leader is now recognized in England as being pivotal in securing a focus on learning and teaching. Log on to www.nationalcollege.org.uk to learn more about middle leaders.

clear and strong in Ontario as it is in England. And that's an important observation because I think that where our schools have been successful, there has been a strong team of middle managers in the organization who drive through quality performance. The role of middle leaders in Ontario schools is not so clear-cut. That role seems to be more about teaching, and then senior leadership. That's an observation I would offer for consideration.

Similarly, what advice would you give to those in Ontario who are considering the principalship?

A. One of the main reasons people say they don't want to become principals is because of the worry about accountability. But I would suggest that the accountability of the principalship is a double-edged sword.

It's true that the accountability is sometimes terrifying. The accountability can make you feel lonely. It can make you feel insecure. And that's the downside of accountability.

The upside of accountability is that you can make things happen. You can make decisions. You're not just a receiver of instruction. You actually can change things.

In a system with low accountability, you have less fear but less excitement. There's less loneliness, but there is also less impact. When you have high accountability, you get both.

You've spoken in the past about differences between leadership in the public and private sectors. How does that inform your own practice as a leader?

A. We have great leaders in the private sector. But in the public sector there's something extra that provides many leaders with a powerful compass. In the public sector, it's not just about producing a great product. It's about changing and transforming the lives of children and young people and their families.

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In the words of Steve Munby, "so much rests on our leaders". To learn more about NCLSCS' vision for school leadership in the 21st century and how this is impacting its approaches to developing and supporting leaders read *School Leadership Today* at www.nationalcollege.org.uk.

And that's why every great public sector leader I know gets up in the morning and goes to work.

I think this also enables us in the public sector to attract people of high quality. For example, if you ask anyone in my organization why they work there, they will all say it's because they want to make a difference. Leadership is about more than running a steel factory – even through steel is important for our economy.

It has a different quality. For example, there is a sort of dark side of leadership that says "it would be great if my successor did well, but not quite as well as I did". You have that in the public and private sectors, but I'd suggest to a far lesser degree in the public sector.

The reason, I think, comes back to this moral purpose – the moral purpose of the public sector and of education. One of the most interesting questions for me, as I've progressed to bigger and bigger jobs, and more political jobs as well, is whether or not you can hold onto that notion of integrity and moral purpose. Each time, I've wondered "can I still operate like this?" in a bigger arena. And each time, I've found that I can, and that people respond well. People respond to authentic leadership and to integrity. It's a powerful ingredient.

What are your thoughts on the ideas presented in this issue of *In Conversation*? Email your comments and insights to InConversation@ontario.ca by November 9, 2009. We will review them and share them with the community on the [In Conversation](#) page of the ministry website.