



Quiet leadership = great and lasting influence

Robyn Pearce

It was 1995 and Auckland was preparing for a CHOGM (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting). My daughter Catherine was a university student at the time. To fund her studies she also worked on the banquets team of a top Auckland hotel, the location of most of the really significant CHOGM events.

She came home one night, bursting to tell about that day's experience.

"We had a huge function today. Everyone who's anyone in the Commonwealth was there – all manner of Very Important People. There was lots of 'please notice me – I'm important in my country' behaviour. These people had no idea how obvious they were. The irony was, those same people, so hungry for attention, treated the hotel staff as though we were invisible. They snapped orders, were rude and unpleasant to serve.

"However, two people stepped aside from the crowds of people jockeying to make an impression. These two people came over to the staff as we were lined up, waiting to begin serving the meal. They asked our names, what we were studying (as with many hotels, almost all the banquet staff were students) and what future careers we have planned. Not only did they ask questions, but they also listened and talked with us as equals.

"Guess who they were?"

"The Queen of England – and – Nelson Mandela."

By the time you read this article, Nelson Mandela may have passed on. When it happens,

tributes will plaster the media. In fact, tributes are already flowing and yes, this is one of them.

I've told the story above many times but never cease to be impressed when I imagine the lesson on leadership those young people received that night. I wonder if the would-be VIPs around them took note?

Leadership qualities can be seen everywhere around us, demonstrated by quiet unobtrusive people of all ages as well as inspiring and very visible people like the Queen and Mandela.

In your role as teachers and principals, you'll have seen many examples of influential leadership – not just from senior teachers, but also new teachers; not just teachers, but also low-paid ancillary staff; not just paid people, but also volunteers; not just adults but also children. But we're all busy, and it's easy not to notice the amazing things under our nose.

A principal's way of building a team through collaborative leadership

One of the most fundamental challenges for a leader is to develop a work climate in which staff can consistently achieve their best.

One major goal for Alison, a new principal of a five-teacher school in rural New Zealand, was to create a strong working relationship with her new team. She decided to copy something she'd experienced in a previous corporate life and try a team-building weekend.

She told me: "With access to a family holiday home, I popped the question, *How about we all*

go away for a weekend?" To my absolute delight the offer was quickly snapped up. After all, who could resist a free weekend away? It was a huge success. We tramped, fished, got stuck out on the lake in a boat, and talked the night away.

"Back at school the atmosphere became more relaxed, more open. We all had a healthy respect for each other, both personally and professionally.

"Then the 'beam me up Scottie' moment – confirmation of an ERO (Education Review Office) visit early the next year. We knew we were a successful school, but what about all that preparation and fine tuning that needed to be done. One staff member had the answer. *Let's go away again and all work together.*

"This time we went back to the same place for three days. I had never before experienced such a focused team. We collectively planned our programmes, introduced innovative curriculum activities, wrote our Education Plan for the year and decided on our responsibilities. Needless to say, we had built a solid foundation for a successful review.

"Everyone felt ownership; everyone was included; everyone shared in the great results."

A young teacher shows quiet leadership through influence

And one last example, just to prompt your noticing. This story was shared by the parent.

Karl's young son Simon had struggled mightily the year before. His very experienced and quite senior teacher constantly sent notes home about Simon's behaviour, and that same inappropriate behaviour was a regular topic at parent-teacher interviews.

The next year Simon's class was taken over a lovely young Indian woman, a second-year teacher. His parents began to notice that Simon was happier and were delighted to find that the new teacher was having no trouble with him.

"What's different?" they wondered.

One day, in conversation with the teacher, she shared her philosophy.

"Every day I look for something positive to praise each child for."

We all crave acceptance; this young woman had cracked the code. Just imagine how much time she saved in discipline because she took the time to emphasise the positive. And in her quiet way she displayed great leadership too.

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Robyn Pearce helps exhausted overloaded teachers find more time, control their paperwork and get home earlier. www.gettingagrip.com.

She is a Certified Speaking Professional (top speaking accreditation in the profession of speaking) held by only about 800 people around the world.