

Holding up a mirror to leader behaviour in schools – findings from school research

Louise Parkes



Effective and inspirational leaders are critical to a school's success, with leaders having unparalleled influence over a school's culture and direction. One way to help leaders build and maintain a positive influence is through a leadership 360 survey. A 360 survey provides feedback to leaders on how their workplace behaviours and effectiveness are perceived by those 'all around' them. One of the most interesting aspects of this process is comparing how leaders see themselves compared to the view of others – do others see what the leader sees in the mirror?

A simple yet helpful way to unpack 360 feedback is to draw up a 2x2 table of a leader's strengths and development areas as rated by themselves and others. Leaders can sometimes be pleasantly surprised by strengths that others see in them, and a little unsettled where others don't think the leader is as good as they think they are – their 'blind spots'. While this is challenging on a personal level, it's really interesting when this phenomenon occurs for a whole cohort of leaders.

Others Ratings	High	Unrecognised Strength	Confirmed Strength
	Low	Known Weakness	Blind Spot
		Low	High
		Self Ratings	

Voice Project is a research and consulting firm specialising in 360, engagement and service quality surveys. At the 2014 ACEL National Conference we presented research looking at the 360 ratings of 112 Australian school principals and other senior school leaders. The leaders had participated in Voice Project's Quality Leadership Profile for Schools 360 survey, with combined feedback from over 3400 staff.

Both leaders and their work colleagues agreed that their key strengths lay in school leaders' personal capability, being good role models and representing their schools well in the wider community. In terms of 'known weaknesses', leaders acknowledged that they didn't provide as much performance feedback and career guidance as their staff would like.

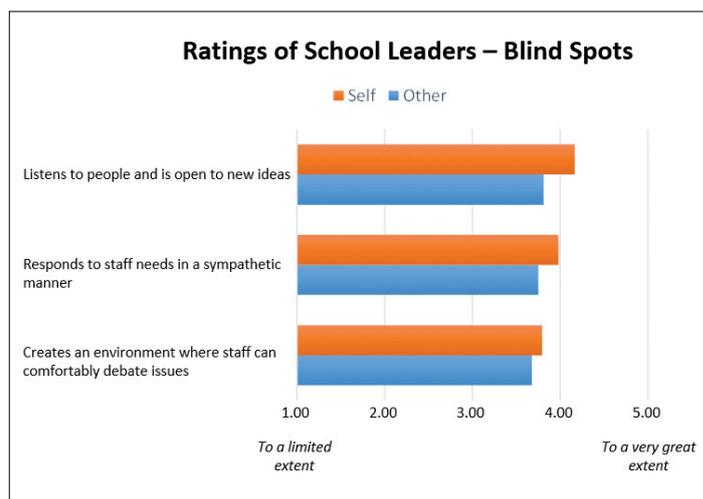
But there were also some key differences in leaders' own perceptions and those of their raters. Like leaders in many industries, on the whole, school leaders were slightly harsher judges of themselves than others were of them. In particular, they were not as confident as others were in their strategic capability to navigate the complex educational environment.

This general trend of harsher self-ratings makes the 'blind spots' stand out even more. Consultative leadership and people management were the few areas where school leaders rated themselves more favourably than others have rated them.

They included:

- Creating an environment of trust and safety for speaking up and debating issues
- Listening to staff and being open to new ideas
- Responding sympathetically to staff needs.

This discrepancy provides a challenge for school leaders to re-think how their interactions with staff are viewed by others. Leaders have often risen to their positions because of their excellent communication skills and confidence speaking in organisation and public forums. Perhaps they are unaware of how difficult it can be for some people to speak up at work, and how much encouragement is required to elicit genuine involvement in decision-making. Of course, the issue may not be one of



self-awareness, but a disagreement over the level of consultation that is desirable or necessary. Although leaders may be comfortable with their level of directing versus listening, staff would like to see more listening and empathic responding.

Either way, to improve their leadership effectiveness as perceived by others, opportunities exist for school leaders to more actively seek out and listen to staff, and to look for ways in which they can promote the development of a more supportive and open work culture.

School surveys

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Dr Louise Parkes is a senior consultant and psychologist with Voice Project. She is passionate about improving the work environment of schools by 'giving people a voice', and with Voice Project has developed employee engagement and leadership surveys specifically for the education sector.

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