

Leadership and listening: the transformation of School X

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Leadership is a vague concept that engenders a surprisingly precise mental image. When we think 'leadership' we think of more or less ideal 'types': Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Churchill, Nelson Mandela – individuals with substantial personal charisma. In the leadership literature charisma is closely associated with theories of transformational leadership, but transformation is possible without charisma. As an organisational psychologist I had the privilege of witnessing a dramatic revival of a large urban high school, driven by a man who neither looked nor sounded like Richard Branson. It was a case I conducted along with research assistant Georgina Cohen as part of a study lead by professors Paul Gollan and Adrian Wilkinson, and funded by the Australian Research Council and industry partner Voice Project. This, briefly, is the story of School X, a school where, in the words of one of the principals was characterised by "blue lights and sirens, and [students] getting carted off". School X hit the national news more than once for all the wrong reasons, but its successful transformation has barely touched the media.

School X now looks like an institution that could be transplanted into the leafier suburbs of a state capital, with nicely maintained gardens, and uniformed students wandering around surprisingly quietly behind the school fence. But on the other side of the fence, this is far from a leafy suburb. The sun blazes down on bitumen strips where the usual suspects in the fast food game – McDonald's, KFC, Pizza Hut and Subway pull in dozens of school students for breakfast, because there is nothing to be had at home. Forty per cent of the students speak a language other than English away from school, unemployment is high, and community crime rates are well above the state average. Seven years ago, before the revolution, trouble beyond the school borders spilled over before the revolution at School X, not one student in the 2000-strong student body, managed to land in the top three of the tertiary entrance scores, partly because whatever education was being delivered in the school classrooms, the students were not there to receive it:

"You know when I first arrived here six years ago, I'd drive past the park and there would be 50 students there, in the park, at any given lesson," the school principal told me. "I defy you now to find any around the place, there is just none."



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The data collected by the school back his contention. Well into the revolution, in the year before we arrived, retention was continuing to rise, from 82% up to 90% (the story began with retention in the low 60s) and the parks were indeed empty. The school now annually delivers a handful of students with peak university entrance scores, and objectively measured student performance is over 20% up in the last five years.

So, what happened? The focus of the project

was on employee voice, and to coin a proverb, when a hunter goes seeking buffalo, it should not be surprising that they find buffalo. But before I get to that, the easy answer to "what happened?" is "the National Partnerships Scheme happened", with the school receiving \$800 a year per student on top of normal funding. But the money arrived along with a new principal, who like the classic transformational leader came with a vision, but by his own admission he arrived bruised from the experience of leading another 'challenging' school, where he was "a bit bang, whack, a bit gung ho..." The National Partnerships Scheme gave school principals unusual powers over their budget, but like other NP schools, the money had to be spent largely on human resources. The investments at School X went into the top and the bottom: a whole tranche of new second tier school leaders, along with more teachers' aides and specialised truancy officers.

Beyond new staff, the culture changes were enormous. The intensification of professional development was challenging, often encroaching on teachers' private time. Teachers were often asked to join more than one professional development group, including reading and discussion groups, more than once a week, with the principal leading the way. The doors of classrooms were literally thrown open, and teachers exposed to scrutiny to at least the same degree as they were offered support. The changes came with challenges. "People were so used to being left alone to whatever they wanted, to their own devices," said one of the senior managers. Some staff tried to resist, and others resigned, but the consistency of the measures being introduced inoculated the program to some degree against the resistance. So, the principal – who had come through several schools of hard knocks, cherry picking his way through some of the toughest schools in Queensland – practiced what he preached, meeting staff twice a year for intense two-hour performance management sessions designed to build careers and confidence, and literally opening his own door to complaints. It was not uncommon for a senior staff member to wait in the corridors to see the head, who was meeting with a Year 8 student to hear her concerns. The



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school offered a classical example of what HR experts call 'employee voice'.

As we spoke to staff, and students, and watched what was happening in the playgrounds and classrooms, we continued, seven years after the revolution, to see real signs of stress, signs of rebellion, but muted by a realisation that the revolution was real, and not just lip service. Seven years in the cycle of continuous improvement demanded of the leadership was clearly wearing: war footing can only be maintained so long.

But perhaps the most telling moment for me came when we asked staff some of the classic 'employee voice' questions, focusing on (for example) communications between management and the union, between the union and staff, and between management and staff. Not only was the union brought into the revolution, but such was the harmony between the union voice and the principal's voice, the union voice almost blended into the background. In classic management studies, it's rare to find that staff ignores the official union organ because management voice is so well trusted. But this was what we heard. "I figure if it's important enough, [the principal] will mention it", one teacher said.

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