

Random reflections on leadership

Dennis Sleigh



At the end of 2011, I closed the door of my office for the last time and walked away from a school after 46 years full-time involvement in education. It has not always been an easy experience, but it has never been boring. I have met some wonderful people, and I like to think that I have had a positive effect on at least some of my pupils and co-workers. If I had my life to live over, I would again hope to become a teacher, albeit a better one the second time around. Teaching is a privileged profession for anyone who wants to make a difference.

Of course, whether we do make a difference depends very much on the sort of leadership we experience on our journeys. There are brilliant leaders out there, and there are dreadful ones. There are some leaders whom, if I was running Meals on Wheels, I would be tempted not to feed; there are others whom we could justifiably list among the great men and women of this nation.

In the near future, I hope to work with more of these people – of both classes – and so I have been reflecting a little on what leadership means to me. These thoughts are not polished; they are eclectic, not original; and they are the basis on which I hope to spend some of my time in coming years.

An important feature of leadership

In real estate sales, the three secret ingredients are listed as 1) position 2) position and 3) position. In leadership, it would be equally valid to suggest that the three ingredients are 1) relationship 2) relationship 3) relationship. As I reflect on successful leaders that I have known, or about whom I have learned, I cannot help think that they were people who were driven in their zeal to relate.

It has been said that in selling houses, position is *not just a physical fact* – “The house I am selling is at the northern end of Beach Street” – but is above all about *perception*. If people see the position as something that will benefit them in some way, they are more likely to be attracted to it. Why do you think that serious realtors in the Gold Coast think nothing of spending bucket loads of dollars to impress potential clients from down south by flying them up and spoiling them over a two- or three-day period while gradually letting them see just what they will get for their investment?

Allied to perception, of course, are the *strategies* that the agent uses to bring about the gradual-release perception. The client doesn't get to see everything at once, but is drip-fed

so that the sense of wonder increases as more and more is revealed. The same ideas will work in leadership when we examine the concept of relations.

Just as the real estate mantra, with its emphasis on position, is a rich field for exploration, so is the concept of relationships in leadership. Before pursuing that thought, let me stress that this whole issue is not some cheap trick to deceive others. Selling houses is a practical service to the community, and leadership is the same. To lead others is not about dominating them, or forcing them to do your will – some infamous leaders notwithstanding – but instead it is about serving them. The service implied in Greenleaf's *servant leadership* was not a sham or a pretext; it was a genuine concern for the individual.

Robert Greenleaf had a holistic perspective of people, their activities and their community. He saw the need for service, not dominance, in order to bring about the optimum performance of all he met. He certainly understood the meaning of relationships, and recognised that leadership did not mean compliance with a series of pre-determined *leadership qualities*. His widely published thoughts have been further developed by others, and several books highlight the strategies needed to implement this style, such as compassionate collaboration, the need for foresight, and the exercise of moral leadership. Since his period of popularity, other paradigms have been brought forward, but relationships and service remains essential components of most leadership action, regardless of the additional perspectives offered by modern writers.

There are many precedents for a *servant leadership* style, including Christian (Jesus washing his disciples' feet) and Islamic teachings (the leader of the people is their servant). It is perhaps best summed up in the saying of Lao Tzu: *A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves.*

During almost 40 years as an educational leader, I have witnessed – and studied – many different leadership styles. I have been swept up by the usual enthusiasms – instructional leader, authentic leader, change leader and so on – and I hope I have been able to draw from each of them something that has been of value in my own leadership. Now, as I considering the mentoring of new leaders, I have to acknowledge that there were many lessons I missed, and some that I learned only imperfectly. However, that's how most of us operate. Teachers are bower birds, ready to pick and choose from the multitude of offerings that



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confront us in our daily work. How successfully we incorporate these new learnings will often depend on how well they were presented, how valid they were, and how attentive we were when we met them. As experienced teachers, we know only too well that not everything that is taught is learned, and if we have any self-awareness at all, we will know that we are just as prone as our students to selective learning.

The value of academic study

This brings me to another question that merits serious consideration in my new role as a guide for leaders: to what extent do academic studies enhance our eventual performance in running schools? It is not a new question, of course, and I remember hearing it from my lecturers at various stages of my own career. I have been inclined to take a bet both ways – gathering academic qualifications but keeping an eye on the practical lessons that might not be so obvious in lecture halls. I am not sure which approach is the most useful but I suspect that the answer lies, as in most issues, somewhere near the middle – a combination of academic theory and work-based practice.

I am sure that we have all met teachers with a string of qualifications but very little skill as teachers; we have also met people with the most basic of qualifications but a natural and enriching ability to teach others. The same holds true about leadership.

When I talk to the people with whom I will be working, I will try to remember the sound educational theories expounded by the masters at whose feet I sat, but I will mix these theories with the solid practice that I learned from wily bosses, ambitious executives, and harassed teachers. I hope I will also remember that leadership is not such a precious orchid that it grows only in the rarefied atmosphere of school rooms; I have also learned a lot about both leadership and management from watching people in other professions.

Leadership or management

The previous sentence is a contrived entree into a discussion about the distinction between leadership and management. We've all heard endless discussions about the common features and the differences between the two, but a good starting point is that leadership is doing the right thing while management is doing the thing right. One is a theoretical construct, while the other is eminently practical.

A leader who cannot manage is as big a liability as a manager who cannot lead. One takes his followers into a swamp while the other takes them nowhere. A badly managed community might make some exciting progress for a time, but when the resources run dry, so do the people in the community; a poorly led community simply wanders around in circles, never able to make use of the facilities that they have been given.

Some people might enter the principalship with the idea that they are going to fill their days as educational leaders until retirement, but they are sadly mistaken. They soon learn that attestation documents, annual reports, policy documents, staffing allocations and compliance issues take up far more time than they thought. Getting up and leading, in the way they might perhaps have envisaged, will be far less frequent. Perhaps this is why some principals become so disillusioned, suffering from acute clerical haemorrhoids – a.k.a. massive piles of paper.

This cynical statement ought not be read as a suggestion that there is anything wrong with management. If a school is going to function effectively, it will require a considerable amount of sound management – and much of this will come from the principal. However, at a time when principals are challenged to be educational leaders, ethical leaders, community leaders, charismatic leaders and, in some schools at least, religious leaders, it comes as a shock to realise how little time is left in a week to devote to such noble callings.

The importance of perception

I suggested earlier about the fact that relationships, like position, involved perception and strategies. The same is clearly true about leadership. I have witnessed projects where there was a strong perception of potential progress and success, only to see these projects dwindle as observers noted the lack of strategies to move the ideas forward.

The saying “You don't sell the steak; you sell the sizzle” actually says something about the perception involved in leadership. People will follow a leader for many reasons, and one of these is because they think the leader will take them somewhere better than they are currently situated. If you have been called on to lead a school away for crisis into calm, you must find some way to convince your followers that the calmness you offer is actually attractive.

We have probably all seen charismatic leaders, even if only on television. Names such as Nelson Mandela, Steve Jobs, Margaret Thatcher, Princess Diana, Martin Luther King and Mary Robinson all come to mind. They are people who had a particular quality – some call it charm, but not all of those named would be seen as charming – and they were clearly perceived by their admirers as great leaders. However, it is also clear that they had *strategies* to bring about change.

This combination of charisma (the perception that they were leaders) and strategies (ideas that would enable them to exercise their leadership productively) meant that they were able to do great things. They could relate to people and the people found them worthwhile. Any leader needs this same combination, and the more generously endowed they are, the more obvious is their leadership ability.

What do I want in leaders?

I have to say that I am not wedded to any single leadership theory – too many wise people have written at length about so many different theories that it would be silly to ignore them – yet I certainly carry a torch for relationships, as a key component of leadership progress. I also know enough from personal experience that different strokes suit different folks. A very wise District Inspector, Jim Devlin, told me years ago that any reading scheme will work if the teacher does. I think the same is probably true of leadership schemes. Leaders try to achieve goals – stated or otherwise – and if their program delivers results, I will be happy to watch that leader at work. I am looking forward to a very instructive time of my life. **ET**



Dennis Sleight retired as a school principal at the end of 2011.

He is co-author of *Australian Teachers and the Law*