Leadership Complacency

Over time, leadership complacency can develop and reach a point where the principal begins to follow more than lead. This behavioural shift, if not a deliberate action, can lead to a school leader feeling vulnerable as they become more comfortable taking a back seat. School leaders need to be aware of the pitfalls of leadership complacency, ensuring that structures or processes are established to foresee the inevitable improvement lag that, over time, will ensue.

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When complacency sets in achievement suffers.

The enthusiasm and drive that fuels improvement and growth varies in intensity in schools and organisations according to human contextual issues, situational factors, and time. We believe that every change has a life cycle that usually follows a familiar pattern; creation, birth, infancy, maturation, decline, and death (and sometimes resurrection). Clearly, the time lapse between creation and death will vary, and we need to take into account traumatic events which can impact on the normal sequencing. In this paper we examine the neglected, and overlooked concept of Leadership Complacency that can lead to a school's decline, even in the most fortuitous circumstances. Over time, if leaders are not prepared to constantly review, and to disrupt organisational thinking regarding the way that things are done, then they risk overseeing a school that slips into decline, regardless of how good it has been. The Cambridge dictionary notes that complacency is:

'a feeling of calm satisfaction with your own abilities or situation that prevents you from trying harder.'

Regardless of the timelines, complacency lurks in the shadows of the leadership domain, feeding off a lack of perceptual awareness and waning motivation levels.

Leadership is hard work. Leaders simply cannot take a Hawaiian holiday from organisational leadership whenever it

suits them. It is the leader's personal input, and even charisma, that helps drive and maintain the identified change agenda. Furthermore, they play a critical role in establishing structures that sustain it, including the application of distributed leadership. However, over time, leadership complacency can develop and reach a point where the principal begins to follow more than lead. This behavioural shift, if not a deliberate action, can lead to a school leader feeling vulnerable as they become more comfortable taking a back seat. School leaders need to be aware of the pitfalls of leadership complacency, ensuring that structures or processes are established to foresee the inevitable improvement lag that, over time, will ensue.

Complacency can fog a school leader's thinking, meaning it is more likely for them to miss a potential window of opportunistic change to grow their school, their staff, and their leadership team. Glenn Ilopis (2014) identified five warning signs that signal the onset of leadership complacency:

- Fear settles in
- Attention to detail fades
- Tension unknowingly begins to mount
- Reactive thinking
- You stop leading

These warning signs are not sequential and may appear in any order. Singularly, while not fatal to a school sustaining an improvement agenda, if ignored then a snowballing effect begins that accelerates the process of decline. At that point a greater effort is required to climb from the chasm the leader finds themself in.

Organisational Life Cycles and the Principal's Role
All organisational change has a shelf-life, and the leaders' roles vary in the complex algorithms of inputs and resultant actions. Remembering, that as the school's context changes so too should the role the leader plays in promoting and driving the change. In the literature on organisational change, the metaphor of the human life cycle is often employed to portray the energy of change conception to its gradual demise over time. In schools, cynical teachers see change as cyclic. We have all heard teachers say, "I am not doing that, I will wait until collaborative learning reappears as a new discovery in 10 years' time."

Also, it is important to note that some school administrators are good managers, but not good leaders. Selection panels often seek out good managers because they like to play safe, something that sits within the concept of Survivorship Bias and the notion of 'ducks pick ducks' (MacNeill & Boyd, 2020). The good managers maintain the status quo, and implement directions that that support the systemic imperatives of the times. While the real innovative excitement comes from school leaders who understand the strategic 'big picture' and move school staff and students onto the leading edge of the waves of change. More importantly, in these school contexts, everyone knows that they are on the winning team and like the geese flying in formation, willingly and not surprisingly, follow the leader. The problem for the managers, rather than leaders, is they stick with the 'same old, same old' and processes become the dreary order of the day regardless of the shifting contextual sands of the school. When leaders become complacent, they can very quickly fall into a management paradigm and, in a worst-case scenario, fall to the back of the flying formation.

Pedagogic Obsolescence and Role Discontinuity
With the advent of the concept of instructional leadership, school principals were expected to defibrillate the pedagogic practices in their schools after a period of neglect. MacNeill and Cavanagh (2007) observed Pedagogic Obsolescence in the principalship with the implementation of New Public Management (NPM) which:

'... changed the way that governments provide public services, and consequently the work expectations of principals changed at the same time. Loder and Spillane (2005) referred to this growing dissonance between the principals' pedagogic and administrative leadership expectations as role discontinuity, which has been a neglected

issue for those who study school leadership.'

In our own schools, we have found that it is important to keep parts of the leadership team actively engaged at some level teaching in classrooms. This act gave them credibility with the teachers, and a meaningful catalytic role in pedagogic leadership. For example:

- A non-teaching administrator will say to staff, "We need this new teaching process done in this way." But staff are left wondering if the "new way" will work in our school context.
- The teaching-administrator can say, "I tried this in my maths class last week, and it worked. However, the IEP students needed a bit more specialised tuition."

Which dialogue, from these two examples, pulls the most credibility with teaching staff? Assuming you identified example (b) this dialogue is also suggestive of the teaching administrator functioning as the litmus paper of the change process, which is a way in which the principal can keep a finger on the pedagogic pulse.

Most of the literature on instructional or pedagogic leadership avoids this important point but we reiterate the need to demonstrate our craft skills to retain credibility. We also suggest that it is through this action that a school leader can, in a small way, reduce the chasm of complacency.

Leadership Complacency

There is very little literature on leadership complacence, and yet we have all seen this phenomenon at work in organisations and schools. While it is now a bit dated, Charles Handy's Sigmoid Curve (Hipkins & Cowie, 2016) still serves an important heuristic role when examining leadership complacency. Typically, the sigmoid curve records a growth and decline cycle that fits businesses, organisations, schools, personal growth, and even relationships. The danger period for complacency occurs when the organisation's growth plateaus and then starts to decline.

Figure 1 Charles Handy's Sigmoid Curve of Growth and Decline

Clearly, the levels of complacency hasten the decline cycle in every school and organisation. What we are advocating however, is that if school leaders are aware of the concept, they can take steps to avoid it. Heraclitus is credited with the saying "no man ever steps in the same river twice. For it's not the same river and he's not the same man." In our paper Re-examining management by walking around (MacNeill & Boyd, 2006) we articulated the action of a school's principal as he/she moved through the school

'...speaking to teachers in their classrooms and greeting students, many by name. Through discussions with students, he gained a better understanding of the effects that the learning programs were having on them. At the same time, discussions with teachers about their pedagogy gave him a better sense of the teachers' understanding of new pedagogic practices aimed at developing a sense of empowerment in both teachers and students'

This action, of 'stepping into the river' enables the principal to understand the river as it changes. In the case of leadership complacency, one of the first things that principals do is that they stop stepping into the river. In doing this, the critical connection between what they believe is happening in the school and what is actually happening in the school is severed.

An astute leader acknowledges that change is constant. As staff come and go, so too does the organisational knowledge base that those who leave hold. In schools where this fact is not so much ignored but not considered in terms of ensuring everyone remains on the same track, can result in programs that were well understood in both the way they were delivered and why they were being used, being lost. Astute leaders will consider the development of a cyclic approach to professional development to minimise the influence this natural staff attrition has on student learning. In addition to this, these leaders recognise that student populations change, and so too

then should content and potentially delivery style. Ignoring these markers, is ignoring the attention to detail that Ilopis (2014) refers to.

It is interesting that complacency in schools can either be deliberately enacted or an unconscious act. We see the process of growing the next generation of school leaders as the use of deliberate complacency, a process of stepping back to enable another to grow. One of the authors is developing the school's future leadership team through a system of independent portfolios. This is founded on the belief everyone learns through real actions, through real success, or the real pain of failure. Deliberate complacency can be seen as an effective training strategy, providing safety nets are in place. On the other hand, unconscious complacency is the Mr Hyde of the two, and it happens when the small, incremental aspects of neglect often go unrecognised, and become difficult to remediate.

Case Study

'Complacency Primary School' had previously been identified as a turn-around-school. Significant work had been undertaken by the school's principal and the leadership team to establish a common instruction model that was applied in all classes from K–6. Processes were in place to support teacher development through coaching, mentoring and instructional rounds. Collective leader efficacy was assured through regular meetings with the leadership team ensuring consistent messages were provided to staff regardless of who was proving the information.

Over a seven-year period student achievement continued to improve, however there were also subtle changes in the school that were missed by the principal despite actively engaging in conversations with staff. Two of these changes were not subtle and fed into the notion of the best way to hide something is to put it in plain sight. These were

- A turnover of staff, and
- A relaxing of connections with leadership group

In ignoring, or missing these two aspects of the school's operations, the principal had begun to slip into a state of unconscious complacency. Leadership and management were left to others, a deliberate action in trying to grow leaders, however the messaging was not being audited. Adding fuel to the fire was the 65% turn-over of staff in that time. While new staff understood the what of the instructional methods, they were lacking in the why, the important underpinning philosophy of what was being done in the classrooms.

If we consider Charles Handy's Sigmoid Curve of Growth and Decline at this point, had the principal identified the plateauing that was occurring at this juncture, interventions could have been put in place to reduce the decline and reinvigorate the improvement cycle. This however did not occur, and the decline increased, resulting in a decline in student achievement.

In this case staff, while working in established teams, had begun to deviate from identified practices and tensions began to grow between long standing staff and new staff, as well as between the senior leadership team and staff. It is important to note that this was not a novice principal, this was an experienced leader who had worked hard to build a school where student achievement sat at the heart of everything that was done. What underpinned his demise in this case, was not that he had stopped stepping into the river, but rather that he had not realised that it was no longer the same river he was stepping into.

Like any good fairy tale, it is worth mentioning that eventually the principal realised what was occurring, took hold of the reins again, and returned to what he called Ground Zero in re-establishing the common messaging and structures that were required to realign the school's staff, practices, resourcing, and professional learning cycles. Not all examples of leadership complacency, however, have similar outcomes.

Conclusion

We hope that this article generates interest in the murky concept of complacency in our leadership practices. That at the very least, this promotes some level of reflective thinking from leaders and leadership teams which initiates levels of interventions before it is too late. This is where an independent significant other can play an important role in adjusting the school's direction before it is too late. Leadership like change needs one but takes two, and where complacency is a factor, this is vital.

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