CHAPTER

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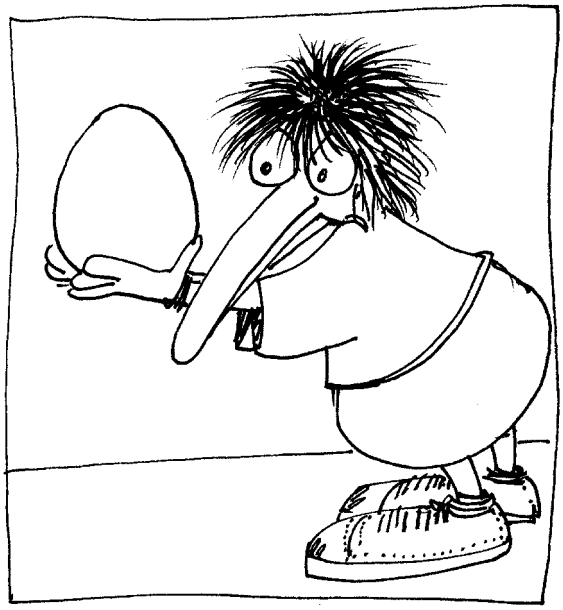

The concept and role of educational leadership

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The importance that the educational leader has in terms of the provision of effective learning opportunities is highlighted in this chapter; effective learning must be the number one focus and reason for leadership coaching. Many people think they are educational leaders but in actuality just hold a management or leadership position. This chapter endeavours to shed some light on the concept of educational leadership, and just who can exercise it. The qualities deemed important are set out and considered within the reality of a leader's work situation. The reasons why coaching is an important intervention in a leader's daily life, and how coaching can help leaders think about and respond to today's educational context are also explored.

Developing educational leadership

A transformative process

This book is not just about the process of leadership coaching but also about developing *educational leadership*—first in ourselves and then in others—through coaching leadership. Educational leadership encompasses the *informed actions that influence the continuous improvement of learning and teaching*—with an emphasis on "actions" and "learning and teaching." The primary focus is on the relationship between the two.

Caldwell (2003, p. 26) states that, "Educational leadership refers to a capacity to nurture a learning community." He goes on to say that a learning community is not necessarily a comfortable place in which to work, as there is a "hard edge to the concept" and the "stakes are high" if every student's learning needs are to be met. For Gunter (2001, p. *vii*), "Leadership is not an 'it' from which we can abstract behaviours and tasks, but is a relationship … highly political and is a struggle within practice, theory and research. Furthermore, leadership is not located in job descriptions but in the professionality of working for teaching and learning." The word *leadership*, as used in this book, signals the energy, impetus, and collective action needed for change and improvement to occur—the word itself denotes *transformative* practice. Educational leadership is not about the position one holds, but rather the actions taken to improve opportunities for learning.

Leadership for all

All members of an education community can therefore contribute to the leadership energy needed to achieve its vision and goals. This concept of leadership, as that which can be contributed to and constructed by many "leaders" in the institution (Lambert, 1998), is synergistic, in that it is developed by those who choose to take up leadership roles. Many teachers do not view themselves as "educational leaders", even though they guide and facilitate the growth of learning for large groups of students on a daily basis. Providing effectively for learning, and the knowledge management it entails, requires educational leadership!

Caldwell (2002, p. 831) stresses that "Knowledge management involves … developing a deep capacity … to be at the forefront of knowledge and skill

in learning and teaching and the support of learning and teaching… This is a systematic, continuous and purposeful approach that starts with knowing what people know, don't know and ought to know." Even those holding positions of responsibility do not always place sufficient emphasis on the educational leadership aspect of their role—knowing what people know, don't know, and ought to know. One of the most important roles for effective leaders, therefore, is developing leadership in others; encouraging them to take on responsibility for improving learning and achieving goals (Fullan, 2001). This is how leadership capacity is built. A "key notion in this definition of leadership is that leadership is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively" (Harris & Lambert, 2003, p. 17). The effective use of coaching practices for the development of such educational leadership practice is, of course, the focus of this book. It is for leaders in education who are committed to improving pedagogy and learning. By using coaching as part of their daily practice, leaders can promote continuous leadership development and improvement of practice and, from there, effective learning in their institutions.

An underlying premise here is that education institutions that establish coaching relationships are more likely to form democratic communities of learners and therefore a special type of education culture that focuses on the continual improvement of learning. These "coaching organisations" may thus be better suited for meeting the needs of students and leaders in this knowledge age, where flexibility, innovation, and ability to adapt to change, and take on new learning are essential.

The qualities of the educational leader

Many qualities but one goal

Educational leaders are leaders who, no matter at what level in the institution, focus on improving learning opportunities as their main function, *and* work to develop their own educational leadership capacity and that of their institution. This type of leader is wanted more than ever in education today. We need leaders who can work in a complex, ever-changing educational context, who are aware of the social and political influences on their work, and who can draw on this knowledge when working with others to create necessary changes to systems and practices.

Effective educational leadership requires much more than any individual leader can attempt to do alone, and so has the potential to be greater than the sum of the individual leaders in an institution. Coaching practices drive the development of a leadership culture that produces educational leaders able to contribute collectively to the sustained and ongoing improvement of their respective institutions (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinback, 1999).

Educational leaders are the people in educational institutions who:

- continually search for more effective ways of facilitating learning;
- are not content with the status quo, and will act *on* as often as they act *within* the system to redesign education;
- see the importance of being transformative and innovative and encourage considered risk taking from their colleagues;
- have a strong set of values and beliefs that focuses them firmly on social justice, so facilitating their critique of policies and practices within their educational communities;
- stand out (and up) from others as people who want to make a positive difference in the lives of others, and who still believe they can;
- are enthusiastic, energetic and believe that enhancing the learning opportunities of others is central to their work and that of others;
- lead by example and model the types of practices they believe are important in the education community; and
- have developed the ability to critically reflect and to seek opportunities to develop this skill with others.

Educational leaders constantly strive for the ideal of democratic communities, where all community members assume responsibility for learning. This process is distinguished, in part, by leaders critically reflecting on the role and effect of their educational leadership, particularly in terms of building learning communities for themselves, their colleagues, students, and local business and parent communities (Apple & Beane, 1995). They value diversity yet have a sense of shared purpose. While critical reflection and thinking can be developed to some extent through the institution's learning curriculum, these practices need to be modelled in the institution's *culture*. Democracy, too, needs to be learned through the day-to-day *experiences*. As Maxine Greene (1985, p. 3) has stated:

> … democracy is neither a possession nor a guaranteed achievement. It is forever in the making… For surely it has to do with the ways persons attend to one another, and interact with one another. It has to do with

> choices and alternatives, with…the capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise.

Coaching maximises the effect of these experiences by enhancing the learning gained from them.

Statesperson, connoisseur, and entrepreneur

Studies conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see, for example, Marshall & Duignan, 1987; Robertson, 1992) grouped the qualities of educational leaders into three areas: those of the statesperson, who lobbies for the education in their institution in the wider community; those of the connoisseur, who is learned about pedagogy and committed to lifelong learning; and those of the entrepreneur, who always looks for new ways of working more effectively and innovatively so as to facilitate continual improvement of the learning experiences offered.

Leaders who are *statespeople* focus on relationships, because they know their work is with and through other people. The learning relationship is one of the most important of all relationships within an education institution, and leaders fluent in coaching practices usually have had first-hand experience of developing effective learning relationships. Teachers talk of how they approach their teaching differently after the experience of being coached. They say they hear themselves using the skills of coaching with their students to facilitate their learning processes, rather than simply teaching content and telling students what to do.

As *connoisseurs*, educational leaders focus on pedagogy—their own as a leader and that of others in the institution. Conversant with current research practices, they work to develop continual improvement in their own teaching and that of colleagues. They use evidence-based leadership (Earl & Katz, 2002; Southworth, 2002) to encourage commitment among the people they work with. They also encourage them to take ownership of issues related to improving learning opportunities within the institution.

As *entrepreneurs*, educational leaders research their own work, and that of others, and gain outside perspectives and feedback to confront their thinking. They seek out new ideas, challenges, and opportunities to improve what they do. Inventors and innovators, they like coaching because it gets them beyond the usual façade of leadership to the "nitty-gritty" of their work. They focus on problem posing as well as problem solving.

Coaching and the present-day reality of leadership

Barriers to effective leadership

As early as the mid-1980s, Apple (1986) pointed to the increasing complexity of the role of the educational leader in modern society, a situation that has intensified rather than diminished over time. The world over, reforms to educational administration and national curricula have seen educational leaders endeavouring to negotiate multiple demands on their time and cope with being pulled in many different directions. As Robertson (1995) has observed, leaders often feel they are in reactive mode, responding within a context of ambiguity, paradox, and change and to a plethora of tasks characterised by brevity, complexity, and fragmentation. Daily, they have to make choices between conflicting options raised by various issues.

According to Marshall and Duignan (1987) and Robertson (1991b), the dilemmas causing the greatest conflict for leaders are between

- the administrative and educational leadership aspects of their role;
- being accessible and being efficient; and
- decreasing authority and increasing responsibility.

Many of those in positions of leadership feel the administrative demands of their daily work limit them from exercising their leadership role within learning, and learning is what they see as their most important focus (Robertson, 1999; Wylie, 1997). Wylie (1997) identifies funding and property (building maintenance) as the two major concerns facing leaders in self-managing schools, yet the institution's educational leader should have, as their main focus, the quality of provision of learning opportunities. One leader, a newly appointed principal who participated in the research informing the development of the model, voiced his frustration in this regard: "I've really wasted a year. I've looked more at the administration side rather than at the education in the school, and I haven't pushed that side enough. That's why I am a bit nervous that I've wasted this year."

Within self-managing institutions, it would seem imperative that educational leaders are available and accessible to their communities, consulting with them over the formulation and implementation of educational goals (within nationally prescribed managerial and curricular guidelines).

However, most leaders can achieve this facet of their work only by putting in very long hours, in their own time (Robertson, 1995). Often, self-responsibility and autonomy feel a sham as they struggle to cope with an increasing raft of centrally imposed policies, innovations, and practices, a situation at seeming variance with the devolution intent of educational reforms and a product of what Codd (1990) refers to as the centrally imposed managerialist ideology on the part of government. Indeed, some educational leaders liken their role to that of a "middle manager", implementing, at the behest of others, policies for which they feel no ownership (Robertson, 1995).

This ideology also negates the intention of education policies developed to celebrate and encourage the diverse nature of the communities that schools serve. Educational leaders work with wide-ranging and ever-changing educational communities, which reflect multiple values and beliefs. Conditions in these communities' educational institutions therefore are not linear. They do not allow for clear inputs and outputs, as in, say, factories producing baked beans. Educational leaders deal constantly with the many issues, decisions, changes, and concerns that reflect the communities they serve. The implementation of a potentially transformative policy, whether nationally or locally directed, can lead to divisiveness in the community, given the multiple values and beliefs that preside there (Robertson, 1995).

The importance of critical thinking

The coaching model provides a structure whereby leaders can deal with these pressures, because it allows them to think critically and regularly about the issues as *they* experience them, and then to adapt their practice accordingly. It helps them determine if their management practice is little more than a façade, if it merely encompasses activities or ways of talking with colleagues that give the impression the institution is being well managed and is highly effective, when it may not be, as the following leader articulated:

> They were waxing loud on this—'In my institution this and in my staff… that', and 'We do this', and 'We've got that', and 'I've got this' and 'I've got that'—and I used to think, 'Holy cat fish, how will I ever become as good as they are?' And then I discovered… what I call the 'whited sepulchre syndrome'… a biblical allegory. The sepulchre is a raised tomb which you whitewash every year in memory of the death. So, on the outside, everything is beautiful, but on the inside it is all corruption.

Coaching helps leaders develop special relationships with their professional colleagues, which, as a matter of course, significantly improve professional communication within and between institutions. In the conflicts occasioned by central imposition on the one hand, and localised autonomy on the other, and by the market-driven imperatives of competition and choice, such dialogue and collaboration between leaders of different institutions can only be advantageous in terms of rebuilding collaboration and maximising the strengths of each educational institution in a community. Leaders, moreover, can become more aware of the external influences on their work and, through this understanding and the collegiality that develops, find strategies to manage stress. They develop confidence through the coaching process, through affirmation of their work, through self-awareness and through recognition that the role of educational leadership is complex. The support that professional colleagues offer is also vital in helping leaders to bed in the changes to practice they make as an outcome of coaching and to strive for ongoing reflection about, and improvement of, their practice.

"You tend now to really look. You really are looking for some of the things that are occurring and, when you are doing that, you are thinking to yourself all the time, 'Would I do this?'"

The need for more relevant professional development

For many leaders, attendance at their association's annual conference, the monthly meeting of the regional association or executive group, and perhaps a professional development seminar or workshop slotted in here and there when a brochure catches their attention, typifies their professional development activities (Robertson, 1991a, 1995; Stewart & Prebble, 1993; Wylie, 1994). Leaders state that they seldom, if ever, have to confront their own leadership on such occasions, and so have no impetus to change their practice when back on site. A disruption, an intervention, is often needed before change takes place. Leaders who assume the role of professional coaching partner provide this challenge for one another, as does the facilitator of the coaching process. So, too, do the members of the institution's learning community or their local network or consortium of institutions, established to support the innovation being implemented.

In similar vein, leaders rarely have opportunity to discuss educational leadership with one another or *observe* each other in practice. The term

"reflective practitioner" is often more rhetoric than actuality in leaders' lives unless time is structured for the process. Coaching provides an ongoing venue wherein leaders can talk about and observe one another in action in the workplace, be it a departmental meeting, a community or business meeting, a meeting of the executive team, or time spent working on students' issues or with the board of trustees.

"I think you pick up a freshness, and you go back thinking, 'Oh, gee, neat, I could do something. I've seen this, or maybe I shouldn't have handled that that way.'"

Over the years of my research, many people have asked what competencies, standards and/or attributes of leadership I have been intent on developing through the coaching model, and my answer has always been, "This is not a recipe approach. The model develops critically reflective leaders committed to the continual improvement of their leadership practice." The coaching model approach is the antithesis of many current leadership development trends, which Gronn (2003, p. 7) describes as "production of leaders by design or the idea of designer-leadership." Here, sets of standards or competencies, which are often culture-, context-, and gender-neutral, determine the quality or readiness of the practitioner for management positions. This preoccupation with standards and related competencies is integral to the aforementioned managerial ideology of the New Right exercised in many countries around the world, and it is at variance with an approach to leadership development researched first in Australia and then extended to New Zealand (Wildy, Louden, & Robertson, 2000) that highlights the importance of context in leadership development and practice.

I am also asked at conferences what motivated the leaders who participated in my research to take on coaching partnerships. I often answer by referring to the old adage, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink." The answer revolves around not only how to get leaders *to* the water—which job conditions often prevent them from doing—but *how* to get them to drink once they are there. (I cover this "how to" aspect in depth in the next chapter.)

Educational leadership coaching provides an answer to these questions. Educational leaders who keep education at the centre of their work by critically reflecting on their practice are aware of the influence of managerialism on their work. They are consequently able to hold fast to their educational leadership role, and so do not become mere managers (Robertson, 1999). I believe that, without this perspective, Goodlad's words,

written over 25 years ago in the USA, could become a portent for leaders in education across the world.

> We corrupted the educational process through over cultivation of the system. And now as we reflect on all this—and reflection is a luxury in which we too little indulge—we become dimly aware of something missing. That something is what motivated most of us to become teachers or educators in the first place … to put education at the centre again, [to] want to become educational leaders again, not mere managers. (Goodlad, 1978, p. 324)

I also fear that unless this perspective comes to pervade professional development in the near future, Goodlad's words could be the lament of educational leaders 25 years hence.

> We have yielded to the pressures and temptations of becoming experts in fiscal and personnel management, public relations, collective bargaining, and the political process. Few of us are trained or experienced in any of these, even though we must take responsibility for them. What we are trained and experienced in, most of us, is education—its traditional and emerging goals, its historical roots, alternatives, curriculum, counselling, instruction. (Goodlad, 1978, p. 331)

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- Effective educational leadership can be developed through professional coaching.
- Coaching can be a reciprocal practice between peers and/or involve a learning community.
- Important qualities of an educational leader are the statespersonship of developing relations, the connoisseurship of education, and the entrepreneurship necessary to see opportunities for innovation.
- The work of an educational leader is complex and varied.
- Coaching, as professional development, acknowledges the reality of leaders' work.
- Support and challenge are essential in leaders' professional development. Coaching offers this.
- Coaching allows leaders to critically reflect on and respond to the realities of today's educational context.