Leading a Learning Community

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Leading a Learning Community

Julia Atkin

It seems that wherever you turn in the literature on global change there are calls for the development of learning communities and new forms of leadership. What's the basis for those calls? What's the nature of the demand? What does it mean for leaders of schools?

The themes developed in John Naisbitt's Megatrends, Alvin Toffler's Future Shock and The Third Wave, and Barry Jone's Sleeper's Wake are no longer news to most people as we increasingly witness the world transforming itself into a global community. Depending on where you are, your knowledge of aspects of the transformation occurring in the world may be more from observation than from direct experience. If you live in Bourke you will no doubt be starting to experience some of the benefits and potential of the electronic superhighway and perhaps the rise of the Pacific Rim countries is having an effect on your rural industries. However, the breakdown of national boundaries in Europe will be viewed as a distant phenomenon. If you live in rural Tasmania, multiculturalism and a pluralist society seem far removed. Not so if Rooty Hill or Hurstville is your home. In these communities it’s likely that you will be mixing with as many as thirty different nationalities within one school. Regardless of where you live, you are no doubt feeling the effects of unemployment as the nature and availability of jobs change. In some communities you will be experiencing the effects of reduced demand for unskilled labour while in other communities you may well be experiencing the unemployment which ensues from a flattening of management structures in organisations, and which inevitably leaves some middle managers unemployed.

Wherever we are, our own experience of the trends of global transformation tend to be piecemeal and it's hard to grasp the full effect of the waves of change. Whether the authors who chart and predict global change are accurate in their timing or detail seems immaterial.

The theme emerges and re-emerges clearly enough that students in primary school today can look to a future considerably different from what we are experiencing now - a future vastly different from what we in our mid thirties, forties or fifties experienced as children.

Most of us spent our formative years in a post war era in which, for the adults who patterned our world, regaining control and creating order out of chaos were paramount. What leadership style was modelled to us in those years? How strongly have our expectations of leaders and expectations of self as leader been formed and shaped by a leadership style belonging to a different era?

Leadership shaped for machines and war

As a result of the industrial revolution management structures developed in response to the needs of mass production. They developed into large specialised hierarchies - the top down pyramid model (Figure 1) in which leadership was seen to be about directing and controlling - in which quality control was about uniformity and conformity. In the post war world of our childhood, the need to re-establish order and regain stability and predictability meant that this model of leadership was welcomed and was dominant in our societal structures.
What would be the characteristics and typical behaviours of a leader who led in this fashion? Take a moment to reflect on how such a leader would behave/act?

![Diagram of Leadership for direction and control]

Figure 1   Leadership for direction and control

Would they not always have the answers - that’s their role. Not to have the answers would mean a breakdown in their authority. Would they not also be inflexible as flexibility would be seen to be weak and indeterminate. They would make all of the decisions and see that they were carried out by giving orders. They would check up on others constantly to see if their orders had been carried out correctly as it’s the leader’s job to control and direct.

Most of us who grew up in the forties, fifties and sixties have as role models, leaders who acted in this way. Leadership was bossing. Many of us carry with us expectations of leaders, and expectations of self as leader, modelled on this form of leadership. The models of leaders with whom we grew up form a very powerful mind set for shaping our expectations of what a leader should or shouldn’t be and what a follower should or shouldn’t do. Once in a position of leadership people often find it difficult to act any way other than what they think is expected of them even if it doesn’t ‘feel’ or ‘think right’ intuitively. There is a tendency for people to dress the way they perceive others expect leaders to dress, there is a tendency to mouth the language and express the attitudes they think is expected of them and so on. This is not always a conscious decision. The patterning of expectations which occurs in the years of our childhood and youth exerts an amazingly powerful force. Those of you who have struggled with the changes in gender roles over the past fifteen to twenty years will know this only too well.

Experiences of effective leadership.

On the one hand we have models of leadership which we experienced in our youth which have influenced and patterned our expectations. On the other hand we have our own experiences of effective leadership as we grew from budding professionals to principals. Take a moment to reflect on a person or persons, who acted as an effective leader for you as you have developed in the profession.

In my discussions with many teachers and principals, the characteristics of an effective leader which emerge from such reflections include: effective communicator; gave ownership and sense of partnership; honoured contributions of all; built a sense of ‘team’; was trusting; listened with respect and spoke with respect; conveyed expectation; provided moral and professional support but was not afraid to question or make it known when performance was less than could reasonably be expected; provided sounding board; created a climate which encouraged ‘having a go’ and taking risks combined with reflection and evaluation for
the purpose of learning from mistakes; built a culture of freedom with responsibility, and
had vision and strong commitment.

This model of leadership could well be labelled 'power with' and it is in stark contrast with
leadership for war and machines which could suitably be labelled 'power over'.

**What form of leadership is appropriate for education in a time of rapid
technological and social change?**

Firstly, what form of leadership is appropriate for education? Sometimes it might seem like
'war' but education is a service industry. As a service industry we rely on individuals
providing services to other individual human beings. Humans are far from being uniform or
homogeneous and even further from being predictable. Professionals providing the labour in
service industries need to be far more than cogs in a machine, far more than puppets on a
string. The very thing they need to be is responsive to other humans and varying situations.

In education we have system level leadership, leadership within schools and leadership
within classrooms. Let's look first at system level leadership. In a pyramidal, hierarchical
leadership structure, the 'eye' at the top of the pyramid is often, if not usually, blind to the
realities of the workplace and hence is prone to make demands which are 'unrealistic or
unsuitable. The people at the bottom pretend to carry out the orders - the words are
spoken, the paperwork is completed, the policies are written. Those checking for the leader
that the orders have been carried out think it all 'looks good' and in turn the words are
spoken, the paperwork is done the performance indicators appear to be met and so we
revolve on a merry-go-round of policies and words paying lip-service to the intended
improvement, but within the walls of the classroom, little changes as a result.

Even when a change mandated from the top is philosophically and pedagogically sound the
implementation process is often poorly planned, under-resourced (it would be interesting to
do a comparison of the funds allocated to develop policy with the funds allocated to
implement policy) and implemented in a fashion which totally disregards all the findings
from research on school improvement and change\(^1\). Confusion, frustration and cynicism are
the actual outcomes.

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\text{The dilemma arises it seems because the 'eye' at the top of the pyramid is always politically responsive but rarely philosophically and professionally responsible.}
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Within the education system there are huge differences between the environment of one
school and that of other schools. Any attempt to dictate from the centre the detail of what
should be happening in individual schools will not succeed. Not only are there important
technical differences between schools such as their size, location and architecture, there are
also social differences in terms of what the community values, how ready it is to accept the
need for change and how willing, or able, it is to share in the educational enterprise. A
parallel analogy, which captures the futility and inadvisability of the centre dictating
particular practices to be adhered to in individual schools, would be the Department of
Agriculture informing all wheat farmers in Australia of the date on which they were to
harvest their crop and the method and equipment they were to use to do so. Not only does it
not make sense for someone without local knowledge of ripeness, moisture content and
harvesting conditions to make a decision, reflect for a moment on the message it would

\(^1\) See for example the extensive research and writings of Michael Fullan.
convey to farmers concerning their professional capacity to make a judgement. These criticisms of the top down management model with leader as director/controller have been directed at the system in general. The criticisms apply equally to within school, and within classroom, leadership which is of this nature.

What form of leadership is appropriate in a time of rapid change outside the system?
Sometimes the pace of change experienced in schools has more to do with the constant stream of mandated change than it does to the effects of global change.

Figure 2  Pressures on schools for change

The mandated changes are an attempt to deal with external changes but the management and leadership styles used to deal with the change are inappropriate and ineffectual. To be responsive to rapid external change the system needs to be made up of interdependent learning communities - communities which hold in common a set of core values and beliefs and whose members work vigorously to translate those core values into principles and practices congruent with the beliefs - Figure 3. The point of reference is always how does our current practice help us achieve what we value; how will a suggested practice help us achieve what we value and believe? And, given where we are now, what do we need to do to improve our practice so that it more truly reflects our values and beliefs?

Figure 3  The relationship between core values and beliefs and practices

It is impossible for any one person to have all the answers - thus a learning community values and encourages the contributions of all its members. The solutions to complex
problems are not black or white. Rather than expecting that a definitive answer or solution be found, problem solving is dynamic, fluid and flexible. The answers do not lie in 'either-or', rather they can be found in 'both-and'. The key to releasing the creative energies of others is by giving them 'ownership'. This necessitates a team approach. Such learning communities have the capacity to adapt, to engage in continual evaluation and to work towards creating their own future. This calls for a very different form of leadership both within the school and within the system. What it demands is a style of leadership that I described above as 'power with'. It is the style of leadership that, when asked, people say is effective leadership. It is a style of leadership which needs to be modelled consistently at every level of the system. It is a style of leadership which Malcolm Knowles calls creative leadership:

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\text{It gradually came to me that the highest function of leadership is releasing the energy of the people in the system and managing the processes for giving that energy direction toward mutually beneficial goals.}
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\text{Perhaps a better way of saying this is that creative leadership is that form of leadership which releases the creative energy of the people being led.}
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(Knowles 1983 p.183)

Such a notion of leadership, whether it be as teacher or other leader, holds essentially positive assumptions about human nature. The controlling and rule by threat notion of leadership and teaching which many of us experienced at school holds essentially negative assumptions about human nature. There is no doubt that there is a side to human nature which will get away with as little as possible. But it is also true that our greatest source of pride in self generally comes from achievements inspired from within and encouraged and supported by others who expect and demand that we give our best.

Increasingly within classrooms as teachers move from being "the sage on the stage" to the "guide at the side" they are modelling for students 'power with' leadership. However, despite attempts at devolution, the system still largely works in a 'power over' model. What makes matters worse is that there is a tendency for the system to focus on mandating changed practices rather than to focus on supporting school communities in defining and working towards what they value and believe. The impact of a constant stream of mandated changes in schools feels like the relentless pounding of a battering ram - Figure 4.

![Figure 4 The battering ram effect of mandated change](attachment:image)

My experience working in schools for the past twelve years as a facilitator of school improvement programs, is that many people in schools feel powerless and deeply cynical in
response. In schools where there is a sense of hope, a sense of forward movement, a sense of ‘learning community’, the style of leadership strongly evident is ‘power with’.

To illustrate my point re the misguided focus on changed practice . . . in recent years there has been a strong push for schools to set up school councils. The focus has been on a particular practice. The core belief is that community involvement and participation in schools leads to school improvement and ultimately improved learning for children. I have no doubt that the research backs up elements of this belief. Now if a school defines as a core value community participation in guiding and directing school development, on principle the school should work towards involving the school community. If the school is in Hunters Hill, or an equivalent area in which the community speaks English and does not feel overwhelmed or alienated from the school, a school council may well be the appropriate practice. However, if the school is in Hurstville or Wiley Park and many of the parents do not speak English, or if it is in Bourke where many of the Koori parents feel distant, if not alienated, from schools in general, to attempt to set up a school council immediately would be quite inappropriate. In keeping with the core value of community participation it might mean that in Hurstville or Wiley Park the starting point is that the school engages in a variety of activities, in different languages, to build an understanding of what the school is attempting to do for their children and to invite comment and discussion. In Bourke the starting point might be that the Principal works to get to know and build a relationship with the Koori community and is highly visible in the community, keeping in touch with the community and ensuring that the children know that the school values them being at school. Judgement of the operation of the schools should not be on the particular practice, rather it should be on how they are working towards achieving what they value.

Honouring the contributions of all

Essential to the success of a leadership style which models ‘power with’ is the capacity to truly honour the contributions of each and every member of the team. Far from one person having all the answers, aspects of the answer lie in each one of us. The first step in honouring the contributions of others is to know and understand oneself and to understand and appreciate the diversity of responses of others.

There are many models which describe the diversity of peoples’ responses to the world. One of these models is Ned Herrmann’s model of thinking style preferences. There are several attractive features of Ned Herrmann’s model. Firstly, it does not put people in boxes - people are not labelled as one of four categories - thinking styles are described as a degree of preference in each of four thinking modes. Also, the model is clearly linked to brain physiology and a general model of brain processing. The development of this model has been written about extensively (Herrmann, 1989; Atkin, 1994) so I do not intend to re-develop it here. Rather I wish to step off into the implications of the model for knowing your own response to the world and for appreciating differing ways of responding to the world. According to our thinking style preferences, each of us has a tendency to view various aspects of the whole. The complete view lies in a combination of responses from different thinking style preferences, not in a single view.

Ned Herrmann's Whole Brain Model
Ned Herrmann's whole brain model - Figure 5, describes four main processing modes. In one dimension there is the contrasting styles of the ordered, linear sequential processing of left hemisphere processing contrasted with the holistic, intuitive synthesising processing of the right hemisphere. These are not mutually exclusive. In another dimension processing of the cerebral cortex, the centre of abstract thinking - generalising, analysing, conceptualising, synthesising - is contrasted with processing of the limbic system, the centre for processing our emotions and sensory information. Again these modes of processing are not mutually exclusive.
We have the capacity to draw on all of these thinking modes. And at times may draw more extensively on some modes over the others as the situation demands it. Within our capacity to draw on all of the modes, however, we each tend to have a preferred thinking style which derives from the weighting we tend to give to each of the modes. Your thinking style does not correspond to one of the four quadrants, rather it corresponds to the degree of preference you show towards each mode of processing.

A quadrant thinking is ordered thinking; it is realistic, analytical, focussed on the facts and proof - it knows the bottom line, judges the worth of an idea. B quadrant thinking is focussed on planned, ordered doing - everything in its place and a place for everything, it questions how an idea could be translated into practice with minimal disturbance to order. C quadrant thinking focuses on the emotional, interpersonal response, - how do I feel about the idea, how will people work together harmoniously to achieve it together? The holistic, imaginative thinking of D quadrant focuses on the 'big picture' and the design - is it a good design, could this be done another way? As people have their own pattern of preference for the use of each mode, people exhibit behaviours and responses from a combination and blend of these four different ways of knowing. Table 1 illustrates the thinking style profiles of five different people and outlines their characteristics, the way they are likely to respond to change, and the strengths they bring to a community. Taken singly each style leaves something to be desired - taken together and working as a team the styles have the capacity to achieve something far greater than the sum of the parts. This synergy will only be realised if each understands, tolerates and values the styles of each of the others.

As you read through each of the thinking styles outlined, and you think about the nature of left and right mode processing it will no doubt be clear to you that the ‘power over’ leadership philosophy and style, which is concerned with order and control, reflects an overall left mode preference. The ‘power with’ leadership philosophy recognises that each view of the world has something to contribute. It honours imagination, flexibility, and ownership while simultaneously honouring realism, planning, and order. It is not 'either-or' - it is 'both-and'. The challenge is in walking the tightrope!
### Characteristics

- order/detail before people
- efficiency focus
- rule setter, follower
- industrious
- perfectionist
- unimaginative

### Response to change

- we've always done it this way
- where's the proof?
- show me how
- at what cost?
- doesn't delegate
- attempts to control

### Strengths

- realistic
- thorough
- gets the job done
- works to deadlines
- planning
- documents
- refines/follows up

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#### Person 1

- sees big picture & reality
- needs to develop frameworks/models
- balanced viewpoint
- lacks attention to detail

#### Person 2

- practical
- organised but flexible
- supports others
- balanced viewpoint

#### Person 3

- imaginative
- risk taker
- flexible
- no attention to detail
- fun loving

#### Person 4

- imaginative
- risk taker
- flexible
- no attention to detail
- fun loving

#### Person 5

- expresses emotions
- flexible
- responsive
- no attention to detail
- avoids conflict

### Table 1  Different thinking styles - characteristics, response to change, strengths
Escaping the patterns of the past - deliberately developing a leadership style

The patterns of expectation many of us had formed for us by the direct and control leadership styles of the post war years of our youth exert a gravity like force on our behaviours and mode of operating. How do you escape it? How do you pay more than lip service to a style of leadership which releases the creative energies of others?

Firstly, acknowledge the passage of the old order. Define your values and beliefs and redefine yourself in terms of the new order. Envision the sort of leader you wish to be and in doing so be careful to realise that your strongest preference will be to act out your thinking style. Your thinking style is only one of many valid and valuable ways of responding to the world, so consider how it can be enriched and expanded by the contributions of others. Invite others to comment on the effectiveness of your current style - perhaps by forming a list of characteristics you wish to exhibit in leadership and inviting those you lead to indicate the degree to which you are effectively operating/displaying each characteristic. Reflect carefully on the responses and plan, in small steps, how you can act to improve in the dimensions which warrant it. As hard or threatening as some of you might find that to do, a learning community starts with the leader as learner. And, having defined your beliefs and values, above all have the courage to stand up for them even when the prevailing winds are blowing in a different direction.

Bibliography