Chapter 8
School Leaders and Learning Cultures in School: The Case for Intelligent Leadership

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Introduction

Over the last decade, educators have been calling for 'ways of seeing' meaning, rather than just rote memorisation of content knowledge. Thinking within a practice is embedded in the routines, interactions, and problems which contextualise a given profession. Knowledge is not just the canon which can be explicated, but also the tacit-wisdom which surrounds and imbues the practice. The previous chapter described the process of learning as whole-person learning – involving the body and mind – and developing habits that are intricately woven with the social activities and culture of the practice.

In this chapter, we draw on our recent United Kingdom (UK) based research concerning complex multi-agency organisations to speculate on the implications for leaders of schools. Central to the general line of reasoning is the argument that effective leadership is that which supports a culture of learning and professional judgement which is open to collective scrutiny and promotes adaptivity on the part of the organisation and individuals.

The recent analysis of the social dimensions of the Europe 2020 strategy (Social Protection Committee, 2011) identifies the need to raise at least 20 million citizens out of poverty and social exclusion over the next decade. Key to this is a policy of social integration and building capacity for active inclusion which will involve mainstream as well as specialist services. Current UK Government policy offers new freedoms to the public sector that have enhanced the responsibilities of practitioners and make new demands on the systems tackling the often complex needs of vulnerable children and their families. While such developments bring very significant challenges to leaders, they also offer new freedoms and opportunities. Local

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authorities and schools are therefore responding to these developments in a wide variety of ways (C4EO, 2011, p. 10).

In this context, all practitioners need to adapt to the changing environment without increasing the risk of failing children and their families. Leaders need confidence that professional judgements will lead to the best possible outcomes for children, young people and families. Meanwhile the practitioners they lead need to learn (1) to recognise what it is important to work on, and (2) how to collaborate with others to achieve what really matters.

These demands have led to increased attention to building capacity within and across services and schools to develop well-informed, child-focused systems. At the heart of this process is a focus on the learning that creates a self-improving system, within which practitioners learn by listening to each other to build the knowledge needed to improve the lives of children, young people, and families. This chapter considers innovative and outstanding leadership practice in the development of learning organisations in the public sector. It suggests what effective school leaders do to promote a learning culture and learning practices in which knowledge is nurtured, shared and utilised within an on-going climate of change to achieve positive outcomes for children, young people and families.

Recognising students as people with lives beyond the school gates means that vulnerable children cannot easily be parcelled into discrete needs and each need sent to different agencies which work independently. As the 2011 Munro Review of Child Protection (Munro, 2011) in the UK observed, 'child-centred' systems of services are needed. An earlier discussion paper produced by HM Treasury focused more on prevention and emphasised the crucial role of schools in such a child-centred system. It argued: 'A preventative schedule of support needs the full engagement of universal services, especially schools' (HM Treasury & DfES, 2007, p. 20).

This agenda offers possibilities for greater diversity in the local organisation of services for children and young people, thereby encouraging providers to be more responsive to their needs and focus on early intervention in the lives of the most vulnerable. However, such local autonomy and diversity call for robust systems of close-to-practice accountability which ensure that the clients of these new arrangements are being best served and supported. These changes also demand a high degree of practitioner responsibility within a framework of managing risk. New localism, therefore, requires strong and confident leadership able to meet the learning demands that arise as practitioners work responsively with clients.

The importance of workforce quality is seen clearly in a substantive US study of the relationship between the organisation of services for children and outcomes. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected over 3 years on services provided to 250 children by 32 public children's service offices in 24 counties in Tennessee. A quasi-experimental, longitudinal design was used to assess the effects of inter-organisational service co-ordination. The study revealed that

> organisational climate (including low conflict, cooperation, role clarity, and personalisation) is the primary predictor of positive service outcomes (the children's improved psychosocial functioning) and a significant predictor of service quality. In contrast, interorganisational coordination had a negative effect on service quality and no effect on outcomes. (Glissen & Hemmelgarn, 1998, p. 401)

These findings support the argument for greater flexibility and more personalised approaches to work in the welfare services. They suggest that outcomes can be improved when professionals are able to exercise professional judgements when supporting children and that over-coordination can be detrimental. The crucial demand is for a mutually trusting and supportive context.

Challenges for School Leaders

In the light of this, the key challenges for school leaders who aim to foster learning are how to:

- create a framework within which professional judgements can be safely made; and
- ensure the professional capability to make those judgements.

These and other changes present leaders of schools with a range of specific challenges, many of which are best described as *wicked issues* in the light of their complexity and intractability. Following Grint (2005), wicked issues are understood as complex challenges which cannot readily be solved but are more frequently managed or contained. Wicked problems require leadership that is focused on building capacity and promoting learning rather than a more straightforward application of a tried and tested solution.

Examples of wicked issues faced by senior leaders include the following:

- How do leaders create and sustain systems to enable intelligence to flow through the organisation to ensure that strategy and frontline delivery inform each other?
- How do leaders sustain organisational stability whilst developing the capacity to be innovative in response to a rapidly changing policy landscape?
- How do leaders manage uncertainty and emotion?
- How can leaders increase professional responsibility and distribute accountability across the organisation whilst managing external accountability demands?

Addressing wicked issues requires a collective acceptance of the need for learning by all stakeholders (Canwell, Hannan, Longfils, & Edwards, 2011). Schools learn to adapt to the changing demands they face, spot new opportunities, and understand what they need to learn to thrive.

Effective Learning Systems, Leadership, and Expertise

Munro (2011) argues for greater effort to establish a view of organisations as a learning and adaptive system in which leadership is committed to promoting learning while nevertheless remaining accountable for the overall effectiveness of the services delivered. In systems of *distributed expertise*, such as in schools, this

involves recognising the strengths and focus of individual practitioners, while aligning them to support the strategic vision of the school. Schools contain a great deal of distributed expertise. They bring together different forms of knowledge and skills. Expertise is located and developed in specific practices. Complex problems call for several forms of expertise to be brought into play to interpret and respond to them, and systems need to be established to allow this to happen.

A key to successful leadership is recognising and mobilising and enhancing the expertise distributed across schools. Expertise can be enhanced through collaborations where personal expertise needs to be made explicit and the expertise of others recognised. A key strategic priority for leaders is to work with practitioners to shape what matters to them, to ensure that systems can be developed that support the whole system rather than evolve in isolation. Our research found that the most effective learning systems are adaptive systems which respond to new demands, evidence, and priorities. This, in turn, had three aspects:

1. Effective learning systems can cope with tensions and contradictions

   - Learning systems need to be responsive to policy, changing local demands, and the specific needs of children, young people and families. They therefore need to be alert to evidence that old practices are impeding new purposes.
   - Recognising tensions and contradictions between purposes and practices is a sign that an organisation is open to learning.[1] Rule-bending is often an early sign that old practices are getting in the way of new purposes. Encouraging the recognition and the reporting of contradictions that impede practice makes them visible and helps the system to respond.

2. Effective learning systems utilise evidence to develop strategy and to persuade

   - In learning organisations, the ability to make decisions based on evidence is found at every level.
   - The expectation is that evidence will be gathered, interpreted, distilled, interrogated, and used from the frontline upwards, and that systems will be in place for strategy to learn from the interface with users.[2]
   - Learning organisations also demonstrate an openness to evidence from elsewhere that will challenge assumptions and provide new ways of interpreting the local context.

3. Effective learning systems create space and time for building common knowledge and a shared understanding of the narrative

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[1] These ideas have been developed in the activity system work of Yrjö Engeström (e.g., Engeström, 2008) and they have informed our work.

[2] Evidence from our series of studies, including Learning in and for Interagency Working funded by the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme and the Developing Interagency Working study for the LG Group, lies behind these statements. We have called the process 'upstream learning'.

- Weaving individual sense-making into public meaning requires practitioners to make explicit what matters for them in conversations about problems of practice.
- Opportunities need to be created for these conversations to happen. This is not a training model of learning and development; it needs systemic support. (Daniels & Edwards, 2012, p. 19)

Intelligent Leadership

In our work we have identified three key processes for leading learning in order to address the priorities outlined above. These processes are neither sequential nor hierarchical but rather part of a broader toolkit to be utilised in accordance with the specific demands of the context. Collectively they underpin a form of *intelligent leadership*, intended to build capacity. They can be summarised as (1) recognition, (2) response, and (3) reflection.

Process 1: Recognition

Recognition is concerned with identifying the specific learning challenge and the nature of the learning required to address it through the use of appropriate forms of intelligence and data. Key elements of recognition involve questioning practice and examining practice.

Process 2: Response

Response focuses on establishing the best way to promote the learning needed, the form of leadership this requires, and the specific leadership actions that need to be undertaken. At the heart of response is (1) formulating and modelling solutions, and (2) implementing solutions.

Formulating and Modelling Solutions

We found that high-performing *intelligent leaders* know how to respond to problems. They also need to know how others will react as they align motives in interpreting and responding to problems. This study found that there was sometimes a tension between the desire to drive a solution forward and the need to delegate and get ownership. A central feature of leadership for learning is conscious reflection on the kind of action that is most appropriate and likely to promote the kind of learning that is being led.

The intelligent leaders in our study recognised that they need to lead organisational learning but that also included helping and encouraging colleagues to engage with cultural change and to learn and change themselves. At the same time, these leaders also recognised that colleagues may become champions, sceptics, or cynics with respect to specific innovations and changes. They clearly valued the support of champions and found the questioning of sceptics valuable in challenging and shaping developments; however, they presented an account of zero-tolerance towards those who took up the position of cynical negativity. This was discussed in terms of a firm articulation of the moral imperatives of the service and professional responsibility.

Implementing Solutions

A major difficulty for leaders when implementing solutions is dealing with distance in the chain of command from strategic leadership to frontline delivery teams. Maintaining a record of decisions made and their purposes was often seen as crucial for the creation of institutional memory. Consistency is needed in both understanding the shared narrative and the performance of the ways of working necessary to build outcome-oriented capability for learning. This is needed at all levels and to be mirrored across the whole system.

Process 3: Reflection

Reflection involves asking if the learning challenge has been addressed, whether the leadership approach adopted was effective and what improvements could be made in the future.

This view of small-scale action connecting with large-scale strategic intention connects firmly with the idea of the learning organisation. Peter Senge's description of a learning organisation points to the need for the kind of analysis undertaken in this study. Writing in 1990, Senge argued that organisations need to 'discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at *all* levels' (Senge, 1990, p. 4). He observed that that people in learning organisations are able to make a difference in them.

Senge's challenging view of productive learning was echoed in how the leaders we studied talked about learning. In this study, leaders were presented with three common ways of thinking about learning, which can be summarised as:

- acquisition – learning involves filling the mind with knowledge which can then be applied in different situations;
- participation – learning involves participating in established practices; and
- knowledge creation and transformation – learning involves working with others to develop ideas which change people and change practices.

These were explored in the interviews with leaders, all of whom reported that they drew on all three views at different moments. Which they used depended on the learning challenges they met. When they needed to disseminate information quickly, acquisition prevailed. When new staff were put alongside existing experts, participation was invoked. However, the dominant metaphor for most of them was knowledge creation and transformation. Like Senge, these intelligent leaders wanted learning that would make a difference in the organisation.

The Intelligent Leader's Repertoire of Behaviours for Leading Learning

Our study identified two broad *learning challenges* for leaders which were reflected in the strategies they adopted in this area. These were:

1. designing learning systems, that is, establishing the processes and protocols that ensure the appropriate flow of information and learning between professionals; and
2. building capacity to support the organisational priorities, that is, promoting a common public narrative of the collective mission of the organisation.

This study revealed that the actions that leaders undertook to promote learning coalesced around nine broad themes (which reflected the two broad learning challenges). As noted above, the art of intelligent leadership was being able to select and operationalise these actions in ways that best promoted learning in the context in which they were working and, in particular, to the kinds of capacity-building in which they were engaged. The behaviours could be broadly grouped as addressing (1) system-level challenges, (2) cultural challenges, and (3) individual or group challenges.

Addressing System-Level Challenges

Directing

All leaders stated that at certain moments there was a need for colleagues to acquire new knowledge. Directing was concerned with supporting the practice of knowledge transmission, which was often embedded within the strong organisational narrative they were sharing. They felt that the turbulent contexts in which organisations were being developed meant that some clear knowledge transfer was crucial to keep everyone informed.

Questioning

Questioning was concerned with providing challenge and seeking to ask the key, killer questions which promote reflection and deeper learning. It is not about 'providing answers'. Questioning can support the identification of contradictions between old practices and current intentions. Bringing them to the surface and discussing them in a robust way, based on data, happened frequently.

Pulling Together

Leaders described their work in terms of 'noticing the things that others do not notice' and then knitting together different, hitherto unnoticed strands of thinking and acting across the domains of the service in order to align motives.

Addressing Cultural Challenges

Translating

Leaders promoted learning by acting as negotiators of meaning, particularly in relation to helping others to understand the external demands that were being placed on organisations. These intelligent leaders simplified what were often very complex challenges and removed jargon. In some instances, they also utilised maxims, phrases, and other, more immediate, simple forms of communication that become shorthand for a deeper dialogue.

Taking the Standpoint of the Other

Identifying how others were seeing a situation was key to leaders' decisions on what actions to take. It was central to building common knowledge and was at the same time enhanced by the reservoirs of common knowledge that were created in discussions over time.

Addressing Individual or Group Challenges

Enabling

Intelligent leaders enabled others to take on tasks by building a deep sense of internal control. Importantly, they went beyond the everyday sense of the term 'empowerment', and argued that empowerment involved taking responsibility for

decisions and holding people to account. This was seen to take place at individual and group levels of engagement.

Coaching

One-to-one coaching meetings with colleagues about performance was seen as normal and positively by most leaders.

Facilitating

Facilitation occurred in almost every context. For example, leaders helped individuals and groups of people to understand the challenges and the knowledge they have in common and how they differ. They promoted the formation of a common basis for future action without necessarily taking a particular position in the discussion and provided support when colleagues take new actions.

Collaborating

Collaboration is distinguished from facilitation in that it requires the leader to remain part of the decision-making process. There are degrees of difference in the extent to which the social relations of the decision-making processes are genuinely open and free of status relations. Collaboration and facilitation were sometimes challenging for highly experienced leaders who were more used to taking the lead in decision-making.

Intelligent leaders carried out each of these strategically oriented actions to foster learning with a high degree of interactive sensitivity. Although all the leaders had limits beyond which they could not go with people who were clearly not likely to work productively in the new landscape, they were all highly empathic. Their ability to align motives drew on the efforts they made to identify where others were coming from and to weave their intentions into the organisational narrative.

They listened carefully, used counselling skills to reflect back what they heard, and attended to the language of the person they were talking with and often used it in their responses. They were also assiduous in giving feedback, primarily aimed at setting high expectations and encouraging colleagues, but also of a less positive nature when necessary. They consciously modelled the behaviour they wanted and expected their way of encouraging learning to be mirrored down the system. They were also very hard-nosed. The learning was always outcome-oriented and evidence as a basis for action was crucial.

All of these small-scale actions were evident across all the leaders and were drawn on in all the nine actions listed above, although of course there were personal styles which meant that some features predominated.

Intelligent leaders worked consciously to diagnose the action needed to foster learning and build capacity. This involved:

• assessing the organisation and its resources, now and in the future;
• identifying where they can inform and shape the context they operate in to promote the interests of children and young people;
• selecting a range of responses, drawing on both themselves and others as resources; and
• applying responses and seeing them through.

These leaders were all demanding tasks that required a high degree of organisational and interpersonal awareness in everyday activities.

Each of the high-performing leaders was extremely thoughtful. Each, in some way, saw themselves as a learner and aimed at mirroring a strong degree of evidence-informed reflection down the organisations they led. They all reserved time for reflection on their own roles and the outcomes, both intended and unintended, of their actions.

Conclusion

Intelligent leadership flags the importance of carefully judged decision-making in situations where there are many options. For a leader to engage in intelligent action, he or she needs to be confident of possessing a clear and realistic understanding of the nature and extent of the particular problem or challenge faced. This means ensuring leaders have the best possible data available in order to be able to recognise that problem. Having the data is not just a matter of ensuring that information management systems are in place, but also ensuring that the channels of communication within and between different sections of organisations allow for the best possible flow of the different perceptions, understandings, and meanings that are to be found in complex organisations. Deep understanding is helped by marshalling a variety of different views.

Having recognised the depth of the problem, intelligent leaders seek to make intelligent decisions about how to act. In order to have the best possible chance of acting in the most appropriate manner they must ensure that they have the widest possible array of options open to them. Intelligent leadership requires an awareness of the available options and accordingly leaders who work in this way seek to continually enrich their repertoire of actions. This requires a constant focus on ensuring that responses and interventions are able to meet areas of identified need. This matching of response with need calls for *intelligent action* that must be subjected to on-going reflection and appraisal if it is to be improved and enhanced.

Intelligent leaders do not act alone but rather focus on building local capacity to help them take forward their strategic mission of achieving good outcomes for children, young people and families. This chapter has argued that high-performing leaders attend to learning and create the contexts for learning in their actions as they

engage in everyday activities. Their aim is to create self-improving systems shaped by a focus on outcomes.

In this chapter we have presented an account of intelligent leadership which is a logical extension of the notion of *resourceful leadership*. This is elaborated on in the following chapter, which presents a case study of school leadership in Australian schools.

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