

## **Flagship for Creative and Authentic leadership**

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### **Title of paper**

**Developing the leadership capabilities of middle-level leaders:  
exploring the links between formal study programmes and  
leadership learning in local educational contexts.**

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## **Developing the leadership capabilities of middle-level leaders: exploring the links between formal study programmes and leadership learning in local educational contexts.**

### **Introduction**

The importance of providing opportunities for those in designated leadership positions, or those aspiring to such positions, to enhance their capabilities and develop confidence in themselves as leaders is reflected in current educational leadership frameworks (Harris and Lambert, 2003; Spry, 2004; Catholic Education Commission of Victoria [CECV], 2005; Duignan, 2006). It is also reflected in professional learning programmes being sponsored at system and school-based levels. This paper presents the results of a preliminary study which explored the learning experiences of six middle level educational leaders taking part in Leading2Learn, a programme sponsored by the Catholic Education Office, Melbourne (CEOM), in conjunction with the School of Educational Leadership at Australian Catholic University (ACU). A more detailed study of the leadership capacity-building programme, seeking information from all stakeholders, will be the subject of a later article.

Current thinking about the development of leadership capabilities provides the rationale for the programme and the conceptual framework for this paper. After a brief description of the educational context of each participant, the paper focuses on four strategies perceived to enhance the leadership development of participants, namely, the use of a reflective research learning journal; interaction with a critical friend (an insider with regard to the school context) and critical witnesses (outsiders with regard to the school context); focused professional conversations and engagement with current literature. Based on the participants' reflections about their insights into leadership which emerged from their involvement in the projects, and the author's reflections on the conduct of the programme, some suggestions are offered about ways in which schools can provide appropriate opportunities to further develop the leadership capabilities of those in middle level leadership positions.

### **The conceptual framework of the study**

The conceptual framework for the study emerges from the literature on authentic leadership (Starratt, 2003; 2004; Begley, 2004); distributed leadership (MacBeath, 2005; Spillane, 2006); teacher leadership (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson and Hann, 2002; Harris, 2004); shared leadership (Duignan and Bezzina, 2006); middle level leadership (Busher, 2005; Hobbs, 2006); leadership capacity building (Harris and Lambert, 2003; Hill, Crevola and Tucker, 2003; West-Burnham, 2004; Duignan, 2006); principles of adult learning and reflective practice (Blasé and Blasé, 2004; Stoll, 2004; Swaffield and MacBeath, 2005) and effective professional development for leaders (Bush and Glover, 2004; Cole, 2004; Du Four, 2004).

Acknowledging the multi-dimensional nature of contemporary educational leadership, and accepting the need to distribute or share leadership more widely within schools, authors have suggested various ways to facilitate the development of leadership capabilities amongst educators. West-Burnham (2004) identifies the need to change organizational structures and create a leadership learning culture if a distributed approach to leadership is to become a reality within schools. In their review of literature on leadership development, Bush and Glover (2004) identify emerging concepts which shape and influence contemporary leadership learning. They also

identify strategies which appear to enhance leadership development. Amongst these are personalized and contextualized learning, leadership for learning and the school as a learning organization.

Harris and Lambert (2003) outline a framework which advocates the broadening of leadership experience and the deepening of skill levels amongst educators. In the context of Catholic education, the framework outlined by Spry (2004) identifies six dimensions of leadership and four corresponding sets of capabilities with a view to assisting educational leaders to shape their own professional learning programmes. Duignan (2006) links the discourse on authentic leadership to leadership capacity-building, also identifying a range of possible approaches educators might take to developing their leadership skills and thereby enhancing the equality of teaching and learning within schools.

Also relevant to this study is the limited body of literature focusing on middle-level leadership. Busher (2005) explores the factors which gave a small sample of middle-level leaders their professional identities, noting some differences in what was considered to be central to their work between those whose roles had a pastoral focus, where students and their development were central, and those with a teaching and learning focus, where subject-related matters were central. However, both groups saw themselves more as leaders than as managers and sought to develop a collaborative and collegial environment with those in their sphere of influence. Hobbs (2006) argues that the focus of middle-level positions, whether they be pastoral or curriculum oriented, needs to move away from management to leadership and that development programmes be available for such leaders to support them in making the transition effectively. The characteristics of the middle-level leadership development programme which provides the focus for this study are outlined in the next section of the paper.

### **A snapshot of the programme and the participants**

The educators taking part in Leading2Learn have designated positions of middle level leadership in their schools and all are enrolled in either a Master of Educational Leadership or Post Graduate Certificate in Educational Leadership at ACU. Given the desire of the CEOM for those sponsored into the programme to engage in some research, participants studied two semester-length project-based units which enabled them to undertake two school-based research projects as part of their course. The first project involved participants in preparing, delivering and evaluating a professional development session with their colleagues at school. The second project focused on addressing a leadership issue in their area of responsibility within the school. Participants were able to draw on their knowledge of the leadership literature from at least two other Masters units to inform the design of their second project.

The learning activities and assessment requirements were structured to support regular reflection on the learning which was taking place as a result of the project work. In addition to attending two half-day seminars at ACU, participants were required to:

- i) keep an online research journal and make weekly entries using a WebCT Discussion forum set up for that purpose;
- ii) identify and work regularly with a critical friend from amongst their school colleagues throughout the project;

- iii) engage in professional conversation with two critical witnesses from among their ACU colleagues as part of the first project;
- iv) present the results of their learning to their ACU colleagues at a seminar day or evening; and
- v) engage with the leadership literature in framing their written reflections on the leadership learning which had taken place.

As the Master's unit facilitator, I organized the half-day seminars and was also available to address any issues which arose during the semester-length programmes.

A brief description of the leadership positions held by participants, their educational context and their focus for the first or second project now follows.

***Participant A (PA)*** is the Mathematics Key Learning Area (KLA) co-ordinator in an all-boys' secondary school with approximately 800 students. His project focused on the use of Mastery learning in Year 8 mathematics classes. He wanted to find out the most effective methods of teaching mathematics to Year 8 students and to use the process and results to create momentum for change.

***Participant B (PB)*** is the Literacy co-ordinator at a primary school with approximately 400 students. Her project focused on literacy and the ways in which the delivery of regular professional development and personal support improved the confidence and skills of the parent volunteers who assisted with literacy programmes at the school.

***Participant C (PC)*** is the Director of Teaching and Learning at an all-girls' school with approximately 800 students. Her project focused on reviewing assessment practices across all Key Learning Areas, in light of the introduction of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, and designing assessment tasks for deep learning.

***Participant D (PD)*** is a member of the senior school leadership team at a co-educational secondary school of approximately 800 students. His project focused on the delivery of a professional development session to staff who potentially would be part of a restructured leadership team at Years 11 and 12 for the following year.

***Participant E (PE)*** is the Director of Studies at an all-boys' secondary school with approximately 900 students. Her project focused on the use of existing data collected on student achievement and learning preferences to inform change strategies and promote the importance of authentic assessment to meet the needs of individual students.

***Participant F (PF)*** is the Professional Development co-ordinator at an all-boys' secondary school. His project focused on the professional learning and development of aspiring leaders with a view to encouraging more teachers to consider applying for designated leadership positions.

## **Findings**

The description and discussion of the findings as reported by the six participants are organized around the following four issues, each of which corresponds with a required assessment task: use of the reflective online research journal; interactions with a critical friend; focused professional conversations; and engagement with the

leadership literature in written reflections on the leadership learning which occurred. Quotes included are intended to represent the range of issues addressed by participants rather than be exhaustive. The quotes, used with permission, are taken from the online research learning journals and written reflections submitted by participants at the conclusion of the project.

### ***Use of the reflective online research journal***

The online research journal was found to be a valuable learning tool. Reasons for this included the fact that *'it enabled quick feedback on the directions and questions about the project'* (PA) and deepened the learning process: *'when colleagues responded to my reflections I was able to think more about the issues and concepts and so this process of sharing and responding deepened the learning process.'* (PA).

Another participant found her thinking was challenged by the fact that regular contributions were required *'as I often found myself having to justify my actions. When I re-read my entries, I was able to see how my ideas had developed. Changes in direction and thinking were explicit.'* (PC). In conjunction with professional conversations, the WebCT online journal forum was also perceived to be a valuable source of professional development, as one person reflected: *'the diversity of presentations and subsequent conversations ... were invaluable professional development in how to run an effective PD. All of the presenters achieved their goals in different ways with different audiences.'* (PA).

### **Interactions with a critical friend**

Participants were unanimous in their belief that the interaction with a critical friend had a positive influence on project outcomes and on their own leadership learning. Interacting with colleagues who had experience and expertise, who knew the school context and who could provide appropriate feedback and advice was invaluable, as the following comments indicate;

*'Her expertise and knowledge in dealing with students on an individual basis has been invaluable in this project. She initially trained the (literacy) assistants and this training enabled the beginning of relationships to be formed with the parents.'* (PB)

*'The benefits of this project were that roles were shared and I was able to learn from my critical friend as well as the (literacy) assistants.'* (PB)

*'I found it useful to have a critical friend that understood the context of the school. My critical friend was able to articulate those areas that I had carried out intuitively. Her praise and reassurance also gave me the courage and reassurance to continue the project.'* (PC)

*'The use of a critical friend aids in reflective processes. Regular discussion and feedback allows for formulation of ideas and observation and analysis of performance... My critical friend listened to observations I was offering about the structure of the school and offered affirmation of these observations.'* (PD)

*'To have the Director of Students as my critical friend, with a wealth of leadership experience, to be my mentor and coach was extremely valuable. Our meetings were very productive and I was able to reflect on the advice that was given and use it to*

*ensure that the project was successful for the participants' development and my own learning.'* (PF)

### **Focused professional conversations**

Conversations with critical witnesses, ACU colleagues who attended the professional development sessions given by other project participants as 'outsiders', were seen to be valuable sources of learning. One participant found the review of his presentation *'both affirming and helpful.'* (PD) He also valued the opportunity to visit other schools and view sessions and gain new insights: *'being a critical witness at (two) schools gave me an insight into the workings of other schools. I came away from both schools with a feeling that our school does not spend enough time in the cultivation of ideas that allow for deep learning.'* (PD)

Another participant highlighted the importance of external critique and valued *'constructive feedback on my own presentation.'* (PC). She noted that *'critical witnesses as outsiders are helpful because, not being part of the culture, they can bring different perspectives and experiences to the critique ... this was a valuable attribute of the critical witnesses.'* (PC).

One participant noted the value of school structures which enabled professional conversations to occur as a matter of course, rather than by special arrangement: *'most other mathematics staff are also in this staffroom and professional conversations and feedback have been easily achievable by virtue of the fact that I am in contact with them so often ... staff do not resent the extra time taken for professional conversation when it is something of interest and part of their normal day and not an extra impost.'* (PA)

### **Engagement with the leadership literature in written reflections**

Participants were able to frame their reflections on their project design and leadership learning around relevant insights from the leadership literature as evidenced by the following examples. One participant commented on the relevance to his project design of the framework presented by Bolman and Deal (1997) as follows: *'the Four Frames were probably the major influence on my planning of the professional learning activity. Once I read these articles I was able to make many links to what happens in schools and things that either facilitate or inhibit change.'* (PA) Another noted the usefulness of the school's Mission statement, Teaching and Learning Charter and Values and Beliefs statements to support her project design. In addition, she identified Stoll (2004) as a source of helpful insights: *'Stoll (2004) identifies approaches that promote reflection and that take account of the school's context as being central to leadership learning.'* (PC). The same participant went on to say however that *'not all the ideas in the literature ... supported my plans.'* (PC)

Goleman's (1995) work on emotional intelligence was a significant influence for one participant who commented that *'the importance of positive relationships cannot be over-emphasized, especially when working with a group of people ... In my interactions with the assistants I was also aware of giving them the opportunity to share their understandings and talents ...'* (PB)

The aspects of authentic leadership identified by Begley (2004) influenced another participant who found *'Begley's model of authentic leadership to be a process that*

*promoted integrity and depth. Including aspects such as self-knowledge, sensitivity, reflective and ethical practices as the scaffold meant that I was not detached from the presentation, nor were the participants.’ (PD)*

One participant found Cole’s (2004) suggestion that development plans need to be practical, focused on action and achieved within a designated timeframe, to be relevant in her context. As she noted, *‘we have all three elements in this action research and I expect that we can sustain this change through a whole school commitment.’ (PE)*

### **Reflections on the programme as a means of enhancing leadership capabilities**

The following observations are made from the perspective of the author as programme facilitator. They confirm the leadership learnings identified by the participants and give support to the continuation of the initial programme approach envisaged by CEOM and ACU.

The inclusion of a structured approach to reflection and professional dialogue has identified numerous perceived benefits. Using the levels of reflection outlined by Blasé and Blasé (2004) as a framework, the online research journal entries of each participant show clear movement from mostly descriptive comments in the early stages of the project to comments which involve significant evaluation and systematic critique of their own learning towards the end of the project. Entries in Participant C’s online journal illustrate this:

Week 2: *‘I have decided to focus on improving our understanding and use of formative assessment. The group I will be working with is the KLA leaders. We meet about twice per term and I am the chairperson for these meetings.’*

Week 5: *‘It is really good to have someone (critical friend) acting as a sounding board. I have also had conversations with three other colleagues who have a good understanding of my project and the pedagogy underpinning it.’*

Week 11: *‘(As an observer) I was fascinated by the reaction of some participants ... I was able to try to decode some of the comments and guess what the underlying issues might be. I was reminded of the readings in the Authentic leadership unit on emotional intelligence and the importance of relationships and building political capital.’*

Informed debate on issues concerning leadership arising from the projects is reflected in references within professional conversations to relevant literature and feedback received by critical friends and critical witnesses. This confirms suggestions that opportunities for systematic reflection and professional conversations are integral to leadership capacity building (Stoll, 2004; Duignan, 2006) and that professional learning communities nurture growth and development (Cole, 2004; Bush and Glover, 2004).

The requirement that projects focus on issues currently being addressed by participants in their sphere of leadership within their schools has also allowed for the integration of theory and practice in ways which seem to have benefited participants (West-Burnham, 2004; Harris, 2004). The benefits range from increased confidence and ability to conduct effective professional development sessions for small groups of

teachers or parent volunteers, to having a framework for effecting sustainable improvements to teaching and learning or leadership development across the whole school. This suggests that participants have seen the projects and face-to-face units as part of an integrated approach to enhancing their capacity to lead. One participant expressed this very clearly when he commented as follows:

*‘For my own leadership development the project has been an enormous success ... Being responsible to implement a program within the college community and to work with a large number of staff was a valuable experience. Participating in the Leading2Learn course and undertaking the EDCU 607 subject was my form of traditional professional development. By referring to literature and being presented with information specific to educational leadership, I was able to take this new knowledge away with me and to apply it to my own situation and leadership context. Also, working with others in the course, whether in lectures or the WebCT forum, was a form of networking that proved important to my learning journey. Finally, working with my critical friend was my form of mentoring and reflective practice.’ (PF)*

Another participant identified an important issue concerning the choices individuals need to make for learning to occur. A pedagogically sound course does not of itself lead to enhanced learning, as the following comments indicate:

*‘To put it simply, I would not have learned about authentic leadership had I not chosen to complete a course; paid fees for the privilege; completed tasks related to the topics nor made goals in order to learn. This is the energy required to learn and it does not happen if the person does not make that choice. This has helped my professional learning because it has made me realize the effort required to learn, to understand structures that suppress or enhance learning and to reflect on the nature and practice of a learning community.’ (PD)*

The results of this study support Fullan’s (2006) argument that multi-level approaches to leadership development are needed, whereby systems, local networks, organizations and individuals work collaboratively to create sustainable improvement.

### **Concluding remarks**

From this brief exploration of ways in which a formal study programme might enhance the leadership capabilities of participants, sufficient encouraging feedback has emerged to affirm the value of clearly linking the formal study requirements to the everyday leadership context of participants if valuable professional learning is to occur. However, the strategies incorporated in this programme are not only restricted to formal study requirements. They can and are being used within school communities to build a culture of ongoing professional learning and to increase the confidence and capabilities of current and potential leaders. Educational system leaders, principals and members of leadership teams are to be commended for encouraging middle-level leaders to take part in formal study programmes or to develop appropriate professional learning strategies and networks to effect change within their own sphere of leadership. The challenge is to move from ‘ad hoc’ or short term strategies to integrated, purposeful and sustainable approaches to leadership capacity building involving all members of the school community.

Principals and members of leadership teams need to ensure that staff undertaking professional courses and those using innovative approaches to address problems within the school do have formal and informal opportunities to share their learning with colleagues. By establishing a culture of learning where it is expected that new learning is regularly shared and its application for further learning in the local context is encouraged and rewarded, a school community can develop its own collaborative research culture. By having the opportunity to facilitate small school-based research projects and share their learning through professional conversations supported by emerging technologies, emerging leaders develop confidence in their abilities to meet the challenges of leadership. Middle-level leaders such as those included in this study can become effective leaders of learning if given the opportunity and resources to sustain innovations. The fact that the project undertaken by Participant F has now become a school-wide programme of leadership capacity building shows that it can be done.

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