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LEADERSHIP AND TRUST IN EDUCATION – THE OFTEN MISSING MAGIC GLUE

Abstract

This article examines the trend across the world to move towards centrally controlled education systems driven by a political desire that students might attain and schools be judged by a narrow range of measurable attainment targets with policing by inspections. It argues that this has emphasized management rather than leadership and that there is a need to refocus on more aspirational achievement aims for young people and schools. It defines and argues for integrity in both leadership and management and makes the case for the significance of the way in which leaders lead. A transactional approach leads to the erosion of trust and transformational leaders in contrast build this up.

The article explains why trust is so important and explains how trust can be developed in and by leaders and managers. It finishes by outlining the challenge of developing leaders and managers of high-trust school cultures

Keywords: educational management, educational leadership, transformational leadership.

A global pandemic: the virus in our schools and society

An on-going debate in education is whether schools reflect society or whether they shape it. In truth it is probably a bit of both somewhat like the “which came first – the chicken or the egg” conundrum. Schools are or should be at least in part a model for society as it is and as it should be. If we have a selective, class-ridden, elitist education system (as in England), then the structures and systems in society (legal, financial, social) that generate the education system feed off and replicate it. Sometimes a few fortunate, resourceful individuals break the mould in such a culture but this is unusual. Similarly, a more inclusive system such as that in Norway may be said to help develop a more inclusive society for more individuals.

It could also be argued that this place of schools in shaping the future has become even more significant. Although other social agents influence the way children develop (families, peers, social workers and law enforcement agencies in some cases), school has become relatively more important in many societies as

changes in parenting and respect for authority have weakened. Most children go to schools, which are relatively stable environments, on most days. Schools may be characterized as “the last chance saloon” to solve societies’ ills. The “Every Child Matters” policy in England and “No Child Left Behind” one in the USA may be seen through such a critical lens.

Throughout many parts of the education world we are witnessing the spread of national standardized testing, a narrower curriculum with a focus on what we think we can measure (mainly in Mathematics, Science and English), increased public accountability frenzied by inspection and performance management of individuals centred on measurable targets. Such an approach to education is based on local, national and international competition in relation to a narrow definition of attainment. Sahlberg [2012] calls this the “Global Education Reform Movement” (GERM) and he compares it to a virus that is spreading and has become the unofficial orthodoxy. Such competition, he claims, is eroding traditional public school systems. Over time this leads to a lack of trust and lowers morale and professionalism of teachers.

Chickens do come home to roost. What sort of society will those countries hell-bent on catching the GERM inherit in the future?

Leaders or managers of schools?

Accepting a link between schools and society raises important issues for those who are the leaders of our schools. Leaders decide on the direction in which an organization is moving having justified it and they continually check progress. In the light of this, managers move the organization forward. Are those in charge of schools today infected and affected by the GERM of centrally prescribed performativity not leaders at all but rather managers? Are they really civil servants, employees of the State, who are paid to do as they are told to replicate the established norms of the society in which they operate even if these are those of injustice and inequality? Or rather are those running our schools leaders with a sense of moral purpose, with the courage of their convictions – what Bottery calls “trusted gatekeepers” [Bottery 2007: 89]. For example are they driven by doing what is right for all children (not just those in their immediate care) in order to improve society based on moral tenets such as social justice and equity?

Integrity: the backbone of leaders and managers

Whether we are leaders or managers or a combination of the two, we need integrity. This means that there is a consistency between what we think, say and do.

Leadership and management only exist if there is followership and committed followers need to believe in the thoughts, words and deeds of their leaders and managers.

Exemplary leaders and managers are thinking people and thoughtful people. They are thinking in the sense that they are intelligent in the way they act and at times react. They are thoughtful in that they understand what they believe and why. Exemplary leaders and managers communicate their beliefs effectively in many ways spoken, written, electronic and importantly in their body language. They communicate effectively on a one-to-one basis, in small group, large meetings, with professionals and non-professionals, including a wide audience via the media.

Most important exemplary leaders and managers behave in ways that are consistent with their beliefs and that which they communicate on a day to day. Followers believe what people do much more than what they say.

Thus integrity is vital to exemplary leadership and management. This requires the knowledge, skills and competencies to model the world they wish others to inhabit. They really are in the business of showing and fashioning a future for young people and their staff and leading the way into a better world. Exemplary leaders and managers believe that schools can lead society not just reflect society. Without the backbone of integrity leaders and managers cannot stand tall and may even be spineless.

The way we lead and manage is profoundly important

Effective leadership can make a positive and profound difference to a student's achievement and that leadership can no longer be in the hands of one person – in the case of schools – the head teacher. Marsh [2000] rightly claims that solitary leadership can be directive and heroic (even solitary), but that this no longer fits the realities of time and workload for current education leaders nor does it make best use of the rich talents that reside in many organizations. At its worst it is arrogant and diminishes other human beings in the organization. Yet many organizations have continued to be led in transactional ways based on a simplistic scientific approach. Wheatley [2007] concurs as she explores the extent the scientific paradigm has had on our behavior and organizations. That view blocks the development of the collaborative leadership, culture and expertise needed for success in the reforms, and assumes that reforms can be aligned and packaged in outdated and rigid ways. Tragically, the impact of GERM is to push schools towards this transactional form of leadership and management. Trust is not as important in this systems world as people do as they are told and are then rewarded or do not and are punished.

Leaders who operate in today's world find themselves working in dynamic complicated environments replete with accountabilities and possibilities, plans and projects, specialist staff roles and teams that did not exist a few of decades ago. Leaders in education now work in an environment where they are responsible for diverse groups of specialists with whose areas of expertise they are ini-

tially unfamiliar. Kehane [2004] recognized that in many sectors of the economy, changes in organizational patterns combined with shifts in worker attitudes are ushering in a new dynamic. The complexities of current school organization with its multi agency approach and transdisciplinary working requires different kinds of leaders. This emergent paradigm questions what organizations are and as a consequence what people expect from one another in the workplace. Jenkins and Jenkins [2006] argue that leaders today call for growing levels of personal commitment and creativity from employees and employees expect organizational transparency, meaningful work and significant participation and influence on the quality of life in the workplace. A new way of leading is emerging – that of a transformational leader with employees having more autonomy and responsibility in the workplace.

Such transformational leadership is an elusive concept. Whatever the form of words chosen to express a definition, there seems to be some consensus in the literature that it involves building a vision of a better future, establishing shared organizational goals, providing intellectual stimulation, offering individualized support, modeling values and best practice and demonstrating expectations of high performance, creating a productive culture and most importantly developing structures to foster participation in decision-making. Underpinning all of this is trust.

The challenge for the leader who seeks to be effective in transforming the organization for which they are ultimately responsible is how they can create a shared meaning and a sense of purpose to make more effective interpersonal and inter organizational relationships. Collaboration and cooperation may be the lynchpins to success. Schuman [2006] claims that collaboration is the increased challenge to incorporate collaborative values and practices into everyday ways of working. Sennett [2012] states that the most important thing about meaningful cooperation is that it requires skill. In particular it needs listening skills, subjective expression and empathetic skills. Trust has to be present in order to progress towards collaboration and cooperation.

Trust in leadership and management

Why is trust important in leadership and management?

Trust in schools and school leadership and management is increasingly seen by researchers and practitioners as a crucial influence on how well schools work for students [Bryk & Schneider 2002]. It is indeed the magic glue that binds school communities together. Trust is a firm belief in the reliability of a person and is exhibited by authenticity and interpersonal regard. It is the confident expectation that a person will do what they say and that there will be a benefit. Fink asserts that the “starting point for any relationship is trust. In fact the very foundation of human society is trust” [Fink 2005: 45].

Trust is a necessary condition if leadership and management are to nurture learning that impacts significantly on behaviors in a sustained way in order to succeed in a complex, uncertain world – that is transformational learning. Such deep and profound learning by staff and students involves processes that are risky. A customized curriculum emerges to match the needs of participants. For this to happen successfully, people need to trust the leaders and each other. A critical posture involves students and staff being able to voice and hear other perspectives and sometimes this can be unsettling as well as beneficial. Without trust between all involved in the learning that comes from this, honest helpful dialogue will not happen. Questioning, enquiry, challenge, problem-solving, structured reflection and analysis are all more effective when people operate in a community of learners co-constructing knowledge underpinned by peer support and collaboration. This requires respect for self and others, confidentiality and trust. The meta-cognition (learning about learning) that can encourage individuals to higher levels of learning is also helped by a climate of trust for honest critical reflection. This is true for children of all ages as well as adults.

Thus, it seems clear that trust is a necessary condition for effective transformational leadership and management. Trust in schools can stimulate and nurture loyalty, development, retention and recruitment of staff, successful management of change, creativity, satisfaction and happiness for staff and students alike. Bryk and Schneider state that it “constitutes a moral resource for school improvement” [Bryk & Schneider 2005: 34]. How then can such a vital moral resource be developed in and by leaders?

How can trust be developed in and by leaders and managers?

If trust is so important in successful organizations, how can leaders and managers embrace and grow it so that participants can develop it in their own schools?

- Bottery [2004] argues that those responsible for organisations need to do five things to develop trust: We need to act on the dynamics of trust. We know that trust develops, in a simplistic way, through at least four stages. At first there may be calculative trust with those involved making probability judgements on the reliability of the relationship (what Bottery calls the “the logician”). Next might come the role trust stage where trust is based on greater understanding of the role of the professional. Following this might be the practice trust stage where, rather like a gardener, deeper trust is based on witnessed results over time. Last and deepest is the identificatory trust stage as with a talented group of jazz musicians who trust each other implicitly as time and success in the relationship goes on. Leaders and managers need to know how to identify and encourage trust in the group through these stages and to make this overt and articulated for the others to apply in their own practice.

- We need also to understand and deal with the “foundation arenas” [Bottery 2004: 118]. These three arenas are the agreement on values and value priorities, people who wish to be trusted doing what they say they will do and lastly displaying the competence to do this effectively. All of this is called integrity – a quality highly valued in leaders and managers that needs to be modelled and facilitated in others.
- We need to appreciate the mechanisms by which meso-level trust i.e. institutional trust, works as well as recognising that trust is a multi-level concept operating at the micro (personal) and macro (society) also.
- Effective leadership and management also entail understanding and developing the understanding of others in relation of *thick* and *thin* trust and the appropriateness in cultivating different thicknesses for different purposes and situations.
- Furthermore, trust is cumulatively dynamic. “Nothing is as fast as the speed of trust” states Covey [2006: 3]. It certainly seems true to me that in schools, trust can grow upwards and outwards developing social capital. Figure 1 illustrates how, I feel, trust can build other positive aspects of transformational leadership and, in doing so, deepen trust further.

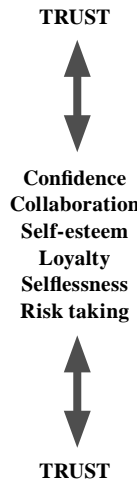


Figure 1. The dynamics of trust

Source: own construction.

However both within groups and within schools mis(dis)trust can spiral downwards and outwards as its corrosive effect takes hold destroying social capital. Figure 2 shows how trust can build negative aspects of leadership and, in doing so, erode trust further.



Figure 2. The dynamics of mis(dis)trust

Source: own construction.

The challenge: developing leaders and managers of high-trust school cultures

For many years leaders and managers, for example in England, have operated in an environment of top-down, rapid, prescribed change with lack of real consultation and with a short-life span for many initiatives. In addition there have been very high levels of accountability for school leaders through inspection and public testing of students (and in the process teachers and schools) with a focus on a narrow range of measurable outcomes and high public visibility. This is not peculiar to England as increasingly other countries have been exposed to and caught, often willingly, the “English transactional leadership disease”. As Sahlberg [2012] argues...the GERM is spreading. Writing from an American perspective Sergiovanni says that: “Many of the standards-driven and high-stakes accountability systems for schools now in place across the globe are here because state governments do not trust local teachers and administrators, local citizens and local governments” [Sergiovanni 2001: 74].

This culture of naming, shaming, blaming and taming of school leaders in an increasing number of countries means that they are pushed into a position of watching their backs and playing it safe. Trust of and by head teachers and school managers has not been a strong feature of school life in recent years. The magic glue has been missing. It is a serious challenge to both model and facilitate learning under-

pinned by trust and for leaders and managers to develop such a culture – in some senses counterculture – in schools today. Habits and behaviors die hard but my experience of working with school leaders and managers across the world tell me that a significant number wish to develop new ways of working. Bryk and Schneider's extensive recent research into Chicago schools leads them to the view that:

Good schools are intrinsically social enterprises that depend heavily on cooperative endeavors among the varied participants who comprise the school community. Relational trust constitutes the connective tissue that binds these individuals together around advancing the education and welfare of children. Improving schools requires us to think harder about how best to organize the work of adults and students so that this connective tissue remains healthy and strong [2002: 144].

Fighting the education virus

In order to resist the negative aspects of the global reforms in education that are the unofficial orthodoxy, leaders and managers need to take a stand and focus on achievement and the whole child rather than attainment only and the basics. This requires a clear and strong sense of moral purpose. It needs courage and confidence to take the stand. Principled horizon scanning [Bottery 2007: 90] of the external environment is necessary in leaders. Leaders today need to be entrepreneurial and spot opportunities. This requires flexibility and adaptability in a rapidly changing world. Integrity and intelligence are essential. Moreover, Power rightly argues that leaders need “professional imagination so they can gauge a sense of their own efficacy within cotemporary settings. Without such imagination professionals will be doomed to stumble from one crisis to another with little hope of illumination” [Power 2008: 144]. Leaders need to “understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meanings for the inner life and external career... the individual can understand his own experiences and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period” [Power: 155]. Leaders and managers also have to be comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty. Most important, as also Sahlbeg [2012] points out, leaders must develop professional responsibility and trust.

If trust within schools is so important then it is axiomatic that those who lead and manage our schools learn to model and develop this in their professional practice. This is vitally important for the well-being of children and those adults who spend much of their lives in our schools today and tomorrow and for the future society that we are in the process of creating. The magic glue needs to be replenished.

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