

Leadership development in Singapore: A changing landscape

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Introduction

Many education systems throughout the world have been decentralizing school management while retaining central control of the curriculum. For example, in the UK, schools have considerable autonomy to make important strategic decisions, but such decisions are within a context of the National Curriculum.

Why is such a pattern occurring? A complex array of factors are probably at play, but from our experience in Singapore, there appear to be three imperatives that are giving rise to the call for increasing autonomy. First, the world in which schools operate is changing rapidly. Globalisation and technological advances dictate that schools must respond quickly, and in order to do so, they must have control over certain key decisions. Second, resources are limited while options are many. Schools, therefore, need the freedom to prioritise their use of resources to meet the needs these changes bring. Third, growing demands for accountability logically lead to the need for greater autonomy, for, without the autonomy, accountability must reside in the loci of key decision forums.

The expansion of decentralization has increased the critical role of stakeholders, for, in a decentralized context, they have more expansive responsibility. Students, as the recipients of the service; teachers, as the deliverers of the educational experience; ministries and central departments as the resource providers: all have a stake in what is happening. However, what we have witnessed in recent years has been a wider role – with increased interest – for parents and the broader community. In a sense, this has been a beneficial effect of devolving increasing amounts of power to the school level.

Attributes of a School Leader in the new Educational Landscape

In many education systems, principals are seen merely as the ‘managers’ of their institutions. This is understandable where schools are seen as operating units within a larger centrally controlled system. The role of the principals is to implement the initiatives and policies of the

Ministry or the Department, follow the guidelines or instructions given, and to spend the funds that are allocated for specific purposes. They are viewed as compliant and efficient administrators, governed by the confines of guidelines laid down by the Ministry. The word ‘freedom’ – especially in relation to decision making – is antithetical to such contexts.

What we have seen in Singapore and other systems, though, is a move away from tight central control. Schools have a greater part to play in determining their respective futures. However, such freedom can be enjoyed only in a framework of central policy. For example, policies covering bilingualism, core curricula and assessment may provide a robust basis on which school development might proceed.

Resources are allocated to schools in the form of lump sums, so that principals have latitude in prioritising their expenditure. This makes it necessary for principals to evaluate their schools critically and to chart future direction in such a way as to capitalize on strength. This locates the principal as a chief executive officer rather than as an operations manager. It is our view in Singapore, therefore, that principals of the future need to develop as CEOs. Whereas the principal as manager thrived as a conformist, the principal as CEO needs to exemplify the spirit of continual reform and seek to go beyond best practice. The word ‘beyond’ is a crucial one, for the old mindset was one of imitating things that were good; now, we believe we need school leaders who move out in front and dictate to others what is good.

It is clear from the above that the ‘new principalship’ needs special people. What are the attributes needed? Here are some of the things that we would argue are essential preconditions to operating as a CEO in the new context of education:

An innovative mindset and a predisposition towards proactivity. In a stable environment, most skilled people can do well, but in uncertain and ambiguous conditions, principals need to formulate new challenges and establish strategic agendas. This they do by taking a step back and seeing the whole picture. By scanning the landscape, they can work with fellow professionals to identify high-impact actions.

The willingness to take risks, to dare to venture, and to create new best practices. No one can know what is going to happen in the future, but that is not an excuse for doing nothing. Principals of the future have to help form the future and to influence what might happen. They have to help their schools develop the capability to both cope and thrive in whatever conditions emerge.

The ability to work with stakeholders to establish a set of broadly agreed values. It is on the foundation of values that a school is able to gain a sense of direction. It is somewhat fatuous to believe in the

notion of a common vision, but if what is valued is generally shared, the idea of direction and emphases is less problematic.

An ability to inspire and harness the strengths of the school. Too often in the past we have dwelt on the capacities of the heroic and multi-talented individual leader, but we see that as unsustainable in a complex and fast-changing environment. Rather, the leader who is able to inspire others to greater things and who can help many others to become innovative in thought, word and deed is the one who will lead successfully

An ability to manage limited resources in innovative ways. The CEO-principal ensures that resource allocation is innovative and supports what the school is trying to achieve.

The ability to see beyond the immediate. The CEO principal has a commitment to preparing children for a complex and changing world. This means thinking beyond mere examination success and about fundamental issues of belongingness to the nation and values that will enable children become good citizens.

Programme to prepare CEO-principals: The Leaders in Education Programme (LEP)

The essence of the above led us to develop a programme that would prepare school leaders, not for the past or the present, but for an unknowable future. With that in mind, we believed that our programme should be not about drawing on codified knowledge but about creating new knowledge. We thus needed to emphasise:

the need to go beyond best practices. In fact, the CEO-principal must be able to create and develop new best practice, and dare to challenge existing notions, even though existing thinking and practice are seemingly right

the need to understand the broader – even global - context of education, asking searching questions about why certain practices appear to lead to certain outcomes

the quest to create new knowledge that might propel the development of the school into an upward rising trajectory.

A training model has been developed by the National Institute of Education, Singapore, which is in the form of a six months, full-time executive programme. It is called the Leaders in Education Programme (LEP). Candidates who are incumbent vice principals in the schools and who have the potential to be principals, are selected by the Ministry of Education to attend the course.

The salient features of the LEP are summarized below.

A great deal of self-reflection and self-learning through generating issues pertinent to the schools and discussing them in syndicate groups takes place. Chong, Stott and Low (2002) describe the process as action learning, although variants of what is generally accepted as action learning are used. Participants are assigned to syndicate groups, each comprising six or seven members. Each syndicate is led by a tutor, who is an academic member of staff of the National Institute of Education. Once a week, each syndicate group will meet with the tutor. During the meeting, pertinent issues relating to the education of Singapore and the management of schools are raised. Each of the issues is deliberated on at length. Participants are encouraged to discuss innovative ways of addressing the issues, some of which relate to problems that have been around for a long time. They also spend considerable time discussing their own innovation projects in schools, and it is through searching questioning and critical reflection that they develop new knowledge about taking schools forward. Through such discussions and idea generation, participants are given the opportunity to think contextually and to understand how best practices might be created and developed to address many of the pressing issues. Risk taking in the implementation of some of the proposed best practices is also evaluated. The process provokes much self-learning and reflection.

There is considerable emphasis given to innovation throughout the programme so as to inculcate the importance, for it is an innovation mindset that will enable the school to move forwards and upwards in a competitive environment. Each participant is attached to a school, under the guidance of a steward-principal, to undertake a practical innovation project that relates to the school. This would involve the participant in scanning the school landscape to understand the school's context, its significant strengths (which might form a basis for innovative development) and the resources available. Based on the contextual understanding, the participant identifies a project, agrees it with the principal, works on the details and comes up with an innovation proposal that will be implemented in the school. It is a real project: not a simulation. It has to be of real benefit to the school and has to be built into the normal routine life of school, since that condition will enhance its chances of success. The innovation is not about weaknesses and problems, but rather builds on key strengths.

An overseas visit to schools and educational institutions that purport to be innovative. The purpose of the visit is not to learn best-practices from such institutions. The aim is to help them understand the context in which innovation is introduced and the factors that contribute to success. It must be emphasized that, while much unplanned learning takes place – even beyond innovation – there is never any intent to import specific ideas and

practices. What happens is that participants' thinking is provoked and that leads to discussion about how we in Singapore might challenge our existing ideas and attempt to develop practices that go beyond 'the best'.

An industrial attachment to an industrial organisation for a short period of time. Many of the organizations we used are multi-national corporations. This is to expose our participants to the different ways these organizations use and develop their human capital. Again, it must be stressed that the intention is not to copy ways of managing and leading, but rather to open up minds to different ways of approaching significant issues.

Active involvement of policy makers from the Ministry of Education with the participants throughout the programme. The Minister for Education, and other senior figures engage in various sessions with the participants. These sessions provide opportunities for participants to discuss with senior policy makers how different educational policies are formulated, developed and implemented. By understanding the reasons for certain policy genesis, even unpopular policies can be better understood. By building an understanding, participants are then able to implement the policies more effectively in the schools.

The participants are also required to a range of leadership topics, although it must be emphasized that these are only included to support the more critical parts of the programme, which revolves around knowledge creation and innovation. The module topics include:

- Managing competitive learning school organizations
- Marketing and strategic choice
- Applying new technology in managing learning
- Achieving excellence in teaching and learning
- Building human and intellectual capital
- Leadership in the new millennium

On completion of the LEP, participants are also given the opportunity to use their learning to be accredited to a higher degree. An increasing number appear to be interested in moving on to master's degree level work.

School leaders: role of the Heads of Department

To establish a school culture characterized by innovation and a future orientation, a CEO-principal must be supported by heads of department who share a similar mindset. If, for example, a school is led by a reformist principal but supported by conformist heads of department, there will inevitably be a clash of culture and the outcome may be frustrating for all. Hence, at the National Institute of Education, all the programmes that prepare school leaders at different levels have been

restructured to be aligned with the same philosophy. Thus, the Diploma in Departmental Management (DDM), a seventeen weeks full-time programme that is an intensive development experience for incumbent heads of department was conceptualized to be in alignment with the Leaders in Education Programme. The goal is to produce forward-looking heads of department to support innovative principals. The key features of the DDM are summarized below:

a) Participants visit schools to observe and discuss examples of excellent practice. They do not copy ideas, but use them as a springboard to create new best practice at a department level..

b) Core modules equip the HODs with certain essential thinking about and skills in people management and development.

c) Elective modules relate to specific topics of great relevance to their work as HODs in their respective schools. Selection of electives is done in consultation with their principals to ensure relevance. This feature allows the DDM programme to be “customized” for each of the participants.

d) Forums form an important part of the curriculum. Each group of participants is required to organize a forum dealing with specific issues that are pertinent to heads of department generally. Through these forums, participants are able to better understand broader issues in education that might have an impact on their work. By taking a broader look at policy and national initiatives, HODs are able to develop wider perspectives and to understand the thinking behind major decisions. While it helps them in the job of head of department, it also serves to prepare those who will eventually move up the ladder into vice-principalship.

e) There are also a short industrial attachments or visits to MNCs or statutory boards to allow participants to understand the role of middle managers in these organizations in supporting the CEOs as they seek to fulfil their visions. They engage in regular reflection sessions after visits in order to build on their learning..

What do the participants say about the leadership programmes? Have they achieved their goals?

The July/August 2002 issue of Education (Singapore’s Knowledge Industry Journal) conducted an interview with several LEP participants to find out how they had benefited from the programme. All the participants interviewed gave positive responses and the sentiments of the responses could be summarized in the following response that appeared on page 18 of the issue:

The programme allows time for me as an individual to think, to reflect – it gives me time to be away from the school context, to take stock of who I am, what I can do and what I believe in. We must first of all know who we are and what we can do so that we can have an impact as a leader...In this programme, I really reinvent my own thinking because this innovation project asked us to look at strengths, and in schools we are so used to looking at areas for improvement – the weaknesses, the ‘let’s patch up the gaps.

What is encouraging for us at NIE is the strong indication of a mindset change in the response. Our evidence to date suggests considerable mindset change amongst participants in both the LEP and DDM.

A longitudinal research project is also being conducted to track the LEP participants who have been posted to schools as principals. Their performance is evaluated to ascertain the extent of the actions and initiatives as an outcome of mindset change.

Conclusion

In Singapore, what we are doing in our leadership programmes is vastly different from what is happening in other countries. We have moved away from skills and competencies training and into an exciting new world of knowledge creation. This is not easy to do, but we believe the effects on our system, over time, are going to be considerable.

We have been encouraged by the international interest shown in our leadership programmes, primarily because what we are doing is different. And we are always willing to share our experience. We also welcome foreign participants to join some of our programmes, and we have been delighted that friends from Brunei and the Maldives have chosen to take part in ‘the Singapore experience’.

As environmental conditions change, leadership emphasis must also keep ahead of the game. Such emphasis must be translated into appropriate programmes and strategies of preparation, so that leaders with the key attributes can be raised to lead our schools and education system to new heights.

References

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