

Schools of the Future: Transformation through Extraordinary Leadership

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The National Institute of Education in Singapore has developed leadership training programmes that are taking leaders at all levels and their schools into new territory. If school leaders at different levels share similar values, it will lead to the establishment of a school culture that can accommodate school reforms. The focus of our programmes is on knowledge creation and innovation, and the aim is beyond best practice. The future-oriented programme includes a varied and challenging menu of learning opportunities, and an extensive involvement by participants in innovation opportunities in the schools. The purpose is to develop 'extraordinary' school leaders at different levels with the capability to operate innovatively in a complex, competitive, fast-changing environment. This paper draws on that experience and shows how Singapore is building coherent patterns of whole school leadership with the potential to provoke and support sustainable reform.

Introduction

We start this paper with a provocative question we recently asked in a keynote address in Queensland, Australia: It is almost part of conventional wisdom that leaders must be visionary and must set the direction for their schools. But what does extraordinary leadership mean when powerful leaders select, plan and control certain courses of action, but cannot select, plan or control the outcomes of those courses of action? (Stacey, 1995)

We want to share that with you, because it is a question we have been grappling with for some time. Mainstream management thought seems to focus idealistically on planning, mission and the like, but we know from our own real-world experience that we don't have as much control as we sometimes claim.

That was probably one of the key influences on our thinking when we developed the leadership programmes which are designed to develop extraordinary leaders for our schools. We recognised that we could select and plan certain training experiences for the future principals and the Heads of Departments, and that we could control such things as assessment criteria and attendance requirements, but we could not control their learning and the use to which they would put that learning in the years to come.

In fact, thinking in this new way became very positive, for it made us examine the nature of the experiences – or learning opportunities – that we were providing. By designing experiences that would provoke challenge to existing mindsets and open up new ideas, insights and understandings, we realised that we would be having an enormous impact on their professional lives.

As the story has unfolded over the past couple of years, we have witnessed remarkable results. We have seen these future leaders' thinking transformed and the

limited evidence to date suggests that their schools are going to be exciting places to be in the years ahead. Indeed, transformation – meaning significant, systematic and sustained change (Caldwell, 2003) – is something that has to be brought about amongst leaders if it is to take effect in schools.

We shall return to that story a little later. First, though, we want to show how what we have been doing in leadership training in Singapore fulfils some of Caldwell's (2003) recommendations for leadership reform.

The way forward: leadership

Structurally, the Singapore system has promoted the notion of distributed leadership by creating a leadership 'track', which comprises a range of 'positions', including subject heads, level heads, heads of department and other senior appointments.

The Singapore system has invested considerably in leader development. Since the mid-1980s, vice-principals have been trained for principalship on full-time programmes, ranging from one year in the 1990s to six months currently. Heads of department used to receive nine months of full-time training. That has been reduced to four months, but, by international comparison, that is still generous. We currently train over 300 heads of department each year. Added to those are programmes for personnel in other leadership positions, including level heads and subject heads, who attend two weeks full-time programmes.

In terms of Caldwell's third recommendation, we provide a broad range of experience for leadership programme participants, and we expose them to ideas in both public and private sectors.

His fourth recommendation about abandonment is a little more difficult to comment on, but we have indeed provoked innovation in our leadership programmes by removing much of the traditional material, mainly from mainstream management thought. This has had interesting consequences, because it has created a paradoxical situation within the system, where seemingly conflicting approaches to leadership have been advocated. As we shall explain later, that may not be a problem.

Caldwell's fifth recommendation talks about national capacity. That is the essence of what we have been doing in Singapore, because developments have focused on moving the system forward rather than individual schools, although the two are, of course, inextricably linked.

Knowledge creation and future school leaders

While much of what we have been doing in Singapore in terms of leader development is consistent with Caldwell's recommendations, our approach to training has been fundamentally different to what has been happening elsewhere, and the purpose of this paper is to raise questions – based on our experience – about much of the prevalent thinking in what we call mainstream management and leadership theory.

Perhaps a useful and provocative place to start is where we depart from Caldwell's views of knowledge management. We would agree that information, as a form of codified knowledge, can be managed, but the sort of knowledge that interests us cannot. We are concerned with the new knowledge, new insights and new understandings

that give strategic advantage and that take our organisations into new realms. The problem is where knowledge has been reified into a ‘thing’ rather than seeing it as a ‘process’ of relating between human beings. It is this process that is impossible to manage; yet it is the process that leads to critically new ways of thinking. As Stacey (2001, p.8) argues: “It is not possible to measure intellectual ‘capital’ in any meaningful way. Even more, it is an illusion to imagine that ‘you’, some powerful person in an organization, can manage learning and knowledge creation, quite simply because no one can manage human minds and human relationships of which knowledge is an essential aspect. The ideas of measuring and managing knowledge arise from a particular way of thinking about organizational life.” And it is that way of thinking that we wish to challenge in this paper as we describe developments in leadership training in Singapore.

One of the first questions we asked when rethinking our leadership training was: do we want to imitate best practice or do we want to move beyond best practice? The language of best practice and benchmarking had become part of the accepted vocabulary. We felt impelled to challenge such terms. So the question that emerged was:

Do we accept uncritically the rhetoric that has emerged from a mainstream management literature that has more to do with stability and linearity than with conditions we have not experienced before?

The creation of new knowledge is a necessary precondition for successful innovation, which has become prominent on the government’s agenda, largely because innovation is seen as the new economy driver. Gaining access to existing knowledge would help people to move towards best practice, but we recognised the need – in an environment of innovation and competitive advantage – to move *beyond* best practice. Fullan (1999) remarks that knowledge creation “is not the acquisition of best practices as products. It is the ability to generate and learn new ideas.” Our point of departure with Fullan, though, is where he implies that organisations can “tap into the values, meanings, day-to-day skills, knowledge and experiences of all members of the organization...and make them available for organizational problem-solving.” We question whether this really is possible. But Fullan goes on to admit that “the process of knowledge creation is no easy task. First, tacit knowledge by definition is hard to get at.” He also recognises that the loss of experienced employees can be problematic.

For us, the building of new insights, new knowledge and new practices has become a central theme in our preparation of school leaders. As Stacey (1993: 365) claims: “The practice of extraordinary management...is above all else concerned with the creation of new knowledge, largely of a qualitative kind – it is only through new knowledge that an organisation can innovate and develop new strategic directions.”

The critical issues

Creating new knowledge is problematic, however, from a mainstream management perspective. While the prevailing wisdom talks of ‘intended learning outcomes’ and ‘objectives’, combined with such rhetoric as ‘start with the end in mind’, we wonder how, in a knowledge creation process, you can realistically identify learning outcomes when no one knows what will be learned!

We do in fact know a number of things: for example, we know what we will teach; we know the nature of the experiences that the participants will face; and we know that participants in the process will engage in deep and meaningful learning. Thus, the programme architecture is one of creating the conditions in which new knowledge might emerge. From this angle, it is not the content that is important, but the nature of the diverse experiences that provoke new and powerful learning.

That was clearly a major issue. There were others. For example, in a paradigm dominated by mainstream management thought – mainly from the West – it was going to be a challenge to move people’s thinking beyond competencies, skills, codified knowledge and the imperatives of pervasive conceptual approaches, all claiming to be the panacea for the world’s leadership ills.

For example, the move towards competencies had become pervasive. Yet, this seemed to be paradoxical in the light of escalating support for collaborative learning concepts, which were being promoted throughout the school system (Lundy and Cowling, 1996). While there were – and still are – tensions and paradoxes in the system, Singapore appears to have a way of working creatively through them, and perhaps we ourselves are learning that such paradoxes are an important stimulus to our knowledge creation process in relation to the design and development of leadership training.

Designing a programme for a changing world: innovation

In designing these programmes for our school leaders, we looked at various models of leadership training, many of which seemed to help their trainees to acquire knowledge and skills for the present situation, based on an assumption of stability. These programmes may have little to do with a turbulent future or with innovation. In other words, the focus is on a set of skills and tasks required to operate the current stable system better. But this does not bring about a different system, which is pivotal to our concern for meeting the needs of a fast changing environment. As Portsmouth, Stott and Walker (2000) observe, there is a tendency to focus on doing the current things more efficiently with the current methods, and managers who behave in this way are colluding to maintain an overwhelmingly stable system. But far from stable equilibrium, leadership takes on a qualitatively different meaning, one in which creative new directions may emerge.

In looking at other training models, we saw strategies that were based on deficit models, where the intention was to diagnose leadership deficiencies and to then attempt to bring the performance up to some predetermined standard. We label this standard ‘the line of mediocrity’. In other words, the emphasis is on bringing performance that is below the line up to the level of the line. In a sense, this probably works well in a stable environment, because extraordinary performance is not required. However, in a context characterised by ‘unknowability’ a different level of capability is needed and that may be achieved – we would argue – by building on strength. From this perspective, innovative schools must build on strength and lessen the emphasis on weaknesses or ‘areas for improvement’.

We also recognised that our development of leaders must be for the future, not for the present. We had to provide not specific skills or competencies, but a broad spectrum of capability that would enable them to thrive in the future.

We must be careful, though, not to give the impression that capability is simply about ‘reacting’ to a changing future; it is also about exerting some influence over the shape that future will take. In other words, we see our future as permanently under construction, rather than merely unfolding. This is the essence of transformative teleology as against formative teleology. At the same time, we realise that the future is unknowable and the outcomes of our efforts are always uncertain.

Does this mean that we ignore the present issues and problems? Of course not. Indeed, there is a renewed emphasis on the present, for the conversations and actions in which we participate today will have an impact on tomorrow. In thinking about the future, therefore, we give attention to the quality of our present actions. In practice, this means experimenting with new ideas, trying different pedagogical approaches on a small scale, talking to people more and listening to what they say: all these will, we believe, change tomorrow in some way.

The new model of school-based learning that we designed enables participants to create new knowledge and to repackage knowledge in order to produce useful results. Essentially, school leaders must become *innovators*. In a knowledge-driven economy, they have to learn to put new knowledge into schools. They must lead others (teachers, students, parents) to do new things and must find different ways of doing existing things. The whole purpose of behaving in this way is to take the school to a higher level of achievement. In trying out ideas in the real world, they learn about intended and unintended outcomes, about the impact on people, and about the need to account for contingencies.

A new frame of reference

It is probably clear from what we have said so far that our thinking is substantially different from much of the conventional thought that underpins education management training. Indeed, a new frame of reference has started to emerge and this helps to contrast our recent and current ‘real world’ experience with much of the prevailing wisdom. It is a frame that is helping us to understand more about the development of principals for a changing world (Stacey, 1993):

Current thinking	A new frame
Predictability and linearity	The future is largely unknowable
Visions, missions and plans are important, including shared vision across the school	Dynamic agendas of strategic issues derived from multiple aspirations and perspectives
Cohesive teams of leaders, always seeking consensus	Learning teams of professionals, surfacing conflict and engaging in conversation
Decision making is logical and analytical	Decision making is exploratory and experimental
Strategy as the result of careful planning	Strategy as emergent from challenge and contradiction, from learning and politics
Top management controls strategic direction	Top management creates good conditions for people to generate new directions and ideas
Long term control, with progress measured against plans	Development is an open-ended process, with opportunities to change and learn

It would be misleading to suggest that we could actually derive prescriptions from this new frame of reference, but we were able to identify several pointers that would guide our thinking. Essentially, we were asking: how can we create the conditions in which innovation and new strategic direction can emerge? Obviously, when our participants become principals, they must apply the same questions and challenge the existing ways of viewing control and predictability, which, logically, lead to the imitation of innovations by others. The pointers were:

1. The notion of control would have to be challenged. Learning teams, through a process of political negotiation, would exert their own control. Our job – partly – was to let go and allow things to happen. That was not easy in an environment where control has been pervasive.

2. The use of power by force leads to conformity, submission or rebellion. In order to search for new perspectives, the dynamics need to be changed. We need to alternate between conflict and consensus, and between confusion and clarity. Thus, we have to withdraw sometimes and allow things to happen; sometimes intervene with ideas; and sometimes exert authority. This calls for an acceptance of individual expression, astutely illustrated in the work of Crowther, Hann and McMaster (2001), who advocate

the legitimacy of strong individualism, and question collegial consensus and teamwork being open to managerial manipulation.

3. We must allow groups of people to gather round issues that interest them and take them forward. If we form groups, it is best to give them ambiguous challenges and open up the opportunity for creative ideas we may not have thought of.

4. We should provoke different cultures. Allowing dominant cultures of managers with the same philosophy to dominate does not provoke new perspectives. One way is to change people's responsibilities and to bring people from other organisations into the team.

5. Just because the future is problematic and unknowable does not mean we should do nothing. Rather, we must take the risk of exposing ourselves to considerable challenges. Innovation invariably carries with it a degree of risk.

6. We must give attention to how we encounter existing mindsets and beliefs. We need to constantly question deeply held beliefs and points of view. One way we do this on our programme – apart from frequent conversations – is to require participants to read contrasting perspectives every time they are presented with one conceptual viewpoint. Another idea – a practical one for school leaders – is given in a chapter by Stott and Zhang (2000), where they explain how the principal, in wishing to introduce a significant change to a professional development scheme, legitimised the opposition to her proposals by asking members of the management team to identify the flaws.

7. Fullan (1999) tells us that “a flow of new and better knowledge and ideas is the lifeblood of continuous improvement.” Yet, knowledge creation is not about a ‘thing’ called knowledge, but a process. Even the knowledge management literature presents problems to us, because it promotes a belief about the ‘reification’ of knowledge – that knowledge is a ‘thing’ that can be manipulated by the organisation. In contrast, our view of knowledge is that it is a *process* that occurs when people interact with others and with themselves. Our programme is, in essence, an attempt to ascribe value to “the ordinary, observable communicative interactions between people in local situations in the living present” (Stacey, 2001).

The story so far...

It is a mainly happy story. We have encountered now two cohorts of ‘confused’ educators! They come to us quite uncertain about what they are in for. They are required to think in new and complex ways, and that sometimes leads to confusion. By the end of the programme, though, many recognise the transformational process they have been through and are ready to approach impending principalship with new eyes.

They do not leave us with the answers, and, again, perhaps that separates our programme from many others. For us, a test of the learning lies more in the great questions people ask at the end of it all than in the answers they have generated.

We practise what we preach! We ourselves have gone through mindset change in developing these programmes. We have done things we did not think possible before. We also continue to challenge everything we do and ask whether there are new and different things we should be engaged in. As partners with our participants in a creative learning process, we shall be satisfied only when we see them taking their schools into new realms

of excellence, and our information so far suggests that some of them are already doing that.

Extending leadership development through the school

After developing the principalship preparation programme, we had to ensure that our training for heads of department was congruent in terms of philosophy and focus. There was always a danger that innovative principals would be entering schools supported by middle managers whose mindsets belonged to the past. We had to move rapidly therefore to align the heads of department programme with the principalship programme.

We always believed that the impact of the revision would be considerable. They spend seventeen weeks full-time with NIE. In the new programme, which was implemented in January 2002, we give them an opportunity to challenge their thinking about a range of educational and leadership issues, and we provide a diversity of experience in order that they might gain new perspectives. Like the LEP, educators on the Diploma in Departmental Management (DDM) programme enjoy access to a range of modules, which are there essentially as learning support, while much of their learning takes place through collaborative work in groups.

Values

From our paper so far, it may seem that our work is largely nebulous, where anything is accepted under the label 'knowledge creation'. Of course, there is a danger in moving too far away from absolutism to relativism. Fortunately, we have a solid moral anchor in a set of values that permeate the education system and, to a certain extent, Singapore society as a whole. It would take a separate paper to discuss even the basic values, but it is sufficient to say that all new knowledge, all innovation – everything we do – is measured against the fundamental values. They are probably not dissimilar to some of the values in other systems, especially as they relate to student welfare and achievement, but Singapore, being a multiethnic society has promoted values that help to sustain both ethnic diversity and a 'single people' nation. Values undergird everything we do in a very powerful way.

Finally...

It seems strange to admit that we, as the Leaders in Education Programme designers, are just beginning to find out what is really happening in the programme. Participants themselves report significant change in the way they think, and they tell us – several months into their first principalship – how they believe the experience has served them. Some of the stories we hear are quite unpredictable and convince us that individuals take away substantially different learning gains.

We are also starting to understand the way in which the programme is being felt by others in the system. For many, there are regrets that they have not been through this programme, and they explain that they can see the difference in present graduates. Those

at the top of the profession speak warmly about the programme's achievements and believe that it is meeting a deep need for fundamental change.

In developing a greater understanding of how the programme works and impacts the lives of participants, certain key words seem to be coming to the fore. We have mentioned already the word 'challenge'. This is something that permeates everything we do in each learning experience. We present contrasting points of view, different ways of doing the same things, new ways of achieving new ends, and the belief that whenever someone claims something cannot be done, someone will do it! Challenge has indeed been a key feature.

Another key word has been that of 'breakthrough'. There have been many fine examples of breakthroughs in the innovation projects. These successes have taken the schools concerned to new levels. But breakthroughs go beyond the projects: they are equally important in changing people's thinking.

No doubt other words will arise as the months go by. Some things may become more prominent on the agenda, while others may slip quietly away. This is a phenomenon we have to contend with if our programme is going to ride the waves of change and provide the extraordinary leaders that are needed to keep Singapore education as a key player on the world scene.

We have mentioned the notion of 'extraordinariness' several times without explaining what it means. Perhaps that is because we don't truly know! In one of our favourite papers of the 1990s – Leadership for the New Millennium by Hedley Beare, which was delivered as the William Walker Oration in 1998 at the Gold Coast – the enigmatic nature of great leadership is discussed. For example, Hedley Beare says: "This wisdom of sensing what is right or opportune is a quality which memorable leaders often have. Gifted leaders seem to experience conjunctions of unlikely events which work together almost miraculously." Some call it 'good luck': we believe otherwise! Beare also talks about artistry, symbolism, meaning, cultural creativity and transcendence. He talks about the supra-rationality of leaders, the spirit and the soul. He explains: "Leading from the soul means that they understand themselves at deep levels; and leading from spirit means that they position their own efforts in a much wider scheme of things." That may point the direction to extraordinariness, but it may be simpler to say that it is not about the instrumentality of management. It is certainly more descriptive than prescriptive.

Amidst all this rhetoric about 'extraordinariness', we have not lost sight of the day-to-day realities of life as a principal. Indeed, our thinking has been based on challenges to the unreal and idealistic. For example, there is persuasive evidence that much of the effort we put into planning is probably wasted in today's turbulent times. We are, therefore, as much concerned with the realities of management as is Fullan (1999), who talks about lofty ideals when facing your worst class on a Friday afternoon. Having been brought back to earth, let us not underestimate the value of hope, for, as Caldwell (2003) rightly observes: "This, almost transcendent, sense of hope has sustained the efforts of many school leaders."

We started this paper with a question. We would like to finish with the same question, because, despite everything we say about leadership development and the impact of our efforts, we don't truly know the outcomes of our actions. It is good to remind ourselves – in deep humility – of our lack of control. We would like to think we

are in control, but that is illusory, and that is why we embarked on a new course for our training of leaders. The question is: what does extraordinary leadership mean when powerful leaders select, plan and control certain courses of action, but cannot select, plan or control the outcomes of those courses of action?

It is with that question that we wish you well as you too in Thailand and elsewhere, like we in Singapore, seek to provide extraordinary leaders, who will lead and be participants in the transformation of our schools of the future.

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