Hello, thank you for downloading this podcast from Teacher magazine – I’m Jo Earp.

School leaders play a crucial role in improving outcomes for students and the success of a school community. But, what happens when they leave? In today’s episode of School Improvement we’re talking about succession planning. My guest is Peter Mader – President of the South Australian Secondary Principals’ Association. I started by asking him why it’s important to have a leadership pipeline in place.

Peter Mader: Given the significant role that schools play in a community, I think we appreciate that young people need the best quality leadership and teaching and learning that they can possibly have. So, we know stories of where schools have had a fabulous leader and the young peoples’ experience of that has been inspirational and empowering and then there's been a leader that has been inadequately prepared and the school community suffers as a consequence of that. So it's incredibly important that we get the pipeline to the principalship right and that we prepare the next generation of leaders as best as we possibly can.

Jo Earp: Can you give an overview of the professional development work that SASPA, you’re President of SASPA, is doing in this area?

PM: For the past two years we’ve run a professional learning program called Unleashing Your Leadership Potential. The scope and sequence of that program is based on the work of our national association ASPA, where for three years in a row they brought together 100 of the nation's best principal practitioners to develop a very deep understanding of the qualities that were needed for an ‘edupreneurial’ principal – which is the type of leader that we think is needed in 21st Century schools.

In the two years that we’ve been running Unleashing Your Leadership Potential, 82 secondary leaders – mainly deputy principal and assistant principal classifications – have completed the program. There are only four out of those 82 that have become principals, but all graduates have expanded their leadership capacity and are able to
meet their current job demands and importantly they have the confidence to take that next step in their leadership journey once it presents itself.

JE: Now, I’m guessing there are lots of different situations where this plan could be enacted – short-term and long-term – I’m thinking those that have been on the cards for a while, things like a planned retirement or long-service leave, but there are also things that happen unexpectedly out of the blue, aren’t there?

PM: Yes there are and one of the important things that’s happening here in South Australia is that where it’s understood that there’s a young leader who hasn’t had as much experience as they or the system might have wanted them to have, that mentoring support is wrapped around that early career principal and that’s usually provided by networks of experienced principals who have recently left the profession.

JE: So, looking at things from a principal perspective then, what are the key elements of good succession planning in terms of their role?

PM: The role of the principal in any school is to make sure that all of their staff are the best educators they can possibly be. So, in working with executive leaders, principals, regardless of their experience in the job, really need to take control of building capacity of those executive leaders – focusing on their professional growth and providing them with leadership stretch that includes challenging them to work outside of their comfort zone and to take on new and ever more increasingly complex tasks and roles.

The ‘what’ can be things like staffing, finances, transition programs and those sorts of things. They tend to be processes and practices that play important roles within schools. But fundamentally the principal should be focusing in on the ‘how’ and working with their executive leadership team [on] achieving the positive responses they get from the people with whom they work. Ultimately, to be a principal in a school you’re a system leader and that means that you have a good grasp on all of the elements within that system (the ‘what’). But it’s the ‘how’ and the interrelationship between those processes and practices and the role that people play to make them successful that’s the important leadership stretch that often young and aspiring leaders need to receive development with.

JE: Does that mean then that if you’re in the principal role – I’m thinking from a perspective of all roles, whatever our job or role, if we thought ‘tomorrow, for some reason, my work gets handed over’ – Who is really going to understand? How much knowledge is held internally [with one person]? Is that just a case of, well,
not simplifying it but good record keeping or keeping things up to date? Is that a key?

PM: That's part of the key and it's really fundamental to the digital age that we've got more information than we've probably ever had before in terms of the 'what', the processes and practices that are undertaken in schools. It was certainly much more difficult in the paper age. That said though, there are always, within a large secondary school in particular, a number of people who have roles to play within a particular practice and process. So, you might be a new leader who's stepped into the responsibility of managing the staffing process within the school, but there would have been a team of people involved in that process – one leader steps out, a new leader steps in, so there's the interrelational knowledge that exists within a team that can be drawn upon, as well as the transactional knowledge that may have been kept within the digital profile of the previous leader.

JE: Finally then, if you've just moved into the role (you could be a new principal or it might be a change of school, for example) obviously you look at things from the association perspective and there's an awful lot of work from associations and at system level, but at the principal level how soon should you be thinking about this then? You've just moved into the role, how soon should you be thinking about getting those plans in place? I think for most people it seems a very long way off – 'when I leave'. And, what would you suggest would be a good starting point?

PM: Day one. That may seem a little bit ambitious but the reality is that none of us know what tomorrow holds and fundamentally, as I said earlier, the responsibility of the principal is to make sure that everybody is the best educator they possibly can be and to make sure that within a team situation, the individuals who make up that team have the capacity to ensure that the school is well led, regardless of whether the principal is there tomorrow or not.

And, that's a difficult scenario, particularly if you're a first time principal walking into that situation. But it is the reality, that none of us can stop professional growth. We're in an industry that demands of us to be ahead of the next step. One of the benefits of being part of a professional network, like SASPA, is that you have colleagues who are undertaking the same role that you are undertaking as a principal. We establish good mentoring and support systems, and within our network we take the approach that we learn the work by doing the work, sharing our understanding of the impact of that work and reflecting with our colleagues about how best to improve it. And if you're having those conversations, on a weekly, monthly, term-by-term basis, within the network then that gives you the confidence and increased capacity to stretch the young, aspiring leaders around you to take on
the ever-increasing demands that they might face, given sudden changes within a school community.

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