



## The Reflective Principle

# Invitational leadership

LEADERS NEED TO BE CONSTANTLY REFLECTING, ANALYSING THEIR ACTIONS AND WORDS TO SEE IF THEY ARE INVITING OR SUPPRESSING LEADERSHIP IN OTHERS, SAYS DAVID LOADER.

A friend of mine has recently been applying for middle management positions in schools. His lack of success has surprised me, as he is well qualified and even gifted both as a teacher and leader. He shows initiative, is highly motivated, empathetic and intellectually curious, yet this seems to be irrelevant in the assessment process. He's been told that his three-year absence from the profession and subsequent lack of experience in schools counts against him, despite his personal and professional experience outside schools. Given his obvious commitment, the last surprise to me is that he's received no constructive feedback or suggestion about leadership experiences or training courses that might develop those skills and experiences that it's thought he currently lacks.

A key challenge for principals and their leadership teams is not only to select good people in succession planning, but also to be open to the self-nomination of other potential leaders for leadership opportunities. How many people have been discouraged from applying for further positions because of an inadvertent put-down they received when they made their first tentative application for a leadership position?

I'm reminded of a perceptive leadership theory that explores leadership from the point of view of 'invitation.' John Novak, Professor of Education at Brock University, suggests there's an intentional invitation process wherein a person is invited into leadership or actively refused an invitation, but there's also an unintentional invitation process whereby our actions and words may powerfully encourage or discourage leadership initiatives in others.

We tend to judge ourselves by our intentions, and others by their behaviours, but in the hurly-burly busy-ness of daily life we can

forget the powerful impact of our behaviour, committed and omitted. The discouragement of leadership initiative might occur through an abrupt or angry response to an error, perceived insensitivity to suggestions, poor feedback after an interview, or simply a lack of forethought regarding the consequences of words and actions. Conversely, encouragement could come from positive relationships, constructive feedback, a culture of personal and professional respect, and no blame when things go wrong. We are aware of our intentional leadership acts, but perhaps we need to be more aware of unintentional ones.

As educators, we are focused, Novak argues, on 'creatively summoning all people to realise more of their social, intellectual, emotional, moral and creative potential.' This must be true not just of our school's curriculum and pedagogy, but also of our leadership interactions. Novak sees invitational leadership as part of school leadership's larger ethical responsibility to create a culture wherein members of staff show respect, care, optimism and intentionality to each other as well as to students and parents. He wants leaders to see the emphasis in relationships upon doing-with rather than doing-to, calling forth participation in leadership, not dictating what is to happen. And he argues that this begins by developing goodwill and trust, taking a real interest in the people with whom you work, helping them achieve goals that are meaningful to them and respecting confidences.

One problem for leaders is that they tend to communicate best with people who are most like themselves. In-groups may form and unintentionally exclude people. The reality, though, is that good leaders reach out to embrace diversity and form teams of

people with different strengths and weaknesses.

Another important part of invitational leadership theory is that it can be applied to the self. Too often leaders let themselves become run down by a total commitment to the task. They find no time for themselves. Novak also wants leaders to invite themselves to nurture their personal growth.

We need to consider our own behaviours and also think about the intentions of others. Leaders need to be constantly reflecting, analysing their actions and words to see if they are guilty of unintentionally suppressing leadership in others, because for renewal and extension of leadership to occur within a school, both initiative and responsiveness are critical.

Returning to my friend, how good it would have been if schools had considered negotiating some alternatives instead of bluntly delivering the result – unsuccessful. It would have been good if schools had a process for assisting applicants to handle rejection. Perhaps my friend was not the best fit for the particular job, but that's what the message should convey, supported by an equally strong statement of encouragement and support for future development. **1**

## REFERENCES

Novak, J.M. (2009). *Invitational leadership, in The Essentials of School Leadership*. Ed. Brent Davies. London: Sage.

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