Seeing things differently

THE METAPHORS WE USE CAN HELP US ARTICULATE NEW MENTAL MODELS THAT WILL ASSIST OUR SCHOOL COMMUNITY TO UNDERSTAND THE NEED FOR, AND PATHWAYS TO, CHANGE. DAVID LOADER EXPLAINS.

In discussions with participants at Futures Focused Schools workshops I’ve recently been conducting around Australia, I’ve been reminded just how powerful metaphors can be in limiting or extending the effectiveness of school leaders who want to initiate change.

Some leaders, for example, see schools as machines. As a result, their emphasis is on ‘inputs and outputs’; people are seen as resources to be managed; leaders have a ‘tool kit’ to get to the ‘nuts and bolts’ of issues and intervene at the point of maximum leverage; and the school is in good shape when it’s ‘running like clockwork.’ The result of this is a leadership focus on design, standardisation, measurement and control.

Another common way in which leaders view their schools is as a living organism, where people must be ‘nurtured’ if they are ‘to grow’; teachers are like ‘gardeners’; and change is evolutionary. Others see the school as a political system with leaders and followers, hidden agendas, alliances and gatekeepers. Some people use a brain metaphor, in which the school focus is upon intelligence, learning, networks and feedback.

These various metaphorical ways of seeing schools influence our ways of operating and thinking: how we set goals, execute plans, make commitments and relate to others. That’s why it’s important that we identify the metaphors that are being used in our communities if we are to open our community to change.

Attentive leaders find out how key stakeholders view the school, usually from many different points of view and through the lens of very different metaphors. Students may see the school as a prison, for example, while parents may see it as their child’s ticket to the future, teachers as a battle-ground, politicians as a power base, the community as a financial drain, consultants as a pot of gold and principals as a garden.

Metaphors determine what is seen, but also what goes unseen. If a principal views their school as a war zone, they will focus on any belligerent or confrontational behaviours and possibly not notice more positive behaviours. Whether we realise it or not, at all times each of us is using metaphors to guide our actions. The fact that sometimes we use contradictory metaphors, at one time appealing to a mechanical metaphor and at another time using an organic metaphor, doesn’t seem to be a problem.

Given that school leadership is based on taken-for-granted metaphors, it’s important that we identify our personal metaphors and examine them for their relevance and validity. A challenging exercise is to have a peer help you to identify the metaphors that you use and then work with you to examine their appropriateness and implications for how you exercise leadership.

Another interesting and rewarding exercise is to ask a staff group to find an object that typifies their leadership style, or something that describes the school’s approach to learning and teaching. Once found, they bring that object to the meeting and describe why they chose it. Of course, the object of itself is not important, but the reasons and descriptions are. By discussing an object – something ‘out there,’ rather than ourselves or our feelings – it’s possible to identify commonalities and to air differences. We can then engage in comfortable or safe discussions of these differences. An outcome of such an exercise might be to achieve a better alignment in staff thinking about values and ways of acting within the school.

Metaphors help explain what we do. For instance, the people in a school might explain their core beliefs, describing them as our ‘pillars of learning.’ Those in another school might explain that their learning goal, no longer centred on classes but more personally focused, is the creation of a ‘community of independent learners.’ Another school that sees its role being more than academic learning, might describe itself as a ‘village.’ A principal, defending a proactive role for their school, might argue that the school is more than ‘a parking lot.’ There is, however, no ‘right’ or ‘best’ metaphor, nor even a single metaphor that can give an all-purpose point of view for structuring everything we do.

Metaphors and their analysis can create energy and understanding; in fact we could describe a school as a network of interacting stories and conversations. The challenge facing leaders is to become skilled at using metaphors so that they can articulate new mental models that will assist the school community to understand the need for, and pathways to, change. Using the power of metaphor is not some ‘nice to have’ tool, but an indispensable skill.

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The Futures Focused School Project is being undertaken by Educational Transformations in partnership with Teaching Australia.

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