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 seem 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.

REFERENCES

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