

Leading a Digital School

Mal Lee

It is ever more apparent that principals are central to the successful on-going evolution of schools, particularly when the school moves to a digital operational base.

Indeed the indicators increasingly suggest school principals, in both the positive and negative sense, are primarily responsible for the current digital divide between schools. While teachers, bureaucrats, governments, funding, school culture and until recently the technology itself can make the principal's job very difficult, and at times near impossible ultimately it is only the principal, the school's chief educational architect and decision maker, its CEO who can lead the school to the digital evolutionary stage and beyond.

In 2008 Professor Mike Gaffney and I published **Leading a Digital School**, probably the first work that coined the term 'digital school' and which specifically examined the role of the principal in a school operating on a digital base. Since then, in conjunction with colleagues in the UK, US, NZ and Australia I've penned a selection of books and plethora of articles (<http://www.malleehome.com>) that have more fully examined the evolution of schooling and the role of the principal therein.

Indeed I wrote a piece on the topic for **Educational Technology Solutions** only a year ago.

However in researching the forthcoming book on **Digital Normalisation and School Transformation** where I took the opportunity to build on the earlier work and interview some 70 schools and astute education observers in the four nations on the current situation in schools that had or nearly had normalised the whole school use of the digital technology the importance of the head's leadership became ever more apparent.

In all the lead role of the principal was paramount, and central to school's digital normalisation.

Ever higher order, evermore complex and integrated, and ever evolving school ecologies require astute principals able to conduct increasingly sophisticated world-class 'orchestras'.

Decades of school effectiveness research, from the pioneering work by the likes of Lightfoot (1983), Sergiovanni (1986), (Goodlad (1986) and Beare, Caldwell and Millikan (1989) onwards have underscored the importance of the principal in what were at that stage relatively simple paper based organisations.

As schools move to a digital operational base, an ever higher order operational mode, an ever evolving ecology that increasingly integrates the 'in and out of school' teaching and learning all the signs suggest the importance of the principal will be ever greater. While specific in-depth research has yet to be undertaken on the nature and importance of the principal's role in such an environment the case study experience – as well as logic – would point to the principal's contribution to the effectiveness and success of a school escalating.

While some would rightly argue all schools need successful leadership teams and not simply an astute principal the point made by Peter Drucker (2001) of industry equally holds with schools, that all organisations must ultimately have a CEO who takes ultimate responsibility for the workings of the organisation.

In any institution there has to be a final authority, that is, a “boss” – someone who can make the final decision and who can expect them to be obeyed (Drucker, 2001, p11)

In the school it is the principal.

Not surprisingly every one of the pathfinder schools had an astute principal who was prepared to play a lead role over a concerted period, often over many years in shaping the desired mode of schooling.

In performing that role they demonstrated the leadership and people skills that have long been associated with successful principals but in addition they all, probably unwittingly, demonstrated a set of skills and a mindset particular to the digital school.

It is the latter that is the focus of this article.

Central role

Ever evolving schools operating on a digital base, experiencing significant natural growth that will have to be constantly shaped to realise the desired benefits require the school principal be the conductor of an ever more sophisticated, ever-larger ‘orchestra’ where in addition to the professional players there may well be sizeable parent, student and community membership, with all the players invariably wanting to constantly perform at the international standard.

It requires the principal as the conductor to understand the total score, the finer nuances therein and when change or retention of the status quo is required. It requires of the principal, the head teacher, to have a macro understanding of all the school’s workings, a strong educational base and an intimate awareness of all the key school operations and their interrelation.

The contrast with the traditional silo like operation, particularly that of high schools where the principal often has little or no understanding of the work of the siloes is pronounced.

In employing the metaphor of the chief conductor it most assuredly does not mean the principal needs to be the sole conductor or to do the actual playing.

Rather it requires the empowerment of the total ‘orchestra’ and its support staff, and the constant monitoring, either directly or through delegates, of the part that all members are playing in the performance.

Attributes of principal operating in digital and networked mode

Many of the attributes required to undertake this kind of whole school conducting are those that have been enunciated in the general leadership and school literature for decades and are to be found in virtually all the education authority publications and standards. Attributes like a strong educational

philosophy, the willingness to lead, the facility to articulate the desired vision, an in-depth understanding of the instructional program, strong people and management skills, the setting of high expectations, political acumen, attention to detail and the capacity to manage the school's finite resources are as important as ever. There is no point in reiterating them at this stage.

What however is important is to discuss are those attributes that emerged out of the work of the pathfinders that are particularly important for principals working in digital and networked schools.

- **Digital acumen**

In the research my colleagues and I have conducted over the last five years (Lee and Gaffney, 2008), (Lee and Winzenried, 2009), (Lee and Finger, 2010), (Lee and Levins, 2012), (Lee and Ward, 2013), (Lee and Broadie, 2013) all the principals leading successful schools operating in the digital or networked mode demonstrated a high level of digital acumen.

On first glance that might seem blindingly obvious but in Australia at least that is still not readily evident in the literature or national standards for school principals. What is the situation with in your school?

Although principals do not have to be a digital technology expert, they do need a macro working understanding of the digital technology with which they will be working. The digital technology in all its forms is core to all facets of the school's operations and as the school's chief educational architect principals have to know how it should be used astutely.

Principals who delegate the technology to a middle manager are in reality abrogating their role as the school's chief conductor and any hope the school has of going digital.

- **Networked mindset**

Another new and vital attribute required is a networked mindset that is constantly scanning the networked community for opportunities to collaborate and to enhance the educational offerings or the school's resources.

The contrast with the traditional insular outlook of heads is marked.

- **Willingness to take charge**

Without labouring the point principals as the school's chief conductor have to take charge of all facets of the school's evolution.

The pathfinders have underscored the principal has to be proactive and lead, neither waiting for the 'system' to give the green light or delegating the responsibility to other staff.

- **Clear shaping educational vision**

While always theoretically important what is apparent as schools evolve is that the imperative of the effective shaping educational vision becomes ever-greater, as does a principal consonant with that vision, intimately aware of the many elements needing attention.

Vitality the principal, the head needs to be able to consistently articulate that vision succinctly and powerfully to all manner of audiences.

- **Instructional leadership**

All the aforementioned attributes point very strongly to the CEO of the digital school needing to be an instructional leader, an educator with the deep educational understanding required to take ultimate responsibility for constantly shaping an ever-evolving school ecology.

It is a very substantial challenge, requiring a very capable person with the wherewithal to convert a plethora of shaping forces into a consistently effective school.

- **Commitment to enhanced educational attainment**

Along with the clear shaping educational was the drive by all the pathfinder principals, some might say the passion, to have all the students enhance their attainment.

It is appreciated this has been to the fore in all good schools but it appears to be that much more up front in the pathfinders, with most openly expressing the desire to match the schooling they provide with the best internationally.

- **Ability to understand and ride the megatrends**

One of the vital skills on track to become ever more important is the facility to read the swelling megatrends, to know when to catch those waves, how to ride them and get the most from them and vitally when to get off and catch the next.

Interestingly while it is undoubtedly a talent many a school principal has had for some time it is an attribute until recent times rarely mentioned in the educational leadership literature, shaped as it has so often been by the sense of constancy and school insularity.

The societal and technological megatrends have had a profound impact on the transformation of schools and are on track to have an ever-greater influence. Indeed so powerful are many of those developments schools can I'd argue only ever hope to ride them to advantage.

- **Big picture planning**

All the pathfinder schools well understood the impact of the megatrends and the constantly, and often rapidly evolving scene and have opted to employ big picture planning strategies that allow the chief conductor to vary the pace of the orchestra's performance as the situation required.

In an ever more tightly integrated ever-evolving school ecology where all the parts are interrelated there is little place for the traditional segmented five-year development plans where bureaucrats oblige schools to identify the month several years hence when a program will be completed.

- **Thrive on chaos - and change**

Principals have not only to have the personal wherewithal to thrive in a world of constant change but to assist create a school wide culture that relishes change, and chaos.

Tom Peters, the management writer identified this need for the business back in 1987 with his *Thriving on Chaos*. Twenty-five years on principals need to both appreciate and thrive within that environment.

It is an environment seemingly most within the pathfinder schools have come to relish, to enjoy the excitement, the vibrancy, the ever opening educational opportunities, the professional rewards and generally to thrive.

- **Organisational integration**

The onus on, and the need for the principal to constantly ensure all the elements in the ever-evolving ecology are integrated and vitally are directed at realising the desired education is considerable, and growing.

Principals do have to know the total orchestral score; the finer nuances therein and constantly address the desired totality.

Equally they need quickly to decide if a proposed addition to the school's operations is consonant with the school's shaping vision and can be readily integrated into the school's ecology.

Yes all the staff, teaching and professional, do need to support that work but ultimately it has to be the head, the principal who ensures the requisite integration occurs.

- **Empowerment and trust**

The willingness and facility of the principal to trust and empower the total school community, and in particular the professional staff in a networked organisation is critical. Lipnack and Stamps (1994) in their work on networked organisations speak of the need for leaders at multiple levels and allowing staff the autonomy, the independence to lead the change. That was apparent in all the pathfinders.

- **Focussing on the priorities**

School principals have always theoretically had to set the school's priorities.

In rapidly evolving, ever changing schools where potential opportunities are being opened virtually each week, where staff highly enthusiastic and committed are pushing the boundaries and where governments, their agencies and society in general have seemingly growing expectations of what should be tackled by the school, the pathfinder principals have increasingly had to identify the priorities apposite to the school realising its educational vision and let the less important go through to the keeper or be accorded minimal attention.

That skill drew upon the head's understanding of the total score and their political acumen.

While principals have always had to protect the staff from the extraneous the further the schools move along the evolutionary the more important becomes the need.

- **Controlling the pace**

The school's chief conductor has to control the pace of the evolution, carefully monitoring the load on each staff member, allowing the natural growth to run its course and if needed to slow the tempo for a time.

The contrast with many of the traditional paper schools where inertia is often the norm and teachers have to be energised is dramatic.

The pathfinders comment on the very real issue of slowing down highly committed teachers anxious to grasp every opportunity for their students, of ensuring senior staff constantly monitor for signs of stress, applying due stress relief measures and when apposite applying the brakes.

It is new art for principals to learn.

Conclusion

For Australia to have every one of its 9,500 schools operating on a digital base, ever evolving, and ever providing an apposite international standard for the digital and networked world it requires 9,500 principals capable of leading a digital school.

Is that too much to expect?

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