



Leader development – it's personal!

Peter Earley and **Sara Bubb** call for a radical overhaul of leader development which places more focus on opportunities for personal development.

■■■ Challenge, change and stress

The work of school leaders is more complex than ever. Challenges include accountability pressures associated with high-stakes testing; school inspections; league tables and exam performance; curriculum developments; changes in assessment; and human resources issues, such as recruiting quality teachers or maintaining staff morale. Allen et al. (2016) found that schools with the most disadvantaged pupil intakes tend to have more inexperienced teachers, more unqualified teachers and higher staff turnover, suggesting that these schools' leaders face even greater difficulties than most.

Research evidence also shows that given the intensity of the job, the emotional demands, the accompanying workload and the high-stakes accountability cultures in

which they work, school leaders, especially headteachers suffer from high levels of occupational stress (Bakker 2015; OECD 2013). It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that many education systems are experiencing difficulties in recruiting and retaining school principals.

All-consuming workloads and challenges must be seen as surmountable and the leadership task perceived as possible for ordinary mortals. As the punishing pace of school leaders' work and the demanding and draining nature of the calls upon them increases, they need to be helped to develop confidence in their leadership and management capabilities and to acquire appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills. They also need to know that they have or can develop the self-awareness, personal resolve and resilience to maintain their

wellbeing and work-life balance and, importantly, that they have the support of others in so doing.

■■■ Personal effectiveness and self-awareness

Support for school leaders to deal with matters of professional isolation, workload and personal wellbeing may come from a variety of sources, both professional and personal. For example, research studies have pointed to the importance of fellow heads, senior colleagues, the chair of governors, local district officers, school advisers, networks (real and virtual), a coach or mentor, a spouse or partner. However, this support needs to be ongoing, flexible and responsive to changing needs over time (Bush 2015; Earley *et al.* 2011).

Leaders need intellectual breadth and agility, self-awareness and self-confidence, good interpersonal skills and high degrees of resilience if they are to deal successfully with complexity, resolve paradoxes and make informed decisions. They also need opportunities to think and reflect which is becoming increasingly difficult to find in the hurly-burly life of schools and the ‘busyness’ of headship. The provision of support and opportunities to develop as highly effective and successful school principals – to survive and thrive – is therefore crucial and more important than ever.

The late Harry Tomlinson, a regular contributor to PDT, stated that “personal effectiveness is a precondition of professional excellence” (2004) and pointed to the importance of self-management and self-awareness thus:

Improved self-management increases an education leader’s ability to cope with stress, resolve conflict, manage change and manage to change, achieve sustainable peak performance, build and lead effective teams, and influence organizational cultures.

Another PDT contributor, Michael Waters, in two important articles written 20 years ago (1998a and 1998b) introduced us to the notion of ‘pro-personal’ development. This he explains: ‘is the development that can occur when teachers are construed first and foremost as people, and is predicated on the premise that people are always much more than the roles they

play’ (1998a). Professional development and leadership development can be defined as the technical knowledge and skills relating to ‘occupational role development’, whilst personal development refers to the development of ‘the person, often the “whole person”’ (*ibid.*, 30). Personal development is ‘often necessary to complement and “complete” professional development’ (*ibid.*).

Personal development which almost always involves changes in self-awareness (Waters 1998a) is therefore seen as a fundamental part of the job not an optional extra. Leader development is above all the development of the individual and only secondarily the development of the role. The premise is that the more we learn about ourselves the better we will perform in our job. In a similar vein, Seward-Thompson, also writing in PDT, (1998) argues that ‘it is the whole person who carries out the role and that personal development is at least as useful in successful fulfilment of the role as any professional skills or knowledge’. The more common approach to personal development is perhaps best described by Waters’ term ‘pro-personal development’. This is development that is not genuinely ‘personal’ in its focus but is personal development for professional development purposes (Waters 1998a).

Nicholas and West-Burnham (2016) have argued that although leadership development and training opportunities are more available for leaders than ever before, the bulk of them focus on the technical and the organisational, yet:

there are other dimensions to (leader) sustainability that we believe are being neglected – that is the personal aspects of well-being and wellness. This might be best understood as personal efficacy (i.e. the development of the whole person) – the recognition that leadership is more than an aggregation of technical skills and that it requires the engagement of all aspects of the person (Nicholas and West Burnham, 2016).

We strongly support such sentiments and believe insufficient attention is given to such matters. School leaders are increasingly being asked to acquire and develop their ‘intelligences’ (e.g. emotional, contextual, strategic) as well as their knowledge and skills (Day

and Sammons 2013). Research, however, especially into successful and highly effective school leaders (e.g. Moos *et al.* 2011) points, *inter alia*, to the importance of whole person development and it reinforces Waters’ exhortation for development which links improved personal management with increased professional efficacy. The importance of ‘resilience’ has also been noted in the literature as crucial to individual effectiveness (Day and Hong 2016; Day and Gurr 2016; Steward 2014). Beltman *et al.* (2011) note how resilience is essential to ‘ensure that those who stay in the profession do not just survive, but thrive as confident and healthy professionals’.

The importance of personal aspects, such as resilience were similarly highlighted in a research report investigating the characteristics of headteachers in successful school ‘turnarounds’ (McAleavy and Riggall (2016). Headteachers said:

they learned the importance of such personal qualities as resilience, a capacity for extremely hard work and a dogged relentlessness of focus. Several themes emerged from their answers: the need for optimism, an emphasis on the importance of motivation and a willingness to seek out support from others. Many respondents made reference to the concept of resilience. (McAleavy and Riggall, 2016).

■■■ New approach to leadership development

Developing strength of character in professional and personal spheres are mutually supportive and beneficial. However, we wish to propose that there is a need for development programmes to give greater prominence to elements of personal development, including developing character, self-awareness and resilience, which are even more important as the role of school leaders changes and their work becomes ever more demanding and all-consuming. We argue that whilst the provision of leadership development opportunities continues to be essential, greater attention needs to be given to individuals and their personal development - their wellbeing and developing the personal qualities and traits required for school leaders

to operate in such demanding working conditions. Consideration is also given to forms of support to aid school leaders’ continuing effective performance, all the more important whilst working within a high stakes accountability culture. In other words we ask, what is needed for school leaders to ‘survive’, ‘thrive’ and also ‘revive’ (or be rejuvenated) in the current educational landscape?

Lovett *et al.* (2015), from a review of the international literature, note that there is general agreement that ‘school leaders need high levels of self-efficacy, resilience, self-awareness and judgement in order to cope with the emotional demands and complexities inherent in school-based ethical decision-making’. A major investigation of the impact of leadership by Day and colleagues found evidence of an association between leaders’ personal qualities and leadership success. Successful leaders they found were ‘Open minded, ready to learn, flexible, persistent in their high expectations of others and emotionally resilient and optimistic. Such traits help explain why successful leaders facing daunting conditions are often able to push forward against the odds’ (Day *et al.*, 2011).

■■■ Personalised development

Leader and leadership development are critical at all levels in an organisation. We know that

approaches to development should be bespoke or personalised. The most successful training and development programmes are adapted to the needs of the individual participant and elements of customised programmes are now more commonly found outside education (Pillans 2015). School leaders need to take greater responsibility for planning and implementing their own learning experiences to meet their personal and professional needs.

Lovett *et al.* (2015) note ‘the limited role individuals seem to take in shaping their own professional learning, seemingly preferring to rely on others to determine what, why and how they should learn’. For them, leaders need to be able to reflect systematically and across time on their knowledge and understanding of leadership and that ‘knowledge



of personal shortcomings and knowing what to do to overcome them is a particularly desirable self-related learning goal for leaders, because it helps them guard against arrogance, complacency, pretentiousness and narcissism.’

In our view it is desirable to strive towards a healthy balance between what an individual ‘wants’ and what they might ‘need’. Customised programmes are therefore essential and need a greater focus on the development of the individual leader, especially the development of the person – their personal effectiveness or personal efficacy - to enable them to be able to ‘survive’ and ‘thrive’; and when necessary to ‘revive’. School leaders should be encouraged to take greater responsibility for their own personal and professional learning.

■ ■ ■ Opportunities

The importance of reflection

Principals and other school leaders’ development is most effective when time is built in for reflection but it is often hard to find such time given high workloads and ‘greedy’ organisations. Structured opportunities to reflect with others (such as with a coach or in a tutorial

or network) can lead to powerful learning. Reflection has been long identified as an important leadership skill but it is in danger of getting lost due to work intensification.

Adult learning theory or androgogy tells us that people need time and space to reflect on what they have learned and plan for how they will put such learning into action. But reflection does not come easily to busy people. The frenetic pace of life in schools makes it difficult to create space for leaders to reflect on what they have learned, and receive feedback and support, such as through coaching, all of which have been found to be critically important to sustaining adult learning (Pillans 2015). It is not known if many leadership development programmes in education place a great emphasis on teaching how to reflect and its importance.

Nicholas and West-Burnham (2016) note that ‘in practical terms, the most powerful basis for (leadership) learning is supported reflection – support being provided through coaching and mentoring, the use of a reflective journal, structured reading to inform review and, perhaps most importantly, peer review and feedback on actual practice’. It is increasingly recognised that learning is a key component of the job itself – not an

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adjunct or a bonus but a crucial element in the definition of the role – and therefore there is a need to schedule time and space for regular reflection along with networks (virtual and actual) to nourish, support and challenge.

Experience is not everything; people do not learn solely from experience but from reflecting on that experience - and that requires time. Leaders’ development is most effective when time is built in or created for reflection. Learning intensifies when we reflect on what we have experienced; and the more recent the experience we reflect on, the greater and more intense the learning. The key question, then, is how can opportunities for reflection and critical thinking be created for school leaders which will help them ‘survive’ and ‘thrive’?

The role of coaching and mentoring in supporting reflection is key. This is discussed by Barnett and O’Mahony (2008) who argue that the coach’s ability to

pose reflective questions to stimulate leaders’ thinking and action is perhaps the most important reflective tool. The ability to reflect, explore and really open up about their leadership role in a safe and private space was welcomed in our research. The coach was regarded as neutral and non-judgemental and this was considered essential for exploring sensitive matters. Coaches can stimulate thoughtful reflection through active listening and posing questions in non-threatening ways and there is no shortage of evidence that coaches and mentors influence the reflective abilities of the individual leaders they work with, helping them to examine various viewpoints, consider options and determine the best ways forward. Coaching, especially executive coaching, can increase leaders’ self-awareness, improve their skills and decision-making, and help them become more reflective. Significantly, it can also help reduce professional isolation.



Opportunities for reflection can be created in a variety of other ways, e.g. forums, university programmes or courses, systematic study or short sabbaticals. They all have a role in encouraging reflection, research and critical thinking. In some parts of the corporate sector, leaders may have lots of peers around them, and bosses and team members who are increasingly used to giving support and feedback. These advantages are not routinely available to school leaders, which may suggest that an emphasis on peer learning methods such as structured shadowing, coaching, mentoring and action learning are important, and more generally the creation of communities and networks where leaders can learn and develop together. Some of this could be conducted virtually. Networks, both real and virtual, can be both supportive and reassuring to school leaders (helping perhaps to combat the feelings of professional and personal isolation), whilst also encouraging reflection and ideas for strategic development.



Sabbaticals, secondments and study leave

Ensuring that leaders remain 'at the top of their game' has long been recognised as a problem (Earley and Weindling 2007). Headteachers need to be enabled to continue to thrive - or given opportunities to revive - if they are to continue to perform at the high levels demanded of them.

Over 45 years ago in England the James report (DES 1972) advocated a sabbatical period or study leave of one term for educational professionals after seven years of service. This idea has been taken up in various forms in other parts of the world (Downing *et al.* 2004) and in some organisations employees (usually senior staff) with over five years' service may be entitled to apply for a period of sabbatical leave.

James' idea was never taken up but in 2001 a sabbatical scheme for experienced teachers working in areas of high challenge was introduced in England (DfEE 2001). This was part of a wider, ambitious government CPD policy, and although short lived, the NFER evaluation (of 130 cases) showed many benefits for both individuals and their schools (Downing *et al.* 2004) of this six-week funded period of absence. For example, improvements in confidence, refreshment and self-esteem, along with raised skills and knowledge were reported in 87 per cent of sabbaticals, whilst in 83 per cent of cases there were reports of the school developing as a professional learning community as a result of the sabbatical. The recently announced sabbatical scheme for experienced teachers (DfE, 2018) is a welcome policy initiative.

Crucially, a sabbatical, even if only for a relatively short-period, should help school leaders to survive (e.g. by knowing that there is a period of time during one's career when the individual can rest and recharge), to thrive (e.g. by undertaking study visits or a high quality course) and, if necessary, to revive (e.g. by being given time to rethink, to recharge and be rejuvenated or refreshed to take on the many challenges of headship). In the USA, sabbaticals or 'time out' have traditionally been treated as 'R and R' (rest and recuperation) rather than as providing development opportunities as has been the case in most other education systems where such schemes are found.

In some cases the time away from school has been devoted to undertaking a course of study. Serious and systematic study, which is what undertaking a higher degree involves, provides opportunities for reflection and updating, research and networking. It helps to develop the 'intelligences' earlier identified and makes school leaders aware of the qualities possessed by highly effective and successful principals. Academic studies are the place to ponder, study and grow, with experience-based debates scaffolded by theory and deeper conceptualization. For participants they provide 'rich opportunities for the kind of learning that reflected personal goals in education' (Hargreaves and Preece 2014), including the spaces to interact with other leaders, to explore existing published research and to undertake research into areas they personally found important.

Secondments too, can provide opportunities for development, offer access to expert personnel and provide a safe way of exploring career options, although for some the return to school can prove difficult (Tuohy and Lodge 2003).

In our view, following James (1972), the opportunity to take sabbaticals or study leave for school leaders, indeed all teachers, should be an entitlement. However, the manner in which a period of leave is used should not be prescribed but more the result of a discussion of needs with a coach, fellow head or line manager such as the governing body or board of trustees. Sabbaticals and study leave provide the opportunity for both leader development and leadership development to be much more personalised. They will also provide opportunities for school leaders to survive, thrive and revive.

The school governing body or board of trustees can assist in providing services and offering support for school leaders. In English schools the governing body is specifically responsible for the wellbeing of the principal and there is greater recognition of the part 'healthy' organisations can play in issues around staff wellbeing and welfare (Bubb and Earley 2004; Bingham and Bubb 2017). Steward (2014) with specific reference to resilience, recommends that governors should be involved in supporting heads (and other school leaders?) to undertake a regular risk-analysis with a resulting

action plan. Regardless of its source, psychological support is needed since many school leaders work under considerable pressure, both physically and emotionally, feel exhausted, and often experience feelings of isolation and loneliness (e.g. see Earley *et al.* 2011). Regular meetings of school leaders, both face-to-face and virtual, with a trusted group of others where problems can be shared and solutions found, along with sabbaticals or study leave for a period (a term, a month or even only a week) to undertake research, read or observe and learn from an outstanding leader, are examples of valuable opportunities for both 'surviving', 'thriving' and, where needed, 'reviving'.

Another benefit of sabbaticals, study leave and secondments is that other members of staff, especially deputy heads, will have to 'act-up' temporarily, and this will help develop leadership capacity and capability, as well as assisting with succession planning. They are important means by which exhaustion and burn out can be prevented and opportunities given for personal and professional refreshment and rejuvenation.

■■■ Leader development for a new era

Surveying the leadership landscape in England, we find that in recent years the skills and capabilities required of school leaders have changed substantially, but especially since the Education Reform Act of 1988 and the introduction of decentralisation and school-based management (Earley and Greany 2017). Simkins (2012) offers a detailed account of these changes and maps three distinct eras of school leadership training and development in England: the era of *Administration*; the era of *Management*; and the era of *Leadership*. To this we wish to argue the need for a fourth era of *Leadership Development* – or more accurately *Leader Development* – which in recognition of the current context in which leaders work necessitates a greater focus on the personal needs of individual school leaders.

We need to ensure we do not lose sight of the individual school leader and their personal development, or what Water's (1998a, 1998b) refers to as 'pro-personal' development. The importance of developing self-awareness, being reflective and resilient, whilst managing workload and wellbeing should not be



underplayed. Research studies consistently show that individual or personal effectiveness or efficacy is key for success as a leader - yet it is not given the prominence we believe it deserves. We have suggested there is a need for *a combination of customised or bespoke school-based and externally-provided developmental opportunities and experience to be provided in a range of settings*. These should be based on careful analysis of an individual's needs (Crawford and Earley 2011) and include strategies to enhance personal efficacy.

■ ■ ■ Developing self and others

The best leaders develop leadership capacity and effectiveness in themselves as well as others, nurturing and spotting talent, and developing future generation of school leaders (Bubb and Earley 2010). It is now well-established in both the corporate and public sectors that the best leaders develop capacity: their organisations become known as 'learning companies' or 'learning organisations', training grounds or greenhouses, nurturing and spotting talent, developing the next generation of leaders (OECD 2016). For some commentators, what will distinguish effective leaders in the future is their ability to develop themselves (especially their personal effectiveness), their people and their teams. So leaders who ask themselves 'how can I make my setting the most fertile ground for the growth of talent?' will most likely be the most successful'

(Kegan and Lahey 2010). In addition, however, there needs to be a growing recognition that schools should be seen as 'healthy organisations' where concern is shown not only for professional development but also for individuals' personal development, their workload, welfare and wellbeing.

■ ■ ■ A clarion call for change in how we develop our leaders

We have argued that greater consideration be given to the role of sabbaticals and study leave to help educational professionals - to 'survive' and 'thrive'. Coaching too is an important part of the personalised route and where it exists it has been highly valued, helping to develop school leaders' thinking, reflection and resilience.

Capacities necessary for successful leadership include the capacity to collaborate with others, the capacity for resilience, and the capacity to survive and thrive in complex contexts. As Kellerman (2012) has remarked 'leading has become a high wire act that only the most skilled are able to perform successfully over a protracted period of time' (2012, 263). Effective leader development should include opportunities for study and reflection and be more customised.

We must ask whether it is reasonable to expect school leaders to continue to undertake such a high powered, challenging and demanding role for a number of years and to continue to do it well without

the provision of opportunities to 'survive' and 'thrive', and where necessary, 'revive'. If the role of school leaders, especially headship, is to be seen as attractive and manageable, then consideration must be given to providing more assistance, greater support and development – both professional (leadership) and personal (leader) development – with the recognition of the need for opportunities for professional refreshment and rejuvenation, such as regular sabbaticals, study

leave and other provision (e.g. coaching) for systematic study and reflection. In this way the chances of schools being well-led and managed and high achieving will be considerably improved.

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