

# Surviving, thriving and reviving in leadership: The personal and professional development needs of educational leaders

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Management in Education  
2020, Vol. 34(3) 117–121  
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Management & Administration Society  
(BELMAS)



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DOI: 10.1177/0892020620919763

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## Introduction

Within a context of recruitment and retention challenges, growing emotional demands and work intensification, this opinion piece argues that greater attention needs to be given to individual leaders' personal development – their well-being and developing the personal qualities required to operate in such demanding conditions. It also asks how can we ensure their continuing effective performance, all the more important while working within a high-stakes accountability culture? In other words, what is needed for head teachers and other senior leaders to 'survive', 'thrive' and also 'revive' in the current performative educational landscape in England and other jurisdictions? Given the widely recognised importance of effective leadership for successful schools, this opinion piece suggests how the work of leaders can be more sustainable, ensuring they continue to operate successfully, both in the interests of their pupils and their own well-being.

## The importance of leadership development and well-being

International research and inspection evidence consistently shows that highly successful leaders demonstrate a number of personal and professional characteristics. Research 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, head teachers, chief executive officers and other senior leaders suffer from high levels of occupational stress. Unsurprisingly many education systems are therefore experiencing difficulties in recruiting and retaining school leaders. Within this context, the professional and personal development needs of senior leaders are crucial. What then is needed for them to 'survive', 'thrive' and also 'revive' (or rejuvenate) in the current challenging educational landscape in England? There is an urgent need to give greater prominence to personal development over professional development – or what Waters (1998a) calls the 'pro-personal'.

## Leadership development and leader development

Leadership development can be defined as the knowledge and skills relating to 'occupational role development', while personal development refers to the development of 'the person, often the "whole person"' (Waters, 1998a: 30). Personal development is 'often necessary to complement and "complete" professional development' (Waters, 1998a: 35). Personal development, which almost always involves changes in self-awareness, is a fundamental part of the job not an optional extra.

Leader development is mainly about the development of the individual and only secondarily the development of the role. The more we learn about ourselves, the better we will perform in our job. Nicholas and West-Burnham (2016: 203–204) are right when they note 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. They note:

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.

The importance of 'resilience' has also been noted in the literature as crucial to individual effectiveness ensuring that those who remain in the profession not only survive but thrive as confident and healthy people. There is therefore a need for leadership development programmes to give greater prominence to elements of personal development, including developing self-awareness and resilience, which are even more important as the role of educational leaders

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change and their work becomes ever more demanding and all-consuming.

### High-stakes accountability

The work of educational leaders is more complex than ever with many challenges to be met. The main difficulty, however, is that at any point in time there are always numerous challenges and initiatives that have to be dealt with, often concurrently. Across the world, head teachers and principals have had to come to terms with heightened expectations, performance management and increasing public accountabilities. In England, educational leaders work increasingly in a 'high-stakes' accountability culture where their job may well depend on the results of their last external inspection, reflecting the intense and potentially overwhelming nature of modern headship. Bottery (2016), in an earlier issue of *MiE*, discusses 'the threats to leadership sustainability'. He argues:

much of this extra work is hidden from public view in the additional hours at home, not just on weekday evenings but also at weekends and on 'holiday'. If leaders do not do this then the job begins to run away from them. So a Catch 22 situation can develop, where work requires unsustainable hours if individuals are to keep on top of it, but where the job becomes unsustainable if they do not. Either route is likely to lead to extra worry and stress, to the four-in-the-morning syndrome, and to less personal sustainability. (2016: 98)

Is heads' and chief executives' work adopting the characteristics of a 24/7 ubiquitous service, commonly found in the business sector? All-consuming workloads and challenges must be seen as surmountable and the leadership task perceived as possible for 'ordinary mortals' for organisations to ensure a continuing succession of effective leaders.

Also, the loneliness of the head teacher's role is considered in many studies: the emotional demands in the face of possible feelings of professional isolation are considerable and have not lessened over the years (Earley, 2013). This can be challenging in its impact on the health and well-being of leaders. Support for heads and CEOs to deal with matters of professional isolation, stress, workload and personal well-being 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.

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 (Kellerman, 2012). 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 leaders is therefore crucial and, given the earlier described context, more important than ever. So what in my view should we do?

### Developing leaders – It's personal

To begin with, approaches to leader and leadership development should be more 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 common. It appears, as with teacher development more generally, it is not so much the case of 'one size fits all' but rather that 'one size fits no one' (Bubb and Earley, 2013). Leaders need to take greater responsibility for planning and implementing their own learning experiences to meet their personal and professional needs.

In my 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, 'revive'. School and academy leaders should be encouraged to take greater responsibility for their own learning.

### Opportunities to 'thrive', 'survive' and 'revive'

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 like schools and academies. 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 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 and academies 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 are critically important to sustaining adult learning.

Nicholas and West-Burnham (2016: 22) note that 'in practical terms, the most powerful basis for 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' (emphasis added). It is increasingly recognised that learning is a key component of the job itself – not an 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.

Experiences are important yet 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 educational leaders which will help them 'survive' and 'thrive'? In my view, this involves two things: more structured coaching and opportunities for professional reflection.

#### a. Coaching and mentoring

The coach or mentor's ability to pose reflective questions to stimulate leaders' thinking and action is perhaps the most important reflective tool. 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. Executive coaching can increase heads' and CEOs' self-awareness, improve their skills and decision-making and help them become more reflective. Significantly, it can also help reduce the ever-present professional isolation.

#### b. Opportunities for reflection

As well as coaching, opportunities for reflection can be created in a variety of other ways, for example, forums, university courses, systematic study or sabbaticals. They all have a role in encouraging reflection, research and critical thinking. Communities and networks where heads can learn and develop together can help and these could be conducted virtually. For example, in England, the (then) National College for School Leadership set up a series of 'Hot Seats' and virtual learning forums for heads and other school leaders. Networks, both real and virtual, can be both supportive and reassuring to group members (again helping to combat feelings of professional and personal isolation), while also encouraging reflection and ideas for strategic development.

Heads work an average of 55–60 hours a week (DfE, 2017) and due to the nature of their job, cannot have an 'off-day' as they constantly need to 'perform'. Ensuring that heads remain 'at the top of their game' and do not 'plateau out' (after 5–7 years) has long been recognised as a problem (Earley and Weindling, 2007). Educational leaders therefore 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. As Kellerman (2012: 263) 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*' (emphasis added).

## The need for sabbaticals!

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 7 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 5 years' service may be entitled to 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. 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).

More recently, the DfE (2018) announced a £5 million pilot to encourage teachers to take sabbaticals so they can gain expertise that can be used in a school environment. The pilot 'will allow more established teachers to do something else for a period, whether that's working in an industry relevant to their field or doing academic research – or indeed coming to DfE to help shape policy' (DfE, 2018: 2).

Crucially, a sabbatical, even if only for a relatively short period, will, in my view, help leaders and teachers to survive (e.g. by knowing that there is a period of time during one's career when the individual can rest and recharge or refuel and refresh), 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 leadership). In the United States, 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 or college has been devoted to undertake a course of study (study leave). Serious and systematic study, which is what taking a higher degree involves, provides opportunities for reflection and updating, research and networking. Undertaking higher degrees and professional qualifications in leadership can be helpful and should be offered at various career stages when people are ready to gain maximum benefit from them. 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. Another key benefit 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. Sabbaticals usually involve the employee taking a period of time – over and above normal paid annual leave – away from the workplace. It is usually a single period of extended leave, but may instead comprise short, frequent periods of absence or regular time off – for instance, to work with or support another organisation. There is no legal obligation on employers to offer employees sabbaticals.

- Sabbaticals are often regarded as an important part of an employee's career development, and may be granted for a variety of different reasons including study, research, travel or voluntary work.
- Offering sabbaticals to senior staff can aid their retention by allowing them scope to try something different with the security of knowing that they can return to work at the end of the time away.
- Employers who grant sabbaticals usually attach various conditions, both in respect of eligibility for a sabbatical and what happens during and at the end of the sabbatical itself.

In my view, following James (DES, 1972), the opportunity to take sabbaticals or study leave for educational leaders, indeed all teachers, should be an entitlement. The latest DfE pilot is indeed welcomed as the idea needs reconsideration, despite concerns about budgetary constraints and teacher shortages. 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 senior leader or line manager, such as the governing body or board of trustees. Sabbaticals and study leave provide the opportunity for leadership development to be much more personalised.

The governing body or board of trustees can assist in providing services and offering support for heads. In English schools, the governing body is specifically responsible for the well-being of the head teacher and there is greater recognition of the part 'healthy' organisations can play in issues around staff well-being and welfare (Bingham and Bubb, 2017). Steward (2014: 67), with specific reference to resilience, recommends that governors should be involved in supporting heads to undertake a regular risk analysis with a resulting action plan. Regardless of its source, psychological support is needed since educational 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, both face-to-face and virtual, with a trusted group 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 all examples of valuable opportunities for heads and CEOs to survive, thrive and revive.

James' (DES, 1972) recommendation of a term's sabbatical every 7 years is an important means by which exhaustion and burnout can be prevented and opportunities given for personal and professional refreshment and rejuvenation. Cost-effectiveness and value for money must be seen in such terms.

## Final thoughts

This opinion piece has argued the need for a greater focus on the individual leader and their personal and professional needs, to personalise development and to

offer the support necessary to survive and thrive in what is generally perceived to be an ever-demanding, stressful role in a challenging, 'greedy' and constantly changing environment. Surveying the leadership landscape in England, we find that in recent years the skills and capabilities required of school and academy leaders have changed substantially (Earley and Greany, 2017). Simkins (2012) offers a helpful chronological 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 I 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 their personal and individual needs.

I have argued for the need to ensure we do not lose sight of the individual and their personal development, or what Waters (1998a, 1998b) refers to as 'pro-personal' development. The importance of developing self-awareness, being reflective and resilient, while managing stress, workload and well-being should not be underplayed. Individual or personal effectiveness or efficacy is key for success as a leader, yet is not given the prominence it deserves. As noted long ago by BELMAS stalwart Harry Tomlinson (2004: 1):

Personal effectiveness is a precondition of professional excellence... 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.

Unsurprisingly, when educational leaders are overworked, emotionally strained and forgetful about their own well-being, their performance is affected negatively. I wish to see a careful analysis of an individual leader's needs which include strategies to enhance personal efficacy. Despite their cost, sabbaticals and study leave are essential to help leaders '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 leaders' thinking and reflection, and resilience.

It is unreasonable to expect educational 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 educational leader 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. In this way, the chances of educational institutions being well-led and managed with high-achieving students will be considerably improved.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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