Educational Leadership

Key Challenges and Ethical Tensions

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Educational Leadership: Key Challenges and Ethical Tensions is a major new work on contemporary leadership challenges for educational leaders. Based on groundbreaking research, this book provides educational leaders in schools – including teachers – with ways of analysing and resolving ethically complex issues. The ethical tensions inherent in common leadership challenges are identified; a framework for their analysis presented and explained; and a clear, practitioner-focused method for ethical decision-making recommended.

Written by a leading researcher in the field, and recipient of the Australian Council for Educational Leadership Gold Medal for excellence, *Educational Leadership* is an important book that provides a practical approach to improving leadership through a greater understanding of ethical concepts and theories, presented, explained and applied to real-life tensions in practitioner language. Furthermore, *Educational Leadership* challenges current paradigms of leadership training and development, suggesting a new approach using formation processes based on leadership capabilities.

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Chapter 2

Key challenges for educational leaders

The challenges in this chapter and the tension situations in the next chapter are accompanied by explanatory or illustrative cases. Some of the details of these cases have been changed to help ensure anonymity without affecting their key messages.

Providing a values-driven vision

One of the distinguishing characteristics of successful educational leaders is their capacity to provide a vision for the future and inspire hope in those with whom they work. They also lift the spirits of their people and help them to translate the vision into the daily practices of their work. In this way they help to inject meaning into the daily grind of getting the work done, thereby providing a sense of purpose and direction.

The articulation of vision necessarily involves leaders sharing their hopes, desires and expectations with the members of the school community, and establishing the foundations of an organisational culture that supports the aspirations of all stakeholders. The intent and content of the vision helps motivate all the members of the school community. Reflection on, and communication of, this vision is essential if it is to become part of everyday practice.

Linking vision to practice seems to be a vital component in the relationship of the leader and those led. Drawing people beyond their daily tasks and routines and engaging them in helping to shape a desired future facilitates the creation of a more meaningful and inspiring workplace. The formative nature of this process also

seems to be important in bringing people to a fuller understanding of their purpose and direction, and to a strategic sense of their work.

Educational leaders are challenged to engage with their staff in ways that take the whole group forward, rather than plugging gaps and responding primarily to perceived emergencies. It is wasteful of time, energy and talent to simply fill gaps as they appear, without reflecting on and working through what is really needed to position the school to meet future challenges. Communicating the strategic purpose to everyone is vital in drawing together staff at all levels. Clear purpose, inspirational communication, and an appeal to agreed values and belief systems, will point clearly to the road forward.

A major problem identified by a number of leaders in the study was finding the time to reflect on and communicate a vision in the face of busy schedules. A principal of a school summed up this issue very well: 'I see a very important part of the leadership role as having time to reflect on direction, to have a sense of vision and to lead others who share that vision, but I find that a great challenge to that is finding the time within the daily routines to ensure that you structure that in'.

Leaders cannot do it all by themselves. They have to work with and through others to achieve their organisation's vision and goals. There is simply not enough time in the workday for one person to provide the scope and depth of leadership required in contemporary school communities. A principal encapsulated it when he said that, 'You have got to be a strong communicator and relationship builder. You have got to have the capacity to build relationships, to make connections, to build partnerships, to build strong alliances with others'.

The principal is referring here mainly to relationships internal to the organisation but of course leaders also have to develop and maintain strong external relationships and networks. They have to be effective public advocates and they need to represent the organisation in various public arenas. This is especially important in an era when education is seen to be everyone's business and is continually under scrutiny and critique by a sometimes sceptical public.

It is too much to expect that one person, the designated leader, can meet all these expectations satisfactorily. Leadership can no longer be regarded as the property, even the monopoly, of one person: the principal. Emerging wisdom on leadership suggests that there needs to be greater sharing and distribution of leadership responsibilities in educational organisations (Crowther *et al.* 2002b). The need to develop effective relationships and engage others in leadership in the school context is obvious. Sharing leadership with others is both necessary and wise, and is discussed in chapter 7 in this book.

However, achieving a dynamic balance between coping with current realities and keeping a strategic eye on the future is difficult for most educational leaders. A principal suggested that one way to help maintain this balance is to involve key stakeholders in generating a strategic vision while, at the same time, ensuring that day-to-day concerns are not neglected.

Many of the educational leaders in this study pointed out that having a set of core values was critical to the leadership role of setting vision and direction. These values, they argued, need to be clearly articulated and communicated as a basis for organisational purpose and direction. There is no better way of serving this purpose than by communicating directly with organisational members so that they are aware of the nature of their psychological contract as members of that organisation. The legal contract of employment, of course, is only one aspect of the contract necessary to become and remain an effective member. Active membership requires engagement at a deeper, affective level where there is a close relationship between personal and organisational values.

Knowing the values that motivate organisational members and articulating these values clearly can assist in developing a shared vision and mission for the school. Clarity of purpose based on a shared set of values and expectations would seem to be fundamental to effective educational leadership.

Managing staff relationships

A dominant theme in leadership is that it must be relational, that is, by definition effective relationships are the energy source of

leadership. A principal stated that valuing others is the key to the development of authentic relationships:

> The promotion of staff morale, keeping staff motivated, cultivating teamwork and providing opportunities for staff development are some of the greatest challenges for leaders of educational organisations. It could be said that valuing others is a common thread in these elements and provides an authentic bond between the leader and those in the group.

Empowering others, delegating authority and simply trusting people to get on with their tasks should underpin leader–staff relationships in ways that link strategic purpose to everyday practices. However, usually when trust is breached there is a tendency to retreat to the classical organisational model, with remote personal exchanges, reliance on quasi-legal rules, and withdrawal to a hierarchical and bureaucratic form of control. A principal of a school commented on what happens when trust is betrayed:

> What happens to the leadership relationship when there is a massive breach of trust? This is not an uncommon occurrence. The leader retreats to a position of power and control. The aggrieved staff members feel excluded and do not give of their best. Morale is affected adversely.

Some leaders believe that developing relationships requires too much time and resources. This is an inappropriate way to think about relationship-building. Developing relationships for their own sake, or conversely for instrumental purposes, is not what authentic leaders do. They regard relationship-building as one of the core ways that value-driven organisations value all those who work in and for the organisation. It is the way a school, as a community, actively and fully engages its talented key stakeholders, giving them a sense of belonging and encouraging and supporting their commitment to the purposes of the organisation. Building relationships is not just a matter of managing the people in the organisation but of providing the leadership necessary to marshal the most valuable resources, the people.

Leading people

Many educational leaders find it a challenge to determine how 'relational' relationship building should be. Those who have been apprenticed in a hierarchical, control-type model of leadership are often unsure of how close relationships should be, especially with those who are accountable to them. It is important to distinguish here between personal and professional relationships in an organisation. Professional relationships must, of course, have a personal dimension, but it is equally important to develop personal relationships within a professional framework. The issue is not how friendly formal leaders should be with those who work with them, but how all organisational members can work closely and professionally together to achieve the goals and objectives of the organisation. Professional relationships must always be predicated on the core values espoused in the organisation. Being honest, trusting and trustworthy, respectful, tolerant, empathetic, open to critique, and willing to be a team person are as essential to professional relationships as they are to the development and maintenance of personal relationships.

In a school setting, core values also include valuing students and the educational processes that best serve their needs. The bottom line in a school community setting is how well relationships serve the needs of students and their parents.

Often, however, educational leaders face the problem of dealing with poor performance and balancing their professional responsibility for ensuring the smooth operation of their organisation with their personal feelings for those staff who are not performing adequately. Time and again the practical difficulties related to this issue were noted in interviews in the study. A typical example was provided by a school principal:

> My clerical assistant has been very unprofessional and, at times, rude and unhelpful to all of her colleagues. I have had interviews with her regarding her attitude and interpersonal skills. The incidents are repeated almost daily and occur in the workplace. They impinge upon others' personal lives as well.

Many educational leaders find it difficult to face up to finding a resolution to such problems. They prefer to think that if they ignore the situation it will go away. Some such challenges are potentially very serious issues and are often the source of much concern and stress for leaders. A principal of a school described a tension-filled event that he found very difficult to manage:

> I can give you an example of one [tension] that we've just had recently which is: we've got a young boy here who has been here for three years and he's diagnosed as having [medical] problems and is on medication and he is a big lad and his home life isn't so wonderful. He takes out his aggression here at school. What happened last year is that we had another lad here who is physically handicapped and for whatever reason this other boy decided that he wanted to attack him and he did, he actually kicked him and bruised him. The parents of the injured boy were very upset but they were prepared to forgive.
>
> The staff here thought that this was an outrage and regardless of the parents they wanted the boy [who'd attacked the other] removed. It was an interesting situation, in that the dilemma I had was all about: where does this boy go if we remove him from the school? The parents were forgiving and understanding and were prepared to just set up structures so it wouldn't happen again and also to guarantee that this boy would never go near their son again. That was a major tension because it took a little while to realise that we couldn't guarantee to this other family that we could be everywhere all the time with this boy to guarantee it . . . . what it meant for me was an awful lot of sleepless nights worrying about all the different avenues.

These issues are illustrative of the range and difficulty of the challenges involved when dealing with tension situations involving leading people in educational organisations. Educational leaders often avoid confronting such problems if they can, because they believe that solutions are hard to find and the legal environment of the employment contract often ensures that the poor performer or difficult person will not be dealt with promptly, if ever. So a response often is: 'Why put yourself in an unwinnable

position that may also undermine your future effectiveness as a leader?'

Balancing personal and professional responsibilities

Maintaining a proper balance between personal needs and professional responsibilities is problematic for many educational leaders. In attempting to maintain a balance between personal and professional responsibilities, as well as coping with the pressure of heavy workloads, educational leaders speak of feeling 'inundated' and of having to do more and more without sufficient support.

Resource pressures in educational organisations are contributing significantly to this problem. 'Inundation' implies that educational leaders are generally overwhelmed by the pressures to achieve the same or greater outcomes with fewer resources. The impact of technology is no doubt promoted as improving the input–output ratio of the flow of work processes. However, electronic technology may be contributing to the feeling of inundation. The implication is that many leaders feel that they are being thrown 'off balance' or 'out of balance', with their work lives dominating their personal and private lives.

The demand for more efficient use of time and resources results in some of those resources being drawn from the personal or private sources of these leaders. They find that their personal time, especially, is encroached upon to an unacceptable level. This imposition on private time, that has traditionally been a feature of the private sector, is now more and more characteristic of leadership in the public sector.

Many educational leaders perceive that more advanced technology is not redressing the balance. A principal put it quite succinctly:

> . . . we are doing an awful lot, with a lot less. Our time is really precious, we are inundated not just at my level . . . but all levels of the organisation . . . we are inundated by this technology which is supposed to be so helpful.

The following extract from an interview with a school principal indicates the heavy time demands of the job and the added

pressures coming from the use of communication technology, especially ubiquitous emails. He states:

> Well, it's pretty much a seven-day working week. I think I'm usually in the office for about 9 or 10 hours [each day]. When I get home at night I might do a bit of reading but I'm not the sort of person who goes home and gets back on the computer. On the weekend I would. All of us e-mail each other about this, that and the other on Sundays and it is becoming an expectation.

> *Question*: Is it becoming a game?

> *Response*: Yes, I think so. One of the standing jokes is about how late the e-mails get sent and about how you can set your computer to send e-mails at 2.02 am. You can get e-mails being sent at 9 or 10 pm . . . I get e-mails from my boss at 5.30 am. Of course, what I think it has done is increase the pressure enormously. Initially, it sounds like a really good and efficient time-saver. You don't have to worry about long telephone conversations when you do relationship building, you can just dash off this e-mail but it has compressed the time frame, so instead of having more time the benchmark's gone up so you are supposed to deliver more work.

This principal is really describing a power game being played. There would appear to be a lack of thought, even respect, for the person on the receiving end of the email messages; the implication being that the person is at the beck and call of the one in control, the one with the greater organisational power. Time for reflection and mature consideration for problem-solving purposes is clearly limited by the pressures to respond quickly to emails, to be seen to be 'on the ball', as it were.

There is also a tension or inner conflict for some leaders as they wrestle with the conflicts between personal and organisational goals. This conflict can eventually lead them to question whether the commitment to remain with the organisation is worth the personal sacrifice. The question of continuing to commit can consume the person's thoughts about his/her role in the organisation. If work and relationships within the organisation no longer inject

meaning into daily life, then quitting, or at least disengaging, becomes a possibility. A principal stated:

> I must say that, at times, I can become quite philosophically disen-
> gaged because I think it is not . . . an organisation that I came into
> and was committed to . . . So, I have, at times, felt that my overall
> personal challenge was to maintain my engagement and maintain
> my commitment . . . and get on with it, as opposed to saying 'I don't
> think I can work in this organisation,' or, 'I don't believe the policy
> framework is going to be suited to my philosophical, educational
> background'. So that sort of sums up the issues that I am facing at
> the moment.

The element that seems to be absent here is the identification of methodologies or processes to systematically determine priorities. Clear priorities could alleviate the stress and conflict that arise when pressures become too great for the individual to withstand. This challenge was identified by a principal as part of the daily tasks that must be met as part of the balancing act:

> Just on a day-to-day level the biggest challenge is dealing with the
> competing priorities and the volume of work and the volume of
> issues you've got to stay on top of, professionally and managerially.

However, few educational leaders seem to have developed specific strategies and methodologies for dealing with the complexity of their jobs, for establishing priorities in their work, or for targeting specific professional development to assist them. Educational leaders, also, did not seem to use the job or the workplace as a basis for experiential growth and learning. In fact, the opposite seems to be more the case: the job and the workplace are seen to be inimical to personal and professional learning and growth.

It would appear that the feeling of being inundated and overwhelmed by the job causes many educational leaders to withdraw within themselves, to become defensive, and to rely more on formal methods of communication (e.g. email or memos). Instead of building relationships, such communication habits can inhibit relationship development.

Communicating effectively

Good communication requires, first, that one has something important to communicate, second, that one chooses appropriate times and means to deliver the message, and third, that one actively engages with others beyond a simple one-way communication to clarify the intended message and dispel misunderstandings. Meaningful engagement and dialogue with staff in their day-to-day working lives facilitates effective communication.

Large systems are sometimes slow to process issues and problems, so gaps in communication may occur between those who make the decisions and those who implement them. Leaders may assume that everyone in the organisation knows where they are going and why, but these are not safe assumptions. Many staff in organisations are heard to say: 'Why doesn't anyone tell me anything around here?' or, 'Why am I the last to know what is happening around here?'

No matter how much communication is used, no matter how accessible it is, down the line or at the local level, messages will be subject to different interpretations. One of the responsibilities that leaders have is to correct misinterpretations and put to rest certain myths. Without this, sometimes the myths develop a life of their own and a rumour can become accepted as fact.

There is no guaranteed process for ensuring that people in an organisation are optimally informed about new policies and changes. Often people will hear what they want to hear and reject or distort what they perceive not to be in their interests. The size of the organisation, of course, influences the degree to which formal leaders can engage in one-to-one conversations, which are the most effective form of communication.

The CEO of a large bank in Australia made an art form of communicating regularly through videos, especially on key topic areas or current issues, with all staff members. Staff generally appreciated his attempt to personalise his communication. No matter how large the school community, principals particularly must devise creative ways of engaging directly with key stakeholders. Every means, formal and informal, must be used to keep all stakeholders informed and up-to-date. If nature abhors a vacuum, then so

do organisations: if communication isn't regular and meaningful, then someone (or some group) will invent a version of events, and rumours will spread to fill the void. This is especially true when leaders are attempting to bring about change in their organisations. Change usually threatens some organisational stakeholders and fears can be exacerbated if the facts of the change are distorted or manipulated by those who are resistant to the change.

If, as an educational leader, one is clear about one's core values and vision for the organisation, and also understands how these values and vision can inspire others, communication is likely to flow much more easily. If the leader's own personal values are explicit and well understood by key stakeholders this will assist them to interpret communications 'in the right spirit' on first reading or listening. Effective educational leaders have the capacity to use both formal and informal communication to build relationships, partnerships, and strong alliances.

Leading continuous change

We live in times of rapid change and transition. In such periods, it is necessary to realise that there may be casualties in any change process. Part of leadership is recognising that not everyone is going to come on board immediately, or even in the short-term, with new ways of thinking and doing. Leaders need to be sensitive to the fears and anxieties of those involved in a change process. As one principal wisely suggested, 'You have to have a set plan on how you are going to deal with that [change]. You have to be caring and have a plan that maintains their self-esteem. You cannot dump people. I think that is an important aspect of leadership'.

One principal, when attempting to introduce a mechanised system of reporting, found that the change better reflected the school's value system but that this was not necessarily appreciated by a number of staff members. She learned that during the process some staff feared that they would not be able to cope with the new system of reporting. The principal used different approaches, including one-to-one discussions and public announcements, to help allay these fears but to also make it clear that the change would happen and that it was in their interests to be part of it.

As leaders, we may, in fact, perceive others to be overreacting to change when they seem to be reacting more than we are (Bridges, 1995, p. 22). Leaders of change need to remind themselves that 'changes cause transitions, which cause losses – and it's the losses, not the changes, that they're reacting to' and that 'it's a piece of *their* world that is being lost, not ours' (p. 22, italics in original).

Leaders who are trying to manage a top-down change may be reluctant, according to Bridges, to talk openly about the change, '. . . arguing that it will "stir up trouble" to acknowledge people's feelings' (p. 23). But leaders of change *must* engage openly with those who will be affected by the change, and they must acknowledge and address positively the losses and psychological transitions being experienced by these people. Research about what helps people recover from loss concludes that 'they recover more quickly if the losses can be openly discussed' (Bridges, 1995, pp. 23–24).

One way to help overcome fear of loss in change situations is for leaders to devise change strategies that strike a balance between top-down and bottom-up change. Those affected by the change must not only be consulted about the change but also actively engaged in its genesis. A principal cautioned that:

> The processes used for the implementation of change can, as a matter of course, alienate members. This is especially true if the change and the change processes are mandated from the top down without adequate, if any, consultation with those who are most affected by the change.

Most people do, of course, have the capacity to change; it is a part of life and this capacity for change is inherent in us all. Those affected by change need to know that the comfort zone they leave will not be replaced by a situation that creates unnecessary conflict and tension for them. Some who initially resist change may finally become excited by it and transformed when given the opportunity to experience the change in a practical situation, especially if they are encouraged and supported by those in leadership positions. A principal emphasised the need for a supportive leadership approach that is sensitive to the level of readiness of those who are expected to change and/or to implement change:

> You have got to be there for them when that [change resistance] happens. Yes you know how they feel and you can say *'God I feel the same way'* and, in fact, there is a lot of commonality to be shared. People want to know that you appreciate where they are; if they are not ready for this they may be ready in six months' time.

Some meet the challenge of change by accepting the need to be up-to-date and involved through professional associations and networks with other members of staff across the organisation and the wider educational community. Networking outside one's organisation is one way to break out of group thinking and be exposed to national and international thinking. This means taking time to reflect on professional literature, since change can often be predicted, because it is happening in other countries. Networking can be an accelerator of change because it is reassuring to share with colleagues who are struggling with the same issues and coming to similar conclusions. Also, as one principal stated, 'on a personal level, it is good to have kindred spirits.'

The challenge to lead in a time of change is a difficult one, because it often requires a shift from a hierarchical world model to an inclusive, transformational leadership model. Some educational leaders in this study acknowledged that they still used a control model more than an inclusive model because they have not shifted their mindset to the new paradigm in which they now live. The new paradigm has different assumptions and a different context from the old paradigm within which many leaders were trained and developed. An educational leader in the study summed it up well:

> The old, put simply, is born of mechanism and clocks and enlightenment and the new is born of complex living systems. Once you appreciate how that works you work from a different metaphor and often the metaphors carry more significance than the facts. Once you work from a different metaphor it is more difficult, but I have a sense that, in terms of making decisions for the future, you'll actually be more in tune with what's [likely to happen] in the future. Today will be a preparation for the future, to get the right direction, but what we tend to do is go back to the old framework

to make our decision because we are more comfortable there and more secure and we can often put a better argument. It's the whole cult of rationalism we get caught in, whereas in the new [paradigm] it's much more to do with the whole and the whole person, the creative imagination.

Some stakeholders are willing to be engaged in a process that is unfolding, and accept that change is automatically built into organisational life, because there has to be constant reviewing and making of key decisions that are part of the new way of looking at reality. How change is actually introduced can also have an important bearing on how such new ideas and new ways of thinking are accepted.

Frequently, principals in the study pointed to the poor performance of teachers as a special challenge when attempting to lead a change process. They suggested that the new accountability processes were bringing a cultural change to their schools.

Managing accountability and individual performance

The high public pressure for accountability in schools, in terms of definite outcomes, means that there is constant pressure to improve performance outcomes. The economic rationalist philosophy and managerialist practices that have influenced governments since the mid-1980s are now driving many educational organisations.

Many in the education sector see this managerialist approach as dominated by an expectation of 'doing more with less'. A principal claimed that these new management expectations have led directly to a change in culture in schools from a former collegial approach to one that is less open and collaborative:

> I think [there is a] complete change in culture and the way in which the organisation now operates. It's quite different from what we experienced [in the past], for example, it used to be a much more open and collaborative style but it has become quite different to that now. So that there is much less openness, much less collaboration.

Both scarcity of and constraints on resources are apparent in most educational organisations. However, it is not always clear whether this is driven by increased expectations of what can be achieved or by constant cuts in the resources available. Whatever the case, contemporary leaders perceive themselves as having to juggle their strategic objectives against insufficient resources.

It appears that a balance needs to be struck between 'hard' and 'soft' approaches to leadership so that individuals accept their accountabilities without feeling overwhelmed or directionless in a complex organisation. A balance between personal responsibility and teamwork is desirable, where the burdens are shared to make them more bearable. Also, there is a need to develop a more formative and developmental approach to accountability; current approaches often appear summative and punitive. Accountability processes must be just and equitable and should clearly reflect the core values espoused by the organisation. Where values are ignored or violated, accountability processes will be seen to be, and most likely will be, antithetical to the real purposes of an educational organisation.

Dealing with poor performance

The issue of dealing with poor performance in a responsible and professional manner that considers the interests of all concerned emerged as one of the most serious accountability challenges for educational leaders. Many leaders feel frustrated by supervisors' reluctance to deal with poor performance, often due to the perceived difficulty of the legal and industrial issues involved. For example, a principal considered it virtually impossible to improve the performance of poorly performing teachers, because, in his view, the union mostly supports the teacher without seeking to find out the facts.

While governments and education departments often take a strong line on this issue in the media, it is the principal who usually has to deal with the direct tensions and trauma involved. Apart from the uncertainty of knowing if they have made good decisions, principals have the stress of dealing with the emotional issues as well as the facts of each situation. A principal provided an

insightful example of the difficulties and complexity surrounding many performance issues:

> At our school we have a teacher in his early fifties who has difficulty with consistency, leading to poor classroom management structures with some children in his class every year. The teacher is a nice person, well-liked by his peers. Most of the children in his class continue to perform at a reasonable level. However, this year three boys regularly disrupt the class. One of these boys, an extremely difficult child, is a challenge for any teacher.

The teacher in this example had taught at the school for over twenty years and during that time many staff worked with him to help with preparation and management strategies, however, similar problems seemed to appear nearly every year. The stress affected the teacher's wellbeing but he could not see any alternatives to teaching.

The principal in this situation had not instigated formal procedures because he regarded teaching as a caring occupation and the role of educational leader as one of helping and supporting people in a difficult profession where it is almost impossible to influence all thirty children in a class to the same level. The principal stressed that dealing with poor-performing staff is not as clear-cut as is often portrayed by the media or by political leaders.

The following example further illustrates this challenge for principals. A principal of a small K–12 school appointed a new teacher, about 50 years old, who had already converted a nursing degree into a qualification to teach biology and health education. In a very short space of time it became obvious, however, that she was going to struggle to get teacher registration. The principal had to decide whether to look after the teacher's personal welfare and provide her with far more support than would be normal, knowing that the educational outcomes for her students could be disastrous.

Eventually, district office personnel were alerted to the problem and accepted a recommendation that the teacher's probation be extended and that she be moved to another, larger, school with more resources to assist her. Mostly, the principal suggested that this was not a very satisfactory solution to such a problem; in fact, it merely shifted the problem sideways.

On reflecting on this experience, the principal pointed out that the first responsibility for an educational leader is to ensure the best possible outcomes for the students and suggested that in future he would:

'Bite the bullet': tackle the performance issue head-on and early. Any personal issues arising from this course of action will need to be dealt with, but I can no longer support or overlook inefficient teaching practices because of personal problems.

It is likely that a failure to act quickly and appropriately may damage the individual teacher, the students, or both, as in the case reported by the principal of a probationary teacher whose substandard performance led to complaints from students and parents. This teacher, who had also retrained from a previous career, grabbed or hit students on two occasions. Although he had been on a program of improvement, he showed little sign of progress and the principal did not believe he would ever achieve an acceptable level of performance. The principal, however, had concerns about the teacher's mental state, and had to weigh up this concern for the welfare of the teacher with his potentially disastrous impact on the students. The principal felt that he had no real choice, and decided to protect the welfare of the students by advising the teacher to seek an alternative career, or else he would initiate formal proceedings for dismissal. The teacher appreciated the principal's concern for the students, revealing that he had similar concerns himself, and resigned his position.

Another example is of a principal who had made the decision to dismiss a teacher who had been placed on a support and development program that had extended over two years. The teacher's ability to interact appropriately and effectively with staff was an issue. The principal involved the industrial relations personnel, a supervisor at the school, the teacher concerned, and a support person for the teacher, as well as the union. The principal considered that not only was there no evidence to indicate that the teacher was able to complete the required tasks, but also that any further assistance would require the input of huge resources from other staff, which would impact on their workload and stress levels,

without an appreciable outcome. In reflecting on the incident, the principal concluded that, in spite of what policies state, when you are dealing with human beings, you are dealing with complexity. He decided that one must be pragmatic but must usually act for the good of the many.

The majority opinion of educational leaders in this study was that teachers' performance problems can and should be identified by leaders early in the teachers' careers. Support and a program of development should be given to those so identified. If a teacher shows no evidence of improvement as a result of such development opportunities, then those in leadership positions must protect the children under their care and set in train processes for the teacher to resign or be dismissed.

Leading an ageing workforce

The workforce in education is ageing. In many Western countries, the average age of teachers is in excess of 45 years (Santiago, 2001). Educational leaders in this research project considered it essential to professionally challenge people who have stagnated in the same role for years. A principal observed that it is rare to meet a person who has not become complacent after a number of years, unless he/she has had a change of responsibility. She suggested that it was difficult to find a person who could maintain enthusiasm over the long haul: 'I don't think any of us can afford in an organisation, like a huge educational institution as we are, to settle into anything.'

A challenge for any individual school and for a system of schools is to encourage an ageing teacher population to continue to meet the contemporary challenges of teaching and learning. Early retirement may lead to a great loss of organisational memory, wisdom and know-how; losses that could not easily be replaced even if financial resources were more plentiful. Some educators merely tolerate change while they serve their last few years. Such a response is especially serious at both teacher and leadership levels where it is essential to respond to change if the school is going to grow and prosper. There is a great danger that teachers and other educational leaders who are nearing the end of their careers will act as one principal suggested:

> There are people who have reached pretty well the end of their careers or have gone as far as they want to go, who are satisfied to sit on their hands.

As the average age of educators continues to rise, education systems and schools need to devote more resources and generate creative solutions to ensure that teachers and other educational leaders continue to be professionally challenged.

Teachers with many years' experience should be more intimately involved in leadership and decision-making at their schools, a challenge that is discussed in greater depth in chapter 8. Formal leaders need to tap into their talents and expertise and challenge them to continue making a contribution to the core activities of their school. There is a need to celebrate the wisdom of experience and recognise and reward those professional teachers who are in the twilight of their careers. They should be encouraged and supported to 'share their wisdom' on teaching and learning, and to engage with younger teachers in a two-way dialogue on how to enrich the learning experiences of students in the school. A major challenge for school principals and other formal educational leaders in schools is to help build a culture of sharing and open dialogue on what really matters in schools – improving learning and teaching.

In an era when more and more professionals are searching for a healthier life–work balance many are opting for part-time employment or retirement, when they can afford it. There is a need for '... a variety of options for flexible work solutions to help keep life and work in balance' (Birch & Paul, 2003, p. 68). Such options could include: part-time employment; flexible working hours; shorter working hours; job sharing; and other family-friendly practices. Those responsible for policy and leadership in educational systems and schools must wake up to the reality of an ageing workforce.

It would appear, however, that much more is said than done about these challenges. Some will be difficult to resolve, but more leaders and organisations need to 'face up to the evident facts of the workplace' and dramatically change their ways of thinking and acting about these challenges (Birch & Paul, 2003, p. 80).

The discussion on leadership challenges in this chapter indicates that contemporary educational leaders face complex and varied

challenges in their daily work. Within the areas just discussed, many of the challenges can be classified as tensions or dilemmas and these are the focus of the next chapter.

Key ideas for reflection

Educational leaders need to collaboratively develop and communicate a value-driven vision for the future in order to give a sense of purpose, meaning and hope to their school community. This envisioning process requires them to engage meaningfully with people, building authentic relationships in order to serve the needs of students and their parents.

A major challenge for educational leaders is to translate the vision into everyday practices. A good start is to create more purposeful and inspiring workplaces built on trust, transparency and open communications. While modern technology can be of great assistance in facilitating communication processes, the current dominance of emails can be impersonal and unrealistic in terms of their time-response expectations and/or their perceived urgency. Pressures of time and of continuous change may cause some educational leaders to disengage, withdraw into themselves, become defensive, or revert to formal methods of communication.

A major contemporary challenge for educational leaders is to lead people who are experiencing fear and psychological loss in a context of rapid and continuous change. They must engage openly with them to help them cope with their fears and anxieties. Top-down mandated changes especially can create great consternation and fear among those who have to implement them. Leaders need to be sensitive to the levels of readiness of those involved. Leading in conditions of continuous change requires a shift from hierarchical approaches to more inclusive transformational models that deal with the whole person.

One of the most demanding challenges for educational leaders is dealing with poorly performing teachers where there is deep concern for students under their care. Such situations are complex and multidimensional; however, the consensus seems to be that it is better for the principal to 'bite the bullet' and deal with the problem early and head-on.

Educational leaders in the twenty-first century need to devise new and creative ways of ensuring that teachers and other educators with many years of experience are continuously challenged and actively engaged in their own personal and professional development. Many with long years of experience can become stale and complacent if they are not constantly encouraged and supported to be reflective and creative practitioners.

Questions for reflection

- What strategies and processes do you use to develop a collaborative vision and then translate the vision into everyday practices?
- What strategies do you use to help ensure that you communicate meaningfully and authentically with teachers, students and other key stakeholders in your school community?
- What leadership style or approach(es) do you use when leading change in your school community?
- What are some of the most difficult challenges you have encountered when dealing with poorly performing teachers? How did you overcome these challenges? After reading this chapter, how might you deal differently with them in future?
- In what ways do you, as a leader, try to ensure that teachers are personally and professionally engaged and committed?