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Chapter 7

Shared and distributed leadership in schools

Schools need to think differently about the quality and depth of their leadership if they are to respond effectively to the types of challenges and tensions discussed in chapters 2 and 3. Many educational leaders leave themselves isolated and alone, taking primary responsibility for the leadership of their school. This constitutes a very narrow view of leadership and ignores the leadership talents of teachers, students and other community stakeholders. As was suggested in chapter 6 when introducing the proposed method for ethical decision-making, it is wise for any formal educational leader, such as a school principal, to tap into the expertise and wisdom of his/her colleagues when attempting to resolve contentious challenges and tensions. Sharing the responsibility for making decisions in such situations will also help generate greater ownership of the decisions.

Another reason for engaging in dialogue with others and inviting them to share in decision-making is, according to Surowiecki (2005, p. 29), that diversity matters and there is wisdom in the 'crowd'. He argues that diversity of people and their information helps in coming to a better decision or resolution because it actually adds perspectives that would be absent if the decision is made by one person, even by an expert, and because it takes away, or at least weakens, some of the destructive characteristics of group decision-making, for example, 'group think'. Surowiecki concludes that diverse groups of individuals 'will make better and more robust forecasts and more intelligent decisions than a skilled decision-maker', but that 'groups that are too much alike find it harder to keep learning, because each member is bringing less and less new information to the table . . . and they become progressively

less able to investigate alternatives' (p. 31). Grouping only smart people (experts) together also doesn't work that well, because they tend to resemble each other in what they can do. He concludes that it is better to entrust a diverse group 'with varying degrees of knowledge and insight' with major decisions 'rather than leaving them in the hands of one or two people, no matter how smart those people are' (p. 31). He encourages leaders, when making decisions, to engage with others who have different knowledge bases and perspectives because 'the simple fact of making a group diverse makes it better at problem solving' (p. 30).

It would be advisable for a principal engaged in the steps of ethical decision-making discussed in chapter 6 to engage in dialogue with other key stakeholders. It would seem essential to listen to diverse viewpoints when attempting to: determine the ethical tensions; clarify the facts; determine possible options and their likely consequences; choose specific solutions, explain and implement them; see the action through, evaluating its impact; and learn from the experience.

There would seem to be a need, therefore, for a shift in the meaning and practices of educational leadership in many schools, especially those where the principal prefers to make decisions on her/his own. To enhance leadership of schools, educational leaders and educational communities need to rethink what educational leadership actually means and involves – its definition, purpose, scope and processes as well as its practices.

What is proposed here is the building of organisational cultures that promote and support greater sharing and distribution of leadership in schools. Such cultures help enhance professional dialogue between and among diverse groups of stakeholders, and promote an environment where leadership and decision-making are seen as a collective responsibility and where sharing is the norm.

Sharing leadership

Educational leaders need to create sharing cultures where others willingly participate in and are rewarded for the successful performance of their leadership responsibilities. Such sharing is not merely a matter of splitting or distributing tasks and responsibilities

in a task-oriented approach, it requires a mindset shift. It requires a 'letting go', especially by principals who have been used to leading from the front. For this to happen, educational leaders need to be secure enough in their own identity to freely share and distribute what were previously 'their' responsibilities. This, as we shall see in chapter 9, requires authenticity on the part of those in leadership positions. Authenticity and genuinely shared leadership, in turn, provide excellent modelling for students of healthy, communal ways of living.

A contemporary view is that leadership in a complex organisation, such as a school, requires the energy, commitment and contributions of all who work there. From this perspective, shared leadership is a product of the ongoing processes of interaction and negotiation amongst all school members as they construct and reconstruct a reality of working productively and compassionately together each day. Leadership, therefore, can be viewed as a shared communal phenomenon derived from the interactions and relationships of groups. The quality of relationships greatly influences everything else that happens in organisations, including the quality and impact of leadership (Duignan & Bhindi, 1997, p. 201).

As well as relationships, deeply held and unquestioned concepts influence what happens in organisations. Sharing leadership requires all the key stakeholders in a school community to rethink what constitutes leadership. Assumptions that underpin leadership – such as those underpinning power, authority, influence, position, status, responsibility and accountability, as well as personal and professional relationships – need to be identified, critiqued and adjusted as necessary.

Often leadership is equated with formal roles, and this mindset can prove an obstacle to sharing. In some hierarchical organisations, leaders expect decisions to be accepted because of their role or rank and they are surprised when their colleagues will neither follow a poor decision, nor explain why they think it was not a good decision. Leadership in such circumstances can be seen as based on the authority or power given by position. This hierarchical view limits an understanding of the need for all members to show leadership, when and where appropriate. Those in formal leadership positions need to let go of the idea that leadership is hierarchically

distributed and embrace the idea that it is their responsibility to develop and nurture leadership in others.

Most successful sports teams have what is referred to as 'depth on the bench': sometimes their key players, their on-field leaders, get injured, but the reserves waiting on the bench have the capability to step into the breach. Organisations, too, need reserves of leadership if they are to be successful in the longer term. These leaders, of course, should not be on the bench but in the game, participating with skill, commitment and enthusiasm. A benefit in having depth of leadership in an organisation is that it creates a larger and deeper pool of leaders from which future executives and middle managers can be selected. A first key step in creating this depth of leadership is to share leadership responsibilities with others.

A commitment to sharing responsibility for leadership in schools often grows out of the shared vision, beliefs and efforts of a committed group of teachers, administrators, support staff, and parents who have a sense of belonging, a sense of being valued members of their organisation and a deep commitment to collective action for whole-school success (Crowther *et al.* 2002a). Ideally, all staff members, including newly arrived staff, would have a clear picture of their special space in the leadership framework of their school. If the depth of leadership in the organisation is to be enhanced, they must feel that they are valued as significant contributors to the leadership of their organisation, no matter at what level or in what area.

While much is written and spoken about the need for shared and distributed leadership in schools, the characteristics, the context, and obstacles to its more complete implementation need to be explored and understood. The language of contemporary leadership is often replete with the jargon of sharing and collaboration (e.g. inclusivity; caring; collaborative decision-making; empowerment of followers; shared vision and goals), but frequently the language constitutes a rhetoric that is never fully realised. There is little doubt that the evolving complexity and uncertainty of life and work in schools compels educational leaders to work more collaboratively with a growing number of people. It is time to make the rhetoric a reality, and create collaborative communities that can embrace uncertainty and paradox.

Teachers as leaders

The concept of teachers as leaders has been the subject of increasing research over recent years. In some contexts, it has been linked to the question of whether teaching has gained recognition and acceptance as a profession (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2001, p. 6). Recent research points to the central role of teachers in influencing student performance and outcomes in schooling (Andrews *et al.* 2000; Crowther *et al.* 2002a & 2002b; Darling-Hammond, 1999).

Andrews *et al.* (2002, p. 25) developed a 'teachers as leaders' framework that highlights the importance of two key factors: teachers' values with regard to enhancing teaching and learning; and the capacity of teachers to create new meanings, especially for students, in the learning process. They make an important distinction between teachers as leaders in a specialised area such as pedagogy and discipline (e.g. subject leadership) and leadership that contributes to whole-school reform and improvement. In other words, while teachers should focus, primarily, on leading improvement in pedagogy and curriculum, it is best if this is done as a whole-school initiative. The principal is in the best position to ensure that this larger school orientation is achieved.

This focus on school improvement was central to a recent Federal Government trial project of a shared leadership approach in schools in Australia (Chesterton & Duignan, 2004). The project, entitled the 'IDEAS Project', included a philosophy and framework based on the concept of 'parallel leadership', which encourages teachers to take on leadership responsibilities for curriculum and pedagogy, 'in parallel' with the principal and the executive, but within a whole-school improvement framework (Crowther *et al.* 2002a & 2002b). This involves teachers working together in teams across grades and subjects in order to overcome their often isolationist habits and practices. It also places their leadership of curriculum and pedagogy within the larger vision and purpose of the school as a whole.

Crowther *et al.*'s work is the most influential in the growing body of literature that supports various approaches to shared leadership. In their view, teachers should be actively engaged in decisions about learning and teaching. Of course, students, parents and

the community are also stakeholders and, as such, should have an input into such decisions, but teachers, as educational professionals, must be in the front line in determining the nature and content of curriculum and the approaches to and processes of pedagogy, learning and teaching.

For contemporary educational leaders to develop and foster the growth of shared leadership in their schools, they need to help teachers to develop collaborative and shared mental models and meanings that bind them together as a learning community. The key emphasis is on learning together, sharing and creating processes and conditions that encourage everyone in the school community to learn, grow, and be creative together. This is, in essence, what is meant by sharing leadership in a school community. Sharing leadership, in the context of the school as a learning community, involves growing, nurturing and supporting competent and capable teachers to become key leaders, especially of curriculum and pedagogy.

However, a key argument in a shared approach to leadership is that it needs to be widely distributed across key stakeholders, not just teachers. A number of researchers have explored the nature and structure of what they refer to as 'distributed leadership' (Pearce & Sims, 2002; Harris, 2002; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001; and Elmore, 2000).

Distributing leadership

Pearce and Sims (2002, p. 188) reported on a study that analysed the behaviour of appointed team leaders (vertical leadership) *versus* the distributed influence and effectiveness of those within the team (distributed leadership). Distributed leadership, they concluded, accounted for much of the effectiveness of change management teams. In another research project on leadership in schools, which took leadership practice as the unit of analysis, the researchers concluded that a distributed approach to leadership can improve practice by making leadership in the school more transparent. It enables the ways in which teachers and other leaders think and act to change teaching and learning to be seen more clearly. Such an approach to leadership, they suggested, can help teachers and

educational leaders 'identify dimensions of their practice, articulate relations among these dimensions, and think about changing their practice' (Spillane *et al.* 2001, p. 24).

Leadership of schools is beyond the capacity of any one person, or of those in formal leadership positions only, and should be distributed to engage the 'contours of expertise' in the school community, creating a culture that provides coherence, guidance and direction for teaching, learning and leadership (Elmore, 2000, p. 15). Contours of expertise suggest that there are rich veins of expertise to be found throughout organisations for those who know the organisational terrain well. Distributed leadership is, however, more than collaboration among teachers. Collaborative work by teachers will not by itself lead to changed teacher practices and improved learning outcomes. To engage teachers productively in leadership there must be a whole-school focus on change and improvement, a larger purpose than just collaboration for its own sake.

Distributed leadership, therefore, must have a clear purpose and focus to bring about whole-school improvement in learning and teaching. In this way, distributing leadership can be an important motivator and a contributor to the quality of teaching and learning in the school and in the classroom. Of course, collaboration and teamwork must occur between and among teachers and these collegial relationships should empower them to make key decisions on pedagogy and learning (Silins & Mulford, 2002) and be grounded in 'mutual trust, support and enquiry' (Harris, 2000, p. 3).

However, it would seem that distributed leadership is not easy to establish and maintain in practice, and consequently is not a predominant characteristic of many contemporary schools. A traditional emphasis in schools on privacy, individualism and 'idiosyncratic institutional practice' makes collective action difficult (Harris, 2002, p. 7). These barriers must be breached if genuine distribution of leadership is to occur. If, as has already been suggested, leadership for school improvement cannot be the responsibility of one or even a few people then it seems reasonable to conclude that a key challenge is to find ways of enabling more teachers to become leaders and supporting them as necessary to change current pedagogical, teaching and learning practices. A new

paradigm of the teaching profession is needed, one that recognises both the capacity of the profession to provide desperately needed school revitalisation and the striking potential of teachers to provide new forms of leadership in schools and communities (Crowther *et al.* 2002b).

While participation of teachers is a key ingredient of true distributed leadership, the school principal has an important role to perform. A recent review of an Australian Federal Government trial of a shared, distributed model of leadership in schools identified the principal as a key to its success (Chesterton & Duignan, 2004). The principal has to have the capacity to share leadership, to 'let go' so that teachers' voices can be heard in key decisions not only on teaching and learning but also on whole-school improvement. Principals with traditional views of position, power and hierarchical structures may find themselves unable to 'unfreeze' their habitual ways of thinking, doing and organising. Principals need to develop their leadership capabilities if they are to feel comfortable in engaging fully with teachers in shared or distributed leadership (Duignan & Marks, 2003).

Based on a substantial research agenda, The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in England (2004) proposed five pillars of distributed leadership in schools:

1 **Self-confident and self-effacing headship** – a desire to make an impact upon the world without a strong need for personal status;
2 **Clarity of structure and accountability** – defining responsibilities to create 'permission to act';
3 **Investment in leadership capability** – to build the value, beliefs and attributes of effective leadership in all members of staff;
4 **A culture of trust** – to facilitate boldness, debate and co-operation; and
5 **A turning point** – specific actions and events in a school's history that lend momentum to the evolution of distributed leadership (NCSL, 2006, pp. 21–32).

While all five pillars are important, investment in leadership capability (number three) is one of the most urgent in the Australian educational systems and is the focus of the next chapter. The

question that arises for me is the degree to which many educational leaders are capable of responding effectively to the challenges and tensions already discussed in this book, especially those with ethical implications for their schools. In the next chapter, I argue that educational leaders will need, first and foremost, to be capable human beings, as well as knowledgeable and competent professionals, in order to cope with the types of challenges and tensions discussed in this book.

Key ideas for reflection

One key way to enhance leadership capacity in schools is to rethink what educational leadership actually means and involves – its definition, purpose, scope and processes as well as its content. In many schools, there is a need for a shift in the meaning, perspective and scope of educational leadership to promote and support greater sharing and distribution of leadership responsibilities.

A shared approach to leadership can enhance professional dialogue and create an environment where core educational and pedagogical decisions are seen as a collective professional responsibility. A distributed approach to leadership identifies the contours of expertise within the school community and harnesses the talents of all key stakeholders for the purpose of improving the processes, content and outcomes of teaching and learning.

While the need for shared and distributed leadership in schools appears to be well understood, the obstacles to its implementation need to be explored and better understood. Educational leaders have the challenge of creating conditions in which the key school community stakeholders are willing and able to collaborate, channelling all efforts towards achieving the shared vision and goals of the school community.

Teachers, especially, need to trust and support one another in a shared working environment in order to optimise learning opportunities and outcomes for all students. However, many teachers may have to overcome a culture of individualism, privacy, professional isolationism and idiosyncratic institutional practices. Research indicates that for teachers to share in the leadership of

curriculum and pedagogy, there needs to be a focus on whole-school improvement in learning and teaching as opposed to piecemeal change in a department or subject area. Engaging teachers in shared and distributed leadership can be an important motivator and contributor to the quality of teaching and learning throughout the school. Collegial collaboration and teamwork among teachers should empower them to make significant and influential improvements in teaching, pedagogy and learning.

For schools with closed professional cultures, shared and distributed leadership will not come about just because literature recommends it or because some school stakeholders 'talk it up' as a good idea. Changes in attitudes and mindsets are necessary before changes in practices can occur. A useful starting point, perhaps a turning point, is to encourage discussion and dialogue about the assumptions that underpin sharing and distributing leadership, as well as the strategies and actions necessary to achieve such change.

Questions for reflection

Reflection 1 – assumptions and concepts

- What assumptions underpin a shared or distributed approach to leadership?
- Can leadership actually be shared and/or distributed? Remember that leadership is, essentially, an influencing process. Can influence be shared and/or distributed?
- How about power? Authority? Responsibility? Accountability? Can they be shared and/or distributed?
- What changes to position, status and personal and professional relationships might be brought about by sharing or distributing leadership?

Reflection 2 – case study

Reflect on a recent project or event where effective sharing of the leadership occurred:

- What were the key reasons for this successful sharing?
- What lessons did you learn for sharing and distributing leadership in the future?

Reflection 3 – getting started

- How can cultures of shared/distributed leadership be better promoted and supported in schools?
- What assumptions and mindsets need to be challenged?
- What positive steps can be taken, almost immediately?
- What needs to happen to sustain such cultures of shared leadership?