

Leadership as everyday interactions

As a leader, sometimes you have to implement change that is not of your making and sometimes change you may not even agree with. Over the last 20 years, primary school principal Joyce Adam reckons there hasn't been a year without some major change initiative to implement. Joyce shares her experience in leading change and how her school makes leadership accessible through recognising everyday acts as small moments of leadership.



What do you think is the biggest misconception about leadership?

That strategy trumps culture. The truth is that the very basic needs of people, such as respect, belonging and inclusion, matter the most. Strong cultures allow strategies to be implemented successfully.

I also think that leadership is happening around us all the time. At our school we don't want students thinking that leadership is about being the Prime Minister or the leader of a company. We want students to recognise that everyday interactions are moments of leadership and that they all have leadership inside them. For example, positively influencing another student is an act of leadership. Thinking about leadership in this way makes it available and accessible to students, versus leadership being a title or something beyond them.

The more you get people working together, the more they are practising leadership. I think organisations could really benefit from recognising and harnessing this type of daily leadership.

Who or what has inspired or influenced your leadership?

Growing up in India, I was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Indira Gandhi. They sowed the seed in me that women can be in positions of leadership. This all happened before I was 11 years old, so it just shows how influential role models are in a person's early years!

I'm also inspired by my school's learning community and their tenacity and motivation to be engaged and lend support.

What's the most rewarding thing about leading?

It's always rewarding seeing students grow and ultimately leave the school as articulate, bright and confident kids. Right now, it's a very rewarding time to be a leader in primary education because we are implementing what's called "democratic education". It's where children are not only at the centre of learning but are planning and driving the curriculum at the school level. It's a big change for people to get their heads around. As a leader, it requires you to use your influence to bring students, staff and the community together around this new approach.

There used to be a time when people would say being a principal is a lonely job. But these days you really have to collaborate with lots of people and the wider community to be effective, and I enjoy that.

What do you find the most challenging?

Every year for the past 20 years there has been pretty much a significant initiative that principals have had to implement – from Tomorrow's Schools and national standards to bulk funding and new approaches to numeracy or literacy. It can get tiring and you have to learn to live with uncertainty and ambiguity. Some of the initiatives work and some fail, and some come back again in a different form!

Some people are early adopters of change, while others can be critical or slip into a "we've seen that before, and it will never work" mindset. As a principal, you have to find a way to bring the critics and early adopters together. It's important to give teachers the time and the space to understand the nature and scope of the change, be clear about what's expected and engage them on how they can implement the change. With a significant change we will often set up an incubation group. This group will trial the change and explore what worked, what didn't work so well and share these experiences with the other teachers.

I think creating and maintaining a positive school culture is the most critical thing of all. It doesn't matter how good your systems are, things won't work well if you have a negative culture. So in many ways, your culture is the most important system of all! I like how the writer Margaret Wheatley talks about organisations as "living and breathing organisms" and that they should be treated and tended to in the same way. That thinking has influenced me, so I spend a lot of time and effort developing and sustaining a positive school culture. Among other things, this includes staff knowing what is important to each other and understanding what makes each other tick.

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LEADING *by* EXAMPLE



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Have you had a defining leadership moment?

Early in my professional career, I encountered a member of a governing body who was destructive and verbally violent. His behaviour was intolerable, and much of it was directed at me because the appointments panel I was part of decided not to appoint his preferred candidate to a position. He enrolled other people into his negative campaign, and it really impacted me. It knocked my self-esteem and confidence, and although I took care of business, I often went into my shell to protect myself against the abuse. With time and support I was able to get over the crisis. What I learned was that I should have front-footed the issue earlier by seeking suitable professional support and legal advice.

What's the most valuable leadership lesson you've learned?

Know yourself as a leader. Doing this is a reflective process – discovering how your life's experiences have shaped you, knowing your core values and beliefs and what drives your leadership actions on a day-to-day basis. Once you have this awareness it helps you understand how you relate to others and how they relate to you. It also helps you to stay focused on what's important.

What's the most useful piece of leadership advice you've received?

Lead with an ego of zero. If you are led solely by ego and something negative happens, as in my defining leadership moment, it can impact your whole sense of identity. You don't have resistance because it is all about you. If you lead without ego, you are able to navigate negative incidents more successfully. It's not about you, so your focus is on others and how to lead them.

What gets easier as you become more experienced as a leader?

The ability to think broadly and strategically. With more experience you see how things link together. I think you also become more natural in your leadership. You are more true to yourself and you speak your mind more freely. I think you can also give people more of your time. Inexperienced leaders can often be frantic in their pace.

If you were able to go back in time, what leadership advice would you give the young you?

Collaborate from the start with issues that you find difficult to manage. Leadership can be tough and lonely at times, so gather people around you and reach out for support early.

If you could distil your leadership ethos into one sentence, what would it be?

We go, not ego.

What attributes do you think Kiwis most look for in their leaders?

Humility, inclusiveness, understanding and determination. I think Kiwis also like leaders who are story tellers and who connect at a human level by sharing both funny and serious stories.

What do you think would improve leadership in New Zealand?

I think in the education sector, training leaders how to collaborate and lead complex system-wide change would be really useful. The ability for schools to collaborate with each other is going to be really important for sustainable change.

Joyce was born in India and emigrated to Australia with her family when she was 11 years old. In 1985, she moved to New Zealand and has been Principal of Miramar North School in Wellington since 1994. Outside of work, Joyce enjoys a good shiraz, politics, reading true crime books and listening to a range of music from the 70s and 80s.

