

– A SURPRISING POINT OF VIEW FROM LEADERSHIP EXPERT **KENNETH LEITHWOOD**. READ WHY LEADERSHIP IS BOTH OVERESTIMATED AND A KEY FACTOR IN THIS Q & A INTERVIEW.

leadership

gets too much attention

** You have written that leadership is second only to teaching among school-related factors in its impact on student learning. Why is leadership a key factor?*

“Leaders have a huge influence on the success of schools. What leaders do serves as a catalyst for much of what happens in schools. Principals have a significant impact on teachers’ collective efficacy and on teacher commitment to the school. When they create conditions that support teachers in their work, schools experience higher teacher retention rates, improved climate and culture, and also increased student achievement.”

Is the role of leadership underestimated within the educational sector?

“No, it is probably overestimated! There is almost too much attention on leadership these days.”

How does this relate to your argument that leadership is a key for a school’s success?

“Leadership was under-resourced in the past, but today funds and policy makers focus a lot on how to improve the quality of leadership in schools, and this means that a lot of resources are directed to this area. But there are many other important issues in schools that need attention. It is a question of how to spend the resources in the best possible way – it is foolish to put all of it in the leadership pot.”

You have written an entire book about leading with teachers’ emotions in mind. Why do emotions matter in schools?

“People’s emotions guide what they think about.

Emotions narrow down what they think about. That is the reason why emotions matter. When you start paying attention to emotions, you see how powerful emotions are in educational settings. Schools are pots of emotions. When you enter a school, you see happy kids and sad kids. You see teachers who have had a good day, and teachers who have had a bad day. When parents enter the school, some of them are a bit confused and others are annoyed at some practices within the school. You see all of these emotions. Schools are cauldrons of emotions.”

What do emotions have to do with teaching?

“Teachers’ emotional well-being affects their performance in the classroom. One example is stress and burn-out, undoubtedly the most powerful negative emotions. About a quarter of teachers suffer some kind of burn-out during their careers and it has significant negative effects on them, their students and their schools. How teachers teach depend on their motivations, capacities, and working conditions. If conditions are not supportive, teachers are unable to exercise the capacities they have. And teachers’ working conditions are essentially students’ learning conditions. If teachers’ working conditions deteriorate, students’ learning also deteriorates. So teacher emotions have a significant impact on student achievement. Dealing with emotions is probably the most challenging thing leaders do.”

Isn’t it extremely manipulative for leaders to try to lead teachers’ emotions?

“Leadership is about influence – how to influence the

staff, the students, the shareholders. Leaders have an affect on teachers' emotions – whether they are aware of it or not. Leaders have, for example, a strong influence on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs. But traditional leadership practices often fail to take teachers' emotion into consideration."

What is the most burning issue about leadership today?

"There are two burning issues! One of them is that we know a lot about successful leaders, but we could do a better job of implementing this knowledge in practice. There is currently a knowledge implementation gap that we have to overcome.

The other burning issue is about the leadership of diverse schools. Schools with large groups of disadvantaged or diverse students create challenges that test the capacities of most teachers and administrators. Such students bring to school different forms of social capital than schools are used to working with. Providing a good education to many of these students also means working much closer with their families than many school leaders are used to doing. This is an expanded role for school leaders, one that takes them outside the boundaries of their own organisations and often also beyond their core competences. But it is vital that they take on such an expanded role if their schools are to provide equitable education for all of their students. Diversity is probably the greatest challenge to school leaders today." ■

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The basics of successful leadership

What does it take to be a successful leader? There seems to be a kind of 'basics' of successful leadership. In organisational sectors as different as schools and the military, and in national cultures as different as Canada, Hong Kong and the United States, there is compelling evidence of a common core of practices to achieve successful leadership. Four sets of practices make up this basic core of successful leadership practices:

1 Setting directions

This set of practices is aimed at helping one's colleagues develop a shared understanding of the organisation and its activities and goals. Having goals helps people make sense of their work and enables them to find a sense of identity for themselves within their work context. A vision also helps set directions, fostering the acceptance of group goals and creating high performance expectations.

2 Developing people

The organisational members' capacities and motivations are influenced by the direct experiences they have with the leaders as well as the organisational context. This include: offering intellectual stimulation, providing individualised support and providing appropriate models of best practice and beliefs considered fundamental to the organisation.

3 Redesigning the organisation

Specific practices typically associated with this set of basics include strengthening district and school cultures, modifying organisational structures and building collaborative processes. Such practices assume that the purpose behind the redesign of organisational cultures and structures is to facilitate the work of organisational members and that the malleability of structures should match the changing nature of the school's improvement agenda.

4 Managing the instructional program

This set of basics includes staffing as well as monitoring the progress of teachers and schools. It includes providing feedback to teachers about their classroom practices and buffering teachers from distractions to their central work of teaching students. A considerable amount of attention is currently devoted to the use of good quality evidence for instructional decision making, an issue which is part of this category of leadership practices.

Source: Kenneth Leithwood and "Learning from Leadership Project" (The Wallace Foundation)



KENNETH LEITHWOOD

Kenneth Leithwood is Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. His research and writing on school leadership, educational policy and educational change is widely known and respected. He has published more than 80 refereed journal articles and more than three dozen books, including *Leading With Teacher Emotions in Mind*.

Favourite book about leadership?
Gary Yukl: *Leadership in Organizations*.