

**Demonizing management and canonizing leadership: The  
rise and currency of the ethical dimension of leadership  
for sustainable quality school improvement**

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**Abstract**

*This conceptual article focuses on the most important and overarching 'quality' principle of leadership and discusses it from an evolutionary perspective in an educational context. It depicts the shift in emphasis over time from managing to leading a school organization. Importantly, it highlights the under-researched ethical dimension of leadership in implementing quality in a school context in deep, sustainable ways. In particular, Starratt's (2004) creative leadership framework provides a brilliant fusion of the philosophical and the practical for the practice of moral leadership. It challenges all school leaders and educators to view the learning process as an overwhelmingly moral activity that engages the full humanity of the school community and to move beyond mere technical efficiency in the delivery and performance of learning.*

**Key words**

*Educational leadership, ethical leadership, sustainable leadership, school improvement, quality education*

## **Introduction**

Quality management stresses the need for visible commitment and support from formal leaders creating trusting teams to embed quality principles and practices in the culture of the organization (Deming, 2000; González & Guillén, 2002). Correspondingly, the failure of quality improvement efforts in schools is often perceived to be caused by ineffective leadership including conceptions of school leadership that fail to engage the talents of staff (Bonstingl, 2001; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006). Hence, the effective implementation and sustainability of quality in schools depends on the support and inspiration of principals.

Principals are expected to promote teamwork to guide the school community in its continuous development towards the provision of quality education (Bernauer, 2002; Detert *et al.*, 2000). This implies that principals support teachers to be leaders, accepting responsibilities that are consistent with their own values and the school's goals (Yu, Leithwood & Jantzi, 2002). The challenge to leadership in a quality context is that of adopting a new philosophy and all other associated processes and systems that ensure generating a quality culture. According to Deming (1986, p. 54), the quality approach to management requires "that managers be leaders." Indeed, since the mid-1980s, educational researchers and authors started "to canonise leadership and demonise management" (Gronn, 2003, p. 269). However, some leading scholars like Bush and Middlewood (2005) and Leithwood *et al.* (2004) believe that good leaders also have to be good managers.

This article focuses on the most important and overarching 'quality' principle of leadership and discusses it from an evolutionary perspective in an educational context. It depicts the shift in emphasis over time from managing to leading a school organization. Importantly, it highlights the under-researched ethical dimension of leadership in implementing quality in a school context in deep, sustainable ways.

## **Transformational leadership**

A major influence on recent thinking about leadership in education was Burns' (1978) concept of *transformational leadership* (Gurr, 2002; Owens, 2001). Transformational leadership looks for potential motives in members of staff, seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the 'full person' in a commitment to change, resulting in a relationship in which other staff are fulfilled and inspired to become leaders (Owens, 2001). Transformational leaders foster development of vision and goals aimed

at the continuous growth and development of the school (Mukhopadhyay, 2005). Hence, in a quality context, the emphasis is on transformational leadership, which has to continuously evolve and unfold to its full potential (Frazier, 1997). Transformational leadership is indeed closely related to how successful principals perceive their own leadership roles (Gurr, 2002).

The most remarkable feature of transformational leadership is that of creating and mentoring leadership at all levels in the organization by trusting and nurturing leadership qualities in others to accomplish goals (Gurr, 2008; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Leithwood *et al.*, 2006; Owens, 2001). Indeed, Leithwood and Riehl (2003, p. 9) succinctly define leadership as “those persons, occupying various roles in the school, who work with others to provide direction and who exert influence on persons and things in order to achieve the school’s goals.” Similarly, Bush and Glover (2003, p. 8) describe leadership as “a process of influence leading to the achievement of goals”. The transformational leader engages in trusting and developing the leadership capabilities of colleagues who therefore acquire the confidence to lead the ‘sub-systems’ of the school, e.g. departments, offices, the gymnasium and sports division, etc. School leaders need to engage themselves in a leadership process through which the minds and talents of people at all levels are applied fully and creatively to the school’s continuous improvement.

This echoes Burns’ (1978) seminal distinction between leadership that is *transactional* and that which is *transformational*. Transactional leadership occurs when the leader takes the initiative to make contact with others for the purpose of an exchange of something valued; that is, “leaders approach followers with an eye towards exchanging” (Burns, p. 4). On the other hand,

[Transformational leadership] occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality [and it] ultimately becomes moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus it has a transforming effect on both. (Burns, 1978, p. 20)

Hence, transformational leadership is not merely based on power and compliance of staff. It is a relationship in which the needs, aspirations and values of both leaders and the led are satisfied (Nemec, 2006). It is to be noted, here, that reference to the inherent conservatism in the notions of the ‘leader’ and the ‘led’ is excluded.

Whilst transformational leadership has the potential to develop higher levels of motivation and commitment amongst stakeholders, it has also been criticized as being manipulative in the sense of a

vehicle for control over teachers (Chirichello, 1999), and for having the potential to become ‘despotic’ because of its strong, heroic and charismatic features (Allix, 2000). To overcome such criticisms, transformational leadership evolved into discussions about *distributed*, *shared* or *collective* notions of leadership (Mukhopadhyay, 2005), including an emphasis on *teacher leadership* (Crowther *et al.*, 2002a, 2002b; Starr & Oakley, 2008). Transformational leadership is now a term mostly used in education with particular reference being given to these newer terms, and therefore increasing attention is being devoted to an important shift in leadership paradigm in schools that promotes, nurtures and supports distributed leadership.

### **Distributed leadership**

From the distributed leadership perspective, the idea of leadership moves beyond formally appointed leaders, personality traits, roles, and positions, but instead draws on the tacit knowledge, skills and merit of staff members and accounts for what the group knows and does collectively (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001; Spillane, 2006). Distributed leadership in schools works through relationships, encouraging a culture that values multiple perspectives and diversity, through structures that actively promote shared leadership arrangements and through approaches that include concertive action from spontaneous collaboration and role-sharing to formal relationships (Cunliffe, 2009; Zepke, 2007).

Distributed leadership practice requires that everyone in the school develop and share a common vision aligned with meaningful and attainable goals for student achievement. To ensure efficient and reliable outcomes that sustain themselves, collective decision-making that genuinely incorporates input and feedback from those most affected by organizational action is indispensable. This recognises the importance of participation, collaborative decision-making and teamwork to enable stakeholders to contribute to the processes of visioning and implementing rather than simply accepting the formal leader’s personal vision (Bush & Glover, 2003).

An important component of distributed leadership is that of *teacher leadership*. There is now a wealth of research evidence demonstrating the substantial advantages that accrue to schools that empower teachers to effect decisions and recognize ‘teachers as leaders’ (Crowther *et al.*, 2002a, 2002b; Day, Harris & Hadfield, 2001; Gronn, 2000; Harris & Muijs, 2005; Wallace, 2002). It is suggested that improvements in student outcomes are more likely when teachers are empowered in decisions related to teaching, learning and assessment (Silins & Mulford, 2002; Starr & Oakley, 2008). “Much research

has demonstrated that the quality of education depends primarily on the way schools are managed, more than on the abundance of available resources, and that the capacity of schools to improve teaching and learning is strongly influenced by quality of the leadership provided by the headteacher” (De Grauwe, 2000, p. 1). Thus, within the general field of school leadership, teacher leadership has more significant effects on student achievement than principal leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004; Silins & Mulford, 2002). In fact, school leadership is second only to teaching in its impact on student outcomes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004).

Principals with vision realise that best results occur through empowering those nearest to a process to manage that process themselves. This implies that teachers should be given the professional freedom in the discharge and leadership of their duties. As Fredriksson (2004, p. 10) says:

The professional freedom of the teacher is of crucial importance in developing quality in education. Professional freedom does not mean that the teacher can do whatever he or she likes, but that the teacher, who knows the students, is the person best equipped to decide which methods to use in order to create an optimum learning situation. Professional and academic freedom is also of crucial importance in achieving teaching that is independent of any political, economic, ideological or religious influence, in order to preserve young people’s right to and democratic exercise of critical creativity.

At the same time, collaboration of teachers will contribute to the development of a positive school culture that is committed to change and the creation of better learning opportunities for all (Robinson & Carrington, 2002; Rhodes & Houghton-Hill, 2000; Wilms, 2003). Pool (2000, p. 37) regards the collaborative efforts as “synergistic elements in a creative process” aimed at the transformation and continuous improvement of learning organizations. Furthermore, collaboration integrates and improves quality and efficiency in all functions throughout the organization (Swift, Ross & Omachonu, 1998; Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Pool, 2000). This means heavy reliance on teams. Team members can draw upon strengths and complement each other’s knowledge and skills in providing better quality instruction. Principals, as formal leaders, also have a crucial role in creating genuinely shared leadership partnerships with teachers by providing resources and opportunities for them to learn and grow professionally (Starr & Oakley, 2008).

Moreover, the ‘formal’ leadership role teachers can play in schools by virtue of their professional status is only one comparatively trivial aspect of their potential leadership influence. According to Harris and Muijs (2005), the ability of teachers to influence decision-making ‘informally’ through their interactions amongst themselves and with other people within the school is much more powerful.

Leadership in this informal sense is a “by-product of social interaction and purposeful collaboration” (Harris & Muijs, 2005, p. 14) amongst all stakeholders. This appears to suggest that teachers say and do things, consciously or unintentionally, which are likely to cause the attitudes and behaviours of stakeholders, including themselves, in the school to change for the better, especially with reference to teaching and learning. It also means that the quality principle of distributed leadership in schools can be enabled by effective communication of the school’s goals and the deployment of participation devices and appropriate reward systems.

Realizing and maintaining this quality principle in schools is complex because it depends not only on the school leader but also on teachers and is very much founded on trust and respect. This necessarily requires the presence of principals who generate adhesion to a vision. More than anything, teachers need to trust in the principal’s fairness and in his/her intention to preserve their interests, thus highlighting the importance of the ethical dimension of school leadership.

The notion of distributed leadership in schools is not without criticisms. Although the importance of this quality principle is acknowledged, so too is the difficulty of achieving it. It has been said that the distribution of leadership can result in a *laissez-faire* environment or even conflict (Burke, 2010; Starr, 2012). In other instances, whilst responsibilities have been delegated to teachers in the name of ‘distributed leadership’, these have seldom concurred with any power to influence decision-making autonomously (Hatcher, 2005). Senior school leaders, as formal leaders, retain effective control of important decisions in schools, and this is particularly true at a strategic level where middle-level managers and other teachers tend to have no say in matters related to the overall future direction of the school (Orchard, 2002).

Furthermore, Bush and Glover (2003) claim that distributed leadership recognizes all forms of leadership and, as such, does not constitute a distinctive approach to leadership. This is in agreement with Gronn’s (2008) contention that school leadership in some situations is ‘hybrid’, rather than truly distributed, whereby it is acknowledged that there may be “highly influential individuals working in parallel with collectivities” (Gronn, 2008, p. 152). Nonetheless, it is not difficult to see the basis of the current appeal to the idea of distributed leadership as a form of participatory democracy for certain functions only, while others should be undertaken by the school’s formal leader (Leithwood *et al.*, 2007). Despite its critiques, “distributed leadership is an idea whose time has come” (Gronn, 2000, p. 333).

## **Ethical/moral leadership**

Despite criticisms of transformational leadership and distributed leadership in education, they offer “a useful platform on which to build the next dominant view of leadership, one which may, for example, incorporate a stronger focus on values and moral leadership” (Gurr, 2002, p. 85). In this context, Sergiovanni (2006) defines *moral leadership* as the ability to build connections that transform schools from ordinary organizations to communities with a commitment to a shared purpose. To that extent, the result of transformational leadership is a relationship of mutual responsibility and accountability “that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents” (Burns, 1978, p. 4). This means that principals should be centrally concerned with leadership practices that are ethical and moral by the very nature of the work they do with deciding what is significant, what is right and what is worthwhile (Duignan, 2005, 2007; Fullan, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2006). An ethic of care needs to be an integral part of what happens in schools alongside an ethic of social justice (Noddings, 2002).

This ethical dimension of leadership, often silenced in the literature, refers to the rightness of decisions and goodness of intentions of the leader in his/her relationship with others, and emphasizes the moral correctness of his/her behaviours and actions. The leader’s influence is largely anchored on his/her moral values or virtues such as respect, fairness, honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, responsibility and inclusion (Nemec, 2006). Hence school leadership involves an element of social justice (Duignan, 2005) and the use of such relational values is central to people’s self-concept and their sense of self and informs the way they interact with each other, and impact positively on personal, relational and collective well-being (Nemec, 2006). This includes a higher sense of autonomy and control at work, improved mental health and higher levels of motivation towards work (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2003).

Correspondingly, Ellyard (2001) talks about the need for school leaders to have ‘heart power’, referring to the qualities of confidence, courage, commitment, consideration, courtesy, compassion, conciliatory skills and communication. Ellyard (2001) claims that such qualities come from the heart and supersede technical abilities, and enable the principal to build trust as a foundation and works towards achieving school goals relationally via a focus on people. Thus current educational leadership thinking is very much driven by morality and ethics, in that implicit in the relationship between the school leader and other staff is trust in one person’s power over another and the way in which that power will be used and the interests it will serve (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Nemec, 2006).

## **Starratt's ethical school leadership framework**

In his atypical but timely book, *Ethical Leadership*, Robert J. Starratt (2004) implicitly asserts that school leaders should transcend the technical dimension of their work so as to have a greater positive impact in the delivery and performance of learning. He urges leaders to become ethical leaders who recognize the learning process as a profoundly moral activity that engages the full humanity of the school community. He goes on to emphasize that educational leadership requires a moral commitment to high quality learning for all students, based on three particularly important ethical virtues: *authenticity*, *responsibility*, and *presence*. These ethical leadership virtues are “needed to infuse and energize the work of schools and hence the work of leaders in schools” (Starratt, 2004, p. 9). They act as standards for leaders as they design opportunities and environments that nurture and sustain teacher capacity (Bredeson, 2005).

The ethic of authenticity challenges school leaders to “bring their deepest principles, beliefs, values and convictions to their work” (Duignan, 2007, p. 5), and to act in truth and integrity in all their interactions as humans “with the good of others in view” (Starratt, 2004, p. 71). This places an obligation on school leaders to promote a reciprocal relationship with teachers in which they express their own authentic selves while simultaneously respecting and affirming how teachers construct authenticity in their lives and professional work (Bredeson, 2005). As Duignan (2007) claims, authentic school leaders focus overwhelmingly on the ‘core people’ (teachers and students) to achieve the ‘core business’ of schooling (authentic teaching and learning), based on and whilst embracing the ‘core values’ (such as respect for the dignity and worth of others). The ethic of authenticity places an obligation on school leaders to think, above all, of teachers as human beings and appreciate and affirm their uniqueness and needs while focused on building individual and collective capacity through professional development (Bredeson, 2005).

Starratt (2004, p. 49) suggests that “[e]ducational leaders must be morally responsible not only in preventing and alleviating harm but also in a proactive sense of who the leader is, what the leader is responsible as, whom the leader is responsible to, and what the leader is responsible for.” The first general orientation to the virtue of responsibility (‘ex post’ responsibility) is that school leaders should be held responsible for past actions, decisions, and their outcomes. The second orientation (‘ex ante’ responsibility) is proactive meaning that a school leader should assume a moral responsibility to all stakeholders for thinking about, planning, and taking actions as human beings, professional educators, community members and citizens. Thus, the ethic of responsibility challenges school leaders and



teachers to act in ways that acknowledge their personal accountability for their actions, and to create and promote conditions in their schools for authentic learning experiences for students as well as listening to and caring for people making the decisions relating to this learning (Duignan & Bezzina, 2006).

Among the three ethical components of Starratt's framework for educational leaders, it is the last, presence, which empowers principals to be and act with genuine authenticity and responsibility, and tightly links them to the school's stakeholders in the pursuit of quality. Starratt (2004, p. 105) discloses the 'symbiotic' relationships between the three ethics when he says:

[T]o be authentic, I have to take responsibility for the self I choose to be. To be responsible, I have to choose to be authentic. To be authentic and responsible, I have to be present to my authentic self and be present to the circumstances and situations so that I can connect my authentic self to the roles I have chosen to play.

Duignan (2007, p. 6) conveys Starratt's sentiments more plainly in the following terms:

Authentic educative leaders couldn't live with themselves personally or professionally (ethic of authenticity) unless they took responsibility for the quality of students' learning by naming and challenging inauthentic learning (ethic of responsibility), then engaging meaningfully with others and helping them create the conditions for authentic learning (ethic of presence).

Hence school leaders' presence triggers, contributes and enhances a deep sense of their own authenticity and responsibility, and those of others, especially teachers, students and parents, through their active engagement in deep and meaningful professional activities, based on ongoing processes of self-reflection and communication with others.

### **Leadership sustainability**

Perhaps reflecting growing environmental concerns, there is now a burgeoning interest by prominent writers on an essential, but often neglected, aspect of educational leadership: sustainability. Davies (2007, p. 11) defines *sustainable leadership* as "the key factors that underpin the longer-term development of the school. It builds a leadership culture based on moral purpose which provides success that is accessible to all," thereby echoing others writers' view that school leadership is very much about values and ethics (e.g., Duignan, 2005; Fullan, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2006).

Hargreaves and Fink (2004, 2006) conceive seven interrelated principles of sustainable leadership, characterised by: (1) *depth* of learning and real achievement rather than superficially tested performance; (2) *length* of impact in the long run, beyond individual leaders, through effectively managed succession; (3) *breadth* of influence, where leadership becomes a distributed or shared responsibility; (4) *justice* in ensuring that leadership actions do no harm to and actively benefit students and other schools; (5) *diversity* that replaces standardization and alignment with diversity and cohesion; (6) *resourcefulness* that conserves and renews leaders' energy and doesn't burn them out; and (7) *conservation* that honours and builds on the best of the past to construct an even better future. In essence, the authors' compelling framework of seven principles implies that no efforts at ongoing change or continuous improvement can be expected to persist in a school, unless leadership is implemented in ways that are enduring. The contemporary challenge of leadership is to distribute and develop leadership across the organization, but also to articulate and develop it over time (Hopkins, 2001).

## **Conclusion**

This article has reviewed the historical development of school leadership and gives credence to our view that leadership commitment and support are among the key factors for successfully implementing quality in organizations, including schools. From this perspective, principals should be the driving force in the pursuit of quality in schools with their staff in a shared, teamwork sense. They should develop and communicate vision, optimism and purpose with their staff (Bonstingl, 2001; Sallis, 2002). They also have a moral obligation to mentor leadership in others by empowering staff and having a high level of tolerance for risk-taking, ambiguity, patience and integrity. Quality becomes an integral part of a school once the thinking and visioning of staff and the culture of the school as a whole organization are aligned. The principal is entrusted with the responsibility of fully adopting the total quality philosophy throughout the organization, empowering staff to continuously improve by removing barriers to their natural joy and pride of 'workmanship' (Deming, 1986, 2000). This means that quality has to be managed, it just does not happen by chance and it has to be managed at all levels of the organization by everyone. School leaders also create an atmosphere of trust that enables commitment to a collective vision which in turn brings about deep, significant changes. By explicitly considering the ethical dimension of school leadership, principals are able to influence a school's culture strongly and, consequently, may enable the deployment of quality tenets in schools in deep and sustainable ways.

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