A new paradigm for leadership development?

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Introduction

Most school leadership institutes around the world take a blended approach to leadership development programs. By 'blended' I mean blended in two different ways. First of all, I mean blended in their delivery – a combination of face-to-face taught sessions/workshops, on-line resources, individual reflection and, crucially, reflective learning on the job, usually with the help of a mentor or coach. Most school leadership institutes also blend their content – with a combination of domain-specific issues, such as sessions or modules on leading teaching and learning; school improvement; a whole-school approach to behaviour management; ensuring the wellbeing of students, etc; and more generic leadership issues such as change management or building effective teams.

In England at the moment there is an interesting debate taking place on the extent to which leadership programs should focus on domain-specific knowledge, and how much they should be about more generic leadership skills.

A developing debate – towards a new paradigm?

Currently organisations in England such as Ambition Institute,[1] and individual thinkers such as Matthew Evans in his interesting new book *Leaders with Substance* (2019), are developing an approach to leadership development which, they argue, stands out from previous approaches. They argue that in the past we have emphasised too much the importance of the leader, especially the so-called 'transformational leader'. The 'transformational leader' is supposed to have developed the leadership skills and competencies needed for leadership, and can then apply those skills in many different contexts to great effect. In contrast, they argue, what singles out successful leaders is that they are experts in the core business of the organisation that they are leading. As far as school leadership is concerned, this means that they need to be experts in teaching and learning and in how to improve learning outcomes for children and young people (though there are also other domain-specific areas of expertise, such as governance, etc). Leaders are successful and effective, they argue, not because they have transformational leadership skills but because they have developed the expertise and knowledge to be able to make better decisions within the context in which they are leading, and to solve complex domain-specific problems. So, the focus is on leaders as the experts within their context.

In some leadership programs for principals and aspirant principals around the world, there has been an assumption that those on the program will already have a good grasp of technical issues to do with pedagogy, curriculum, etc and thus the focus in the programs should be at least as much on general leadership aspects such as

- how to build a shared vision;
- how to set goals;
- how to communicate the vision;
- how to create high-performance expectations;
- how to give feedback;
- how to model the school's values;
- how to have difficult conversations;
- how to lead organisational change;
- how to build trust;
- how to develop effective teams;
- how to distribute leadership;
- how to create a values-based and positive culture, etc;
- how to chair meetings to get to clear, agreed outcomes; and
- how to deal with difficult individuals.

In many leadership development programs, these generic leadership skills are considered in workshops, perhaps with examples of good practice from schools and from other organisations, and then school leaders are expected to apply and practice these things within their own context, as part of 'learning on the job'.

However, this new group of people in England argues that the kind of leadership skills listed above only make sense in a domain-specific context. These skills are not generic. What may work in a health context or a business context may not apply at all in a school context. Moreover, what works in one school context may not work in another, different, school context.

So this group of people seems to be making the following six fundamental and inter-connected points.

1. **Leadership per se has been overrated**, especially things like transformational leadership. In the past we have focused more on leadership style and processes. It is much less about personality and much more about the development of leadership expertise. In the future we should focus more on leadership substance and on what decisions leaders actually make, and on how they solve problems in real situations.

2. **Leadership is highly complex.** Common notions of expertise suggest 'mastery' of domains, whereas, they argue, schools are complex and therefore expertise means managing uncertainty and ambiguity. Leadership expertise is hard to define because of its complexity. It is important to make clear that it is not being argued that great teachers always make the best leaders. Instead, they argue that an understanding of teaching and learning is essential for school leadership but not sufficient. School leaders grapple with a particular, macro set of persistent, complex problems and the expertise they need is in resolving these problems.

3. **Leadership development programs should focus much less on generic leadership skills.** The focus in leadership development should be on increasing domain-specific knowledge. Aspects such as relationship-building skills, empathy or moral purpose are important, but only in so far as they relate to the work to be done, rather than as generic skills or general

processes. Leadership development programs should cover a core body of knowledge within the taught aspect of the program, so that leaders can become better and better at the core business of a school – namely teaching and learning, curriculum development and school improvement – based on the very latest research and evidence. This should then be followed up by practice in context – perhaps with coaches and mentors. Leaders, they argue, rely not on a toolkit of skills but on a schema of knowledge. Our understanding of memory and learning increasingly points towards the importance of a coherent and in-depth body of knowledge that is held in the long-term memory and which leads to mental schema upon which practitioners draw. This leads to procedural fluency through deliberate practice – applying knowledge to address real problems. Leadership development programs have under-emphasised this in the past. So, the taught curriculum in leadership development programs should be revised to reflect this, to enable aspiring leaders to learn and internalise this knowledge and store it in their long-term memory. Sessions that consider problem solving of complex issues that are common in schools should be a key focus for leadership development programs, so that leaders can develop the relevant expertise for their role. Expertise, they argue, is the ability to respond consistently and effectively to the persistent problems faced within a role.

4. **Context matters in leadership.** Leadership is heavily context-specific. You cannot divorce what a leader does from the context in which s/he is operating. Whether something works well in a school may well be less about what the leader does and more about social dynamics, psychology and the capabilities of the group. So, all leadership is situational leadership and all leadership is context-specific. There are countless examples of leaders being very successful in one organisation but not in another. A strategy that works in a small rural school, where the focus might need to be more about informal ways of working and relationships, might be completely unworkable in a large school where there is a need to operationalise procedures. When we attempt to apply generic leadership models or behaviours, we risk losing sight of the reality of the challenges in our own school. The best leaders do not apply generic skills, they become better and better at solving problems and at knowing what to do, within their own context. Their motto is: 'Leaders, know your school'. In reality, all successful leaders have a rich, deep and interconnected body of knowledge relevant to the context in which they are working. Having been taught the essential knowledge in depth, leaders should then be given the opportunity to develop procedural fluency – acquired through repeated practice of applying relevant domain-specific knowledge to real-world scenarios within their own context.

> In reality, all successful leaders have a rich, deep and interconnected body of knowledge relevant to the context in which they are working.

5. **Since expertise is what matters, the leader should devolve responsibility to where the expertise is greatest.** For example, the head of maths should lead on improving the teaching of maths. More generic and less specialist strategies, such as observation of maths teaching by the principal or by the leadership team, may be counter-productive, because they may lack the relevant mathematical expertise, though they will still have more general education expertise, which can be very helpful. Let the people with the greatest expertise drive the decisions.

6. **Most people can be leaders if they are prepared to work hard to learn the knowledge and to hone it through practice.** It does not require a particular personality or communication skills or traits. In the past we have fallen into a trap of limiting leadership roles to certain personality characteristics. We need to acknowledge and develop a broader and more diverse group of people as leaders. In the end, it is about the decisions that you make, rather than your style or behaviour. We won't alter leaders' behaviours or styles of leadership through leadership development programs, but we can give them new knowledge and different perspectives, and help them, over time, to develop habits of mind and mental models.

My comments

I welcome the greater focus on domain-specific aspects of school leadership development. I think it is absolutely right that leadership development programs should help to equip school leaders and aspirant school leaders to be more effective at leading school improvement. We know from the excellent work of Viviane Robinson (2011) that leaders who focus more on improving teaching and learning and supporting the professional development of teachers are likely to have a more positive impact on student outcomes. Leadership does not take place in a vacuum and context really matters. It therefore makes sense that leadership development programs should focus on these areas of expertise. This has not always been the case and I broadly support this new emphasis. Context-specific problem solving is key to effective leadership and it is important that leadership development programs focus on this. If leaders are to be effective in ensuring great teaching and learning, which is the core business of the school, it is important that they are up-to-date themselves with the latest research and evidence and can thus support and challenge their team appropriately.

At the National College for School Leadership in England, where I was CEO from 2005–2012, we used to say that leadership development had five important ingredients, which are

1. a chance to lead (we learn to be a leader mainly by leading);

2. ongoing focused feedback from a peer, line manager or mentor (someone who sees you leading on a regular basis and can give you feedback and help you to focus on improving);

3. an opportunity to see leadership in other contexts (if all you experience is mediocre leadership then all you will know is mediocre leadership, so being exposed to great leadership in other contexts can help to raise expectations);

4. access to the best research, case studies and learning resources (to challenge your thinking and so that you can learn from the evidence); and

5. an opportunity to discuss what you are learning with peers/colleagues.

This new focus on the leader as the expert in the leadership of school improvement means that the fourth point is perhaps even more important than we initially thought. It is right, I think, that we now revisit and rethink this.

The new approach rightly challenges the concept of the 'transformational leader' who is supposed to know what to do in any given circumstance because he or she has all the generic leadership skills. As I have written elsewhere (Munby, 2019), too many people are put off leadership because they think that they have to be 'the perfect leader'. The new thinking that we are considering here is, rightly, opening up leadership to a wider and more diverse group of people, who may not see themselves as 'transformational leaders' but may actually prove to be highly effective. This is a significant and very positive step forward in the thinking on leadership and it is something that I warmly welcome.

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Nonetheless, I think it is a mistake to go too far the other way and to dismiss generic leadership skills and competencies as either irrelevant, unteachable or no more than re-enforcing the existing traits and personalities of leaders. Leadership skills such as

- developing a deep self-awareness of your strengths, weaknesses, traits, motivations and default behaviours;
- building a collective vision;
- chairing a meeting effectively;
- providing supportive and challenging feedback to colleagues;
- building trust amongst a team; and
- holding difficult conversations with colleagues who are not behaving well or who are not performing well

… are all important aspects of leadership. I believe that these kinds of generic skills can and should be covered in leadership development programs. Of course, you have to start in one domain (you have to start somewhere!) but the key is to emphasise the generic skill not the content. If you don't, then the learning about the process can be lost and confused with the content. For example, in my view, unless we consider how to develop trust amongst our team members (see the excellent work by Patrick Lencioni, published in 2002, on this subject), we may lose the key point about how to do this, and instead see it merely as an accidental byproduct of solving a work problem together.

It is my experience that the list above of generic skills can be modelled, observed, practised in a reflective way and then deliberately improved upon, through replication and feedback. Of course, they

are all context-specific, but that does not mean that the generic skills cannot be discussed, developed and applied in different contexts. It is also my experience that, although domain-specific, these skills can be applied, with some nuance, in different contexts. When we move to a different organisation, we do not have to relearn all these skills from scratch.

Rather than seeking to become an expert in all aspects of the work of the organisation – which is usually impossible – one of the real skills in leadership is knowing enough to be able to ask the right questions and to challenge those who are the experts within the organisation; knowing when to devolve responsibility and when to keep hold of it. So, I would argue that school leaders need to be 'expert enough' rather than 'the expert'.

I also believe that the new thinking may possibly be in danger of neglecting the relational and trust-building aspect of leadership, though proponents would argue that this is covered within the context of real work problems. In her excellent paper (2017) on the capabilities required for leading improvement, Viviane Robinson suggests that there are the following three capabilities.

1. **Using knowledge** – which is about making decisions informed by evidence and research.
2. **Solving complex problems** – where she means solving the real problems that are preventing improvement, not just solving the problem that appears on the surface.
3. **Building relational trust.**

I would argue that school leaders need to be 'expert enough' rather than 'the expert'.

The 'new thinking group' argument, and Viviane's too, is that building relational trust only makes sense within a real work context. I agree that such issues are best dealt with within a particular domain, but my concern is that this 'softer' side of leadership may end up not being as prominent as the other two aspects in this new thinking. For example, in my view, the concept of leading with both power and love, with both drive/determination and kindness/empathy, is an important concept at the heart of good leadership – and this can be lost if you focus entirely on just solving specific complex problems, without any broader concepts to call upon to help you. My worry is that we may end up with clever leaders who make the right decisions and who solve complex problems but who may fail to attract discretionary effort from those they lead. Unless we attend to the 'love' side of leadership, we may not be successful in taking people with us in our aim to lead the organisation forward.

There is also a danger of under-emphasising the ethical aspect of leadership. In another piece (this time a chapter in a book by Bush et al), entitled: *Practices, Capabilities and Virtues that Foster Improved Student Outcomes*, Viviane Robinson (2019) brings in an important fourth aspect: Virtues. Excellence in leadership, she argues, is not only about achieving better outcomes for students through using knowledge, solving complex problems and building relational trust, but it is also about doing so in the right way and for the right reasons. She adds the following two important points about the inclusion of work on virtues in leadership development programs.

Two implications of my account of leadership excellence seem particularly germane. First, the distinction between values and virtues should be recognised as critical to the development of leadership excellence, for the study and teaching of values and ethics, at best, shapes leaders' espousals, but does little to alter their practice unless combined with modelling, feedback and coaching in the context of leaders' own problem situations.

Second, the fact that virtues are desirable character traits does not mean they cannot be developed beyond the formative years.

The people behind this new thinking in England are really positive about leaders behaving in an ethical manner and they embrace the Nolan Principles for public life, but they seem to be wary of covering ethical leadership more specifically in a leadership program. My view is that it needs to be at the heart of leadership programs and that the concept of 'doing the right thing in the right way' should be addressed proactively. All humans flex their muscles – even babies – and if we do not flex them then they wither. As leaders, we need to 'flex our ethical muscles' and wrestle proactively with these challenging and complex ethical issues. There are lots of grey areas in school leadership and these need to be talked about openly and discussed (through real case studies, etc). If we just rely on evidence of 'what works,' then we may be helping future leaders to be experts at being 'effective' but not experts at being ethical.

Conclusion

I welcome and applaud this new thinking on leadership development. It has challenged and sharpened my own thinking and caused me to reflect upon some of my assumptions that, rightly, needed to be questioned. My conclusion, though, is that we should be wary of a dialectic approach – whereby one theory of leadership development is set up in opposition to all previous ones, with people taking sides – rather than learning from each other in genuine dialogue. I am delighted that the professional dialogue that I have experienced so far, for example with Matthew Evans and with Tom Rees from Ambition Institute, has been entirely respectful and full of honesty.

I believe that there needs to be a greater focus on domain-specific knowledge and complex problem solving, and that we need to move away from some of the stereotypical leadership models of the past. I applaud Ambition Institute and Matthew Evans for their clear illumination of this.

However, I also believe that this should be combined with a focus on the development of more general leadership skills and behaviours. Analysing why a school is struggling to teach its students well using domain-specific knowledge – that is a real leadership skill – but so is knowing how to help people to change and to take them on that learning journey. School leaders with weak knowledge of school improvement – and who do not know what a coherent curriculum or great teaching and learning look like – are likely to be ineffective, but so are school leaders who, in spite of their expert knowledge, lack the ability to create a trusting environment or to persuade others to move forward and to do it in an ethical way.

In the end, it is all about getting the right balance and blend in leadership development so that it is relevant to the individual leader and helps him or her to be more effective over time; the right blend between external input and learning on the job. As Simon Breakspear and colleagues (2017) have said, leadership development should be

- embedded – so that most of the learning happens within the context of work;
- personal – owned and driven by the leader (rather than the system) and
- continuous – where there is no end to leadership learning.

> we need to move away from some of the stereotypical leadership models of the past.

Endnote

1. For further information see www.ambition.org.uk/about-us/ – 'Ambition Institute is a graduate school for teachers, school leaders and system leaders, serving children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Our programmes support educators at every stage – from new teachers through to leaders of groups of schools – to keep getting better.'

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About the Author

Professor Steve Munby has spent his whole career in education, first as a teacher and then as an adviser and inspector, before moving into leadership. Between 2005 and 2017 he was chief executive first of the National College for School Leadership in England and then of Education Development Trust, an international education charity working in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe. He is now a self-employed consultant and speaker on leadership and on system reform. Professor Munby is also a visiting professor at University College, London Institute for Education and is the facilitator for the Atlantic Rim Collaboratory (ARC) summits, which bring together education systems from across the world. He was awarded a CBE in the New Year honours list in 2010. Among his publications he was co-author with Michael Fullan of a think piece entitled *Inside-out and Downside-up – How Leading from the Middle Has the Power to Transform Education Systems* (Education Development Trust, 2016). His previous paper for CSE was Occasional Paper 157, *Leadership Development: Key Questions and Issues*, published in August 2018. Steve's new book *Imperfect Leadership – a Book for Leaders Who Know They Don't Know It All* Crown House UK, was published in July 2019.

About the Paper

Professor Munby discusses the ideas of a group of educators who argue that school leadership programs should not focus on generic leadership skills but on domain-specific knowledge and expertise. He outlines six fundamental and interconnected points that the group puts forward, encouraging debate that might lead to a new paradigm for educational leadership development. He then comments on these, referring to approaches adopted by the National College for School Leadership in England, of which he is former-CEO. He concludes that many grey areas remain in school leadership and that these continue to need to be talked about and discussed openly.

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