Leading Change and Making Positive Decisions

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"If you were to ask me about the nature of leadership in terms of what I learnt, you've got to have a fire in your belly for an outcome" - Sir Tipene O'Regan

One of the first things that we do with the teachers who join our postgraduate classes is to try to convince every single one of them that they are leaders, whether or not they hold any formal leadership roles within their schools or communities.

At the very least, all teachers have to be leaders in their classrooms; to lead learning, to lead their students, and in many cases they will be leading their colleagues or the wider community in a range of different ways. This is why one of the four courses within our Postgraduate Certificate in Digital and Collaborative Learning at The Mind Lab is focused on leadership, as is one of the follow-on courses in our Master of Contemporary Education, because leadership is essential to the teaching profession, regardless of whether you are a beginning teacher or a seasoned principal.

Reading the Landscape

Leadership, like everything else in education, is a learning journey - every day is a school day.

But what do we mean by leading change as distinct from leadership in general? And in what ways is leading change any different from managing change?

The key difference is that to lead change you are taking the initiative, not just reacting to, and dealing with, changes that are imposed upon you, but making change happen; being proactive, reading the landscape around you and making positive decisions for the future.

So how can teachers become leaders of change?

The first step is to understand some powerful ideas that come from leadership theory. The more you understand how leadership works, the more you can apply these ideas in your own practice.

Develop by Anyone

The concept of leadership has been explored in great detail for many years, and has moved on hugely from early assumptions that leaders were born, not made. Such ideas served hereditary rulers and dictators well, but confused leadership with power. We now understand that leadership skills can be developed by anyone and that no single approach to leadership will work in every context. To be a leader, then, you have to have a range of skills and attributes that can adjust to every aspect of the leadership context.

Ask yourself, do you always apply the same approach to leadership of your family, your classroom, your department, your school, the sports team you coach, your book club? Probably not.

Another important concept to understand is that of followership. It seems rather obvious to state that you cannot be a leader if you have no followers, but following is not a passive activity. Rather, it is an important, active engagement with the leader. Leadership skills and followership skills are, in fact, not so very different. Both require critical thinking, commitment, creativity and belief in a common vision. Being a good follower is a great foundation for being a good leader.

Embrace Change

So, let's assume you have developed some understanding of leadership (and followership). How do you apply this specifically to leading change? There are a number of ideas that we can build on. In the agile software development community one of the core concepts is to "embrace change". That is, to be completely relaxed about the fact that change will happen, and that it should be seen as a positive rather than a negative. Embracing change is not, however, quite enough for being a leader of change, since it is still rather reactive, so what does a change leader need to do?

"When the Ngāi Tūhoe Leader and Department of Māori affairs Manager John Rangihau asked a group of Māori students to define Mana, they said it was to do with kawa and tikanga. He disagreed and told students mana was about knowing when things needed to change and having the courage to do something about it" (Diamond, 2003 p.7).

Selling Your Vision

Once you have recognised the need for change, and have the courage to do something about it, what can you do? The best first step is to use an appropriate framework that can guide you through the process of leading change. To lead change is to go through a number of different phases that make up the overall journey from the inspiration, to selling your vision to stakeholders, to finding your first followers, to making the change, to that

change being embedded and sustainable. Perhaps the best known writer in this area is John Kotter, who developed his 8 steps for leading change over decades of experience, and since first publishing his ideas in an article in the Harvard Business Review (Kotter, 2007) he has continued to refine his model over time, and you may find it a helpful model for your own change leadership journeys - many of our students certainly do.

A word of warning, though, comes from Michael Fullen, who suggests that "Leaders for change get involved as learners in real reform situations. They craft their own theories of change, consistently testing them against new situations" (Fullan, 1998). The main message is that you should not follow any change leadership recipe uncritically, but lead the adaptation of a process to meet your needs.

Transformational and Visionary

Regardless of the process that you adopt, the key feature of any change leadership journey is that different types of leadership will come into focus at different points in the process. For example, in the initial stages of a change initiative leaders need to be transformational and visionary in order to inspire their followers, but this alone is only the first step of many, and as the change begins to take place it is important for the leader to take on other approaches to carrying their followers and organisations forward.

For example, by applying the ideas of servant leadership, they can support their teams by coaching and removing barriers to progress. By applying situational leadership they can recognise the fit between followers and tasks, and adapt their leadership styles to their followers' needs as they develop skills and confidence. By applying distributed leadership they can ensure that their role as the leader of the innovation is not holding others back from making valuable contributions to the change initiative.

Leaders, Followers and Stakeholders

Underpinning all change leadership is the relationship between leaders, followers and stakeholders, since "leaders can act as catalysts for transformation by helping others connect to themselves through relationships with nature, the spiritual domain, ancestors, culture, and people" (Spiller & Stockdale, 2013).

Leading change is increasingly important in the dynamic and evolving landscape of teaching and learning, and it is those teachers who have a fire in the belly for the changes they wish to see who will be most able to become change leaders in their classrooms, schools and communities.

References

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