



# Leadership for powerful learning

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## Introduction

It's often said that educational change is technically simple, but socially complex. In many ways it is relatively easy to identify and describe the features and benefits of productive change in teaching or curriculum. But change in schools is not brought about by technical prescriptions or mandates from above. Change happens through and with people in the school – students, teachers and school leaders being engaged collaboratively in purposeful and productive activity. Creating such a work culture is in the gift of leadership. When leadership of the types described in this paper are not present, then social complexity is not addressed and the common paradox in education of 'change yet no change' takes hold.

We encountered the challenge of social complexity and the phenomena of 'change yet no change' when working on the Powerful Learning School Improvement Strategy in northern suburbs schools in Melbourne, Australia. In *Leadership for Powerful Learning* (Hopkins and Craig 2015c) of which this paper is a précis, we share with you the know-how that emerged as we, together with our gifted principals and teachers, sought ways to progressively achieve sustainable school reform.

## The power of leadership

We founded our Powerful Learning Strategy on the school improvement framework outlined in *The System and Powerful*

*Learning* (Hopkins and Craig 2015a) and the ten Theories of Action for teaching and learning that provided the substantive focus for our school improvement work, and are described in detail in *Curiosity and Powerful Learning* (Hopkins and Craig 2015b), two of the other manuals in the *Powerful Learning* series.

Schools in Melbourne's north were adopting the Theories of Action for teaching and learning. Professional learning for teachers was provided to develop their understanding of preferred practices. Yet framing Theories of Action, and ensuring access to professional learning, did not necessarily mean that student achievement was enhanced. Nor did these steps necessarily lead to the Theories of Action becoming embedded in a school's professional practice.

What was missing? Why did our thoughtful plans fall short? We took these questions to our principals, and to colleagues who worked across many schools in the local system. In response, school leaders posed a question for us:

- What leadership strategies effectively bring people on board and expand their repertoires of professional practice for the long haul?

The Theories of Action provide a map, and professional learning provides an itinerary. But this was not enough to break the paradox of 'change yet no change.' Our school leaders were seeking ways of dealing with the kinds of social complexity that often derail school improvement.

Working with our principals and school improvement teams in

Melbourne and elsewhere we proceeded to develop a set of leadership strategies that addressed a range of challenges. How to:

- Develop, nurture and embed the reform narrative about student learning – **Instructional Leadership**
- Create professional learning opportunities relevant to each teacher's development needs that align with the school's development priorities – **Adaptive Leadership**
- Ensure consistency and rapid development by precise diagnosis of the school's progress along a well-defined improvement pathway – **Strategic Leadership**
- Nurture system wide reform through the adoption of a variety of 'out-of-school' roles and the purposeful use of networks – **System leadership**.

With their assistance we developed and deployed the styles of leadership and concomitant strategies described in *Leadership for Powerful Learning*. Taken together they provide a comprehensive set of leadership resources for shaping, embedding and spreading productive change.

Before exploring these four forms of leadership in a little more detail, and briefly describing their concomitant implementation strategies, it is important to take a more comprehensive view of school leadership in a framework that includes and links together these various perspectives.

## An emerging model of leadership

This way of thinking about and implementing school leadership is validated in international research, such as the OECD's Improving School Leadership study (Pont, *et al.* 2008) which investigated this question: 'School leadership: why does it matter?' The investigation yielded these three responses:

**At the school level** – Leadership can improve teaching and learning by setting objectives and influencing classroom practice

**At the local level** – School leadership can improve equal opportunities by collaborating with other schools and local communities

**At the system level** – School leadership is essential for successful education reform

Thinking about the influence of school leadership at the school, local and system levels has led to the development of the model of school leadership in Figure 1.

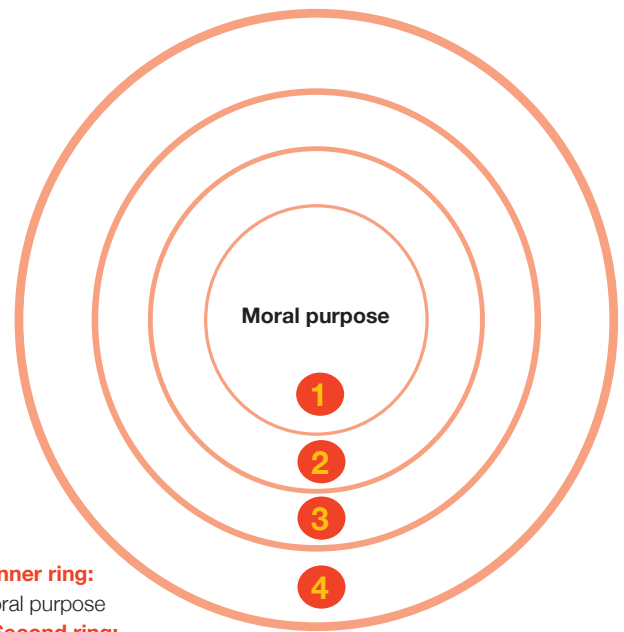
### Moral purpose

The model above exhibits inside-out logic. Leaders are driven by a moral purpose about enhancing student learning. Moral purpose activates the passion to reach for the goal and prompts leaders to empower teachers and others to make schools a critical force for improving communities.

### Reflective development and strategic acumen

Yet moral purpose is insufficient on its own. As the model shows, the practice of our best system leaders has two characteristic behaviours and skills that impact moral purpose:

- First, they engage in reflective personal development, usually informally. They benchmark themselves against their peers and develop their skill base in response to the context they are working in.
- Second, all the system leaders we have studied have strategic acumen. This means they know how to translate their vision, their moral purpose, into operational principles that have tangible outcomes. They can also think simultaneously in the short and medium term.



#### 1 Inner ring:

Moral purpose

#### 2 Second ring:

Reflective development

Strategic acumen

#### 3 Third ring:

Managing teaching & learning

Developing people

Developing the school as an organisation

#### 4 Fourth ring:

Enact network leadership

Lead & improve a school in difficulty

Lead in a school improvement project beyond own school

**Figure 1: Model of school leadership**

### Key behaviours of instructional leaders

The attributes of moral purpose, reflective personal development, and strategic acumen are expressed in three key behaviours of instructional leaders (Leithwood, *et al.* 2004):

- Managing teaching and learning
- Developing people, and
- Developing the school as an organisation.

### Working across schools for the benefit of all students

As they make progress on the school improvement journey in their own school, school leaders increasingly assume system leadership roles. They are committed to their own school *and* to the whole system.

Outstanding leaders exemplify the aspirations and commitments embedded in the outer ring of our emerging model of school leadership. They work across schools for the benefit of all students.

### Leadership for powerful learning

The logic behind *Leadership for Powerful Learning* and this paper is to emphasise the importance of integrating both leadership and implementation in the pursuit of sustainable school improvement. We have therefore begun with presenting both our leadership model above, as well as emphasising the importance of implementation.

The leadership model provides a framework for action and understanding for our school leaders. It helps them appreciate both the purpose of school leadership and how the various leadership strategies complement each other.



Leadership Model	Leadership Style	Implementation Strategy	Effect Size <sup>1</sup>
Managing teaching and learning	Instructional	Five phase framework	0.22
Developing People	Adaptive	Infrastructure for Professional Learning	0.21
Developing the Organisation	Strategic	Improvement Pathway	0.27
Working across Schools	System	Networks	0.27

**Table 1: Leadership for Powerful Learning**

In Table 1 we demonstrate how the leadership style and strategy relates to the various aspects of the overall leadership model. We also provide in the right hand column a summary of the research evidence by McREL (Waters, Marzano and McNulty, 2003) of the impact of these leadership effects on student achievement.

This analysis allows us in *Leadership for Powerful Learning* to provide a comprehensive approach to school leadership as well as suggesting practical strategies to assist with the various aspects of implementation that we have found in our own work to be of crucial importance.

## Instructional leadership

We need to remind ourselves occasionally that school leaders make a very real difference to student learning and achievement. Because their influence is usually indirect, however, it is often difficult to link their actions directly to student outcomes. Fortunately the research on the link between leadership and learning has developed rapidly in the recent past. In particular the work of Ken Leithwood and colleagues has been important in defining ‘instructional leadership’. Their original definition captures the concept well – ‘the behaviours of teachers as they engage in activities directly affecting the growth of students’ (Leithwood, Jantzi & Mascall 1999, p. 8).

In *Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership*, Leithwood and colleagues (2007), offered a more detailed characterisation of the influence of school leaders on student learning. The claims are these:

- 1 School leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning.
- 2 Almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices.
- 3 It is the *enactment* of these basic leadership practices – not the practices themselves – that is responsive to the context.
- 4 School leaders improve pupil learning indirectly through their influence on staff motivation and working conditions.
- 5 School leadership has a greater influence on schools and pupils when it is widely distributed.
- 6 Some patterns of leadership distribution are much more effective than others.
- 7 A small handful of personal ‘traits’ (such as being open minded, flexible, persistent and optimistic) explain a high proportion of the variation in leader effectiveness.

Leithwood and his colleagues (2004) in their research for the Wallace Foundation also defined four instructional leadership practices closely associated with powerful learning and enhanced student outcomes. These are the repertoire of basic leadership practices referred to above, that we elaborated through our own

Setting direction	Ensuring that the school’s vision sees every learner reaching their potential. Translating this vision into a whole school curriculum and high expectations.
Managing teaching and learning	Ensuring a high degree of consistency by planning, implementing and using specifications of practice.
	Supporting innovation in teaching practices that enable personalised learning for all students. Expanding the repertoire of teaching practice to include high leverage practices that influence the learning of all students.
Developing people	Enabling students to become active learners. Creating a school that operates as a professional learning community for teachers.
Developing the organisation	Creating an evidence-based school and an effective organisation. Participating in collaborative networks that build curriculum diversity, professional support, and extended services.

**Table 2: Repertoire of basic leadership practices**

Five conditions for achieving an inquiry focus
Embed the story of the curiosity journey
Select the key pedagogic strategies that promote inquiry
Place professional learning at the heart of the change process
Achieve consistency in inquiry focused teaching practice
Culture changes and develops to embrace inquiry

**Table 3: Five conditions for achieving an inquiry focus**

school improvement work.

These leadership practices are critically important. They are practices that assemble the tools a school needs for the journey that puts powerful learning in the hands of all students. Having described the parameters of Instructional Leadership we now turn to a brief discussion of the Five Phase Implementation Framework that our instructional leaders have employed to give more precision and sustainability to their work (Table 2).

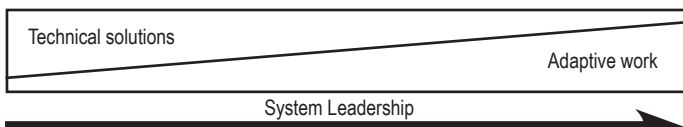
## Implementation Strategy<sup>2</sup> – Five conditions for achieving an inquiry focus: the goal of instructional leadership

Our implementation strategy related to instructional leadership was developed as we tried to understand why achieving inquiry focused teaching across a school was the toughest Theory of Action to implement. We found five interlinking conditions that seem to be in place when schools realise this desired objective.

The five conditions are shown in Table 3. It is useful to note that conditions 1–4 are purposefully directed at changing the work structures in a school. Taken together the first four conditions have a cumulative and positive impact on the fifth condition, the culture of the school. We have developed leadership tools for both enhancing and measuring each of these conditions. When working at scale with many schools we also found that it is most effective to follow a sequenced or phased implementation plan for these conditions – condition 1 is the platform for achieving condition 2, condition 2 is the platform for achieving condition 3, and so on.

## Adaptive Leadership

Although Instructional leadership practices are necessary to ensure pedagogic change, at times they are not quite sufficient. We



Technical problems can be solved through applying existing know how – adaptive challenges create a gap between a desired state and reality that cannot be closed using existing approaches alone

**Figure 2: Leadership as adaptive work**

have found that there are two other dynamics that leaders must grapple with:

- Responding to the resistance caused by the personal and professional challenges faced by educators who engage in pedagogic change
- Creating a work culture for ‘infrastructure’ that welcomes and sustains change in the repertoire of teaching practice.

To navigate such resistance and social complexity we must look to these broader conceptions of leadership, in particular ‘adaptive leadership’, as a navigation aid for leading school improvement.

In 1994, Ron Heifetz of Harvard University drew a valuable distinction between adaptive challenges and technical problems.

An adaptive challenge is a problem situation for which solutions lie outside current ways of operating. Adaptive leadership is adept at responding to adaptive challenges that require fundamental changes to work organisation, work structures, culture, and objectives. Tackling adaptive challenges requires leadership and increasing levels of collaboration.

This is in stark contrast to a technical problem for which the know-how already exists. Resolving a technical problem is simply a management issue (Figure 2).

Among the skills of adaptive work is the ability to discern how old habits detract from our efforts to secure change. Often we force technical solutions onto adaptive problems and find that the changes we introduce fail to endure – and familiar ways of going about our work reassert themselves.

The more demanding challenge is to move from prescription to enduring change in highly competent professional practice. That involves working through the social complexity of change and requires close attention to building teacher capability. Ultimately, adaptive leadership and adaptive work require us to reflect on our shared moral purpose as educators. Drawing again on Heifetz’s words (2003):

- Adaptive challenges demand learning, because ‘people are the problem’ [as well as the solution!] and progress requires new ways of thinking & operating.
- Mobilising people to meet adaptive challenges, then, is at the heart of leadership practice.
- Ultimately, adaptive work requires us to reflect on the moral purpose by which we seek to thrive and demands diagnostic enquiry into the realities we face that threaten the realisation of those purposes.

We have found that the priority outcome from such ‘adaptive reflection’ is an honest diagnosis of how well our existing culture and beliefs are suited to making considerable progress towards realising our moral purpose. Having made the diagnosis, a deeper level of leadership skill is required to assist colleagues in acquiring ‘new ways of thinking and operating’ and meeting ‘adaptive challenges’.

In his essay on the crucial drivers for whole system reform Michael Fullan (2011) proffers the following advice –

- 1 Foster the intrinsic motivation of teachers
- 2 Engage educators and students in continuous improvement of instruction and learning
- 3 Inspire collective or team work
- 4 Affect ALL teachers and students.

This is of course the territory of adaptive leadership and fostering the ‘intrinsic motivation of teachers’ is at the heart of it all. Intrinsic motivation is the gift that keeps on giving, because once teachers are in the grip of their passion for teaching becomes inexhaustible.

## Implementation strategy – building an infrastructure for teacher learning: the achievement of adaptive leadership

Happily, intrinsic motivation is a relatively operational concept that is amenable to ‘fostering’ if adaptive leadership creates the appropriate conditions within the school. We know from Dan Pink’s (2009) book *Drive* that intrinsic motivation leads to improved work performance and enhanced job satisfaction, because the individual is enabled to experience higher levels of:

- **Autonomy** – the opportunity to be self directed
- **Mastery** – feelings of competence through the exercise of skill
- **Purpose** – knowing that one is contributing to the common good.

These feelings, dispositions and behaviours are self evidently motivating, but do not occur by accident. Adaptive leaders create the conditions in their schools whereby most of their teachers feel this level of job satisfaction, professional pride and personal confidence. In the schools that we have worked with on the Powerful Learning and similar school improvement programmes we have helped school leaders consciously develop structures, processes and ways of working, specifically designed to lead to these feelings of professional and personal self worth and competence. As part of this implementation strategy we provide advice and materials for leaders in creating such an infrastructure for teacher learning by:

- 1 Establishing structures for scaffolding teacher development
- 2 Making peer coaching ubiquitous
- 3 Creating protocols for both teaching and learning
- 4 Incentivising teacher teams
- 5 Ensuring that observations are non-judgemental.

All of these conditions need to be in place and mutually supportive for intrinsic motivation to flourish.

## Strategic leadership

Our voyage continues. Schools are on an improvement pathway – a journey to excellence. The Five Phase Implementation Framework sets a course for that journey and the Infrastructure for Professional Learning provides a reliable way of ensuring that all teachers can learn. Each school however begins their journey at a different point. A successful school improvement journey commences with an honest appraisal of its starting point. Our School Improvement Pathway is a performance continuum. It assists a school to determine its starting point, and to navigate its path to excellence from that starting point. The performance continuum describes schools as falling somewhere along this spectrum:

- Awful to adequate
- Adequate to good
- Good to great
- Great to excellent.

Managing progress towards excellence demands thoughtful and strategic leadership. Progress requires clarity about both the starting point and what is necessary to move from that starting point

to higher levels of performance. To make progress, school leaders are asked to think of the present and the future at the same time – and of course the future is less certain and concrete than the present. Making progress in these testing circumstances is best done through the practice of ‘strategic leadership’. The concept of strategic leadership is complementary and mutually supportive of the notions of instructional and adaptive leadership already discussed. It just extends the range of skills and perspectives available to those school leaders committed to sustainable school improvement.

Professor Brent Davies and his colleagues have over the years considerably deepened our understanding of the nature of ‘strategic leadership’. They define strategy as “a process of both looking forward to a new way of operating for the school and of developing the means of planning a journey to get there” (Davies, *et al.* 2005).

Davies and his colleagues’ research points to five critical activities that successful strategic leaders in the study identify as prime activities. These are:

- i Setting the direction of the school
- ii Translating strategy into action
- iii Aligning the people, the organisation and the strategy
- iv Determining effective strategic intervention points
- v Developing strategic capabilities in the school.

We have already discussed a number of these activities in previous sections. What however adds value to the previous discussion is what they call, ‘Determining effective strategic intervention points’. Here the leadership challenge of when to make a significant strategic change is as critical to success as choosing what strategic change to make. Such judgements are manifested in not only knowing what and knowing how but also knowing when and, just as important, knowing what not to do. Unfortunately, there are not many metrics to assist the school leader in making and refining these judgements. That is why we developed the ‘School Improvement Pathway’ as a tool to allow school leaders to become more precise in strategic development.

## Implementation strategy – moving along the school improvement pathway: the work of strategic leadership

With this implementation strategy we unpack the performance continuum.

In the *System and Powerful Learning* (Hopkins and Craig 2015a) we argue that school improvement is a journey to excellence – it is not a final destination. No school or system can be at rest. Our circumstances are evolving continually and our students’ needs are never static. As a consequence all schools are on a performance continuum or school improvement pathway. As a result of our ongoing school improvement work as seen in *Exploding the Myths of School Reform* (Hopkins 2013), we have gained specific knowledge about the combination of strategies needed to move a school and a system along the continuum from ‘awful to adequate’ to ‘adequate to good’, then ‘good to great’ and eventually to ‘great to excellent’. When systems and schools use this knowledge strategically they make significant and rapid progress.

In the Implementation Strategy, we describe the four phases of performance continuum through investigating five improvement dimensions that are relevant at each step along the School Improvement Pathway. They are:

- Curriculum
- Teaching
- Learning
- Assessment/data and accountability

- Leadership.

We identify the key issues that emerge at each step along the Pathway and suggest a series of questions to help progress development. These questions will assist school leaders to:

- Complete an honest diagnosis of their school’s current performance
- Prepare a plan for progress towards excellence.

## System leadership

We are now bringing together a number of themes in our review of leadership for powerful learning:

- Expressing the moral purpose of enhanced student achievement through **instructional leadership**
- Embracing personal and professional change through **adaptive leadership** that emphasises capacity building and sustainability
- Ensuring the drive towards both sustainability and excellence by progressing on the improvement pathway through **strategic leadership**.

Collectively, these elements lead us to consider system leadership – that is, how school leaders work with schools other than their own to improve the whole system.

System Leaders are those head teachers who are willing to shoulder system-wide roles in order to support the improvement of other schools as well as their own. As such, system leadership is a new and emerging practice that embraces a variety of responsibilities that are developing either locally or within discrete national, state or regional networks and programmes that when taken together have the potential to contribute to system transformation.

In *Every School a Great School* (Hopkins 2007) it was suggested that the five striking characteristics of system leaders, those distinguishing them from broader collaborative activity, are that they deploy their experience, knowledge and skills to:

- Actively lead improvements in other schools and measure their success in terms of student learning, achievement and welfare.
  - Commit staff in their own and other schools to the improvement of teaching and learning.
  - Lead the development of schools as personal and professional learning communities.
  - Lead work for equity and inclusion through acting on context and culture.
  - Manage strategically the impact of the classroom, school and system on one another, understanding that in order to change the larger system one has to engage with it in a meaningful way.
- Our own research (Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009) has pointed to five distinct yet overlapping categories of system leadership and leads to the following taxonomy of roles.
- First, are those principals and head teachers who develop and **lead a successful educational improvement partnership** between several schools. These are most usually focused on a set of specific themes that have clear outcomes and reach beyond the capacity of any one single institution.
  - Second, are principals who choose to **lead and improve a school in extremely challenging circumstances**. A dual objective of system leadership is to both raise the bar and close the gap(s) in systemic student achievement.
  - Third, are those head teachers who **partner another school facing difficulties and improve it**. This includes both Executive Principals and leaders of more informal improvement arrangements who are differentiated from category 1 on the basis that these leaders work from a lead school and support a low achieving or underperforming school (or schools) that require intervention.



- Fourth, are head teachers who act as a **community leader** to broker and shape partnerships or networks of wider relationships across local communities to support children's welfare and potential.
- And fifth, are those head teachers who work as a **change agent** or expert leader. The focus is on providing practical knowledge and guidance as well as the transfer of best practice within a formalised school improvement program.

The skill bases of system leaders comprise a synthesis of those behaviours and approaches previously described under instructional, adaptive and strategic leadership. Effective system leaders have, however, incorporated this amalgam of skills into a personal repertoire of leadership capabilities as seen in our original leadership model. The additional skill set that they add to this cornucopia is the ability to generate, manage and lead networks in the pursuit of moral purpose.

## Implementation Strategy – Enabling school improvement through networks: the focus of system leadership

Networks are the basic organisational unit for system reform. Networks are the means by which a school system becomes a consciously effective learning system.

System leaders need to identify which kind of network is best suited to advance their goals. Five types of networks are emerging from practice and research (Hopkins 2003) and these are described in the Implementation Strategy together with advice on how to establish them. These five network types refer to the roles each type plays in contributing to change within school systems, and in wider social systems (Table 4). Networks enable school improvement. And system leaders enable networks. System leaders empower school networks to invest every school with the capability to deliver high leverage pedagogies that nourish powerful learning.

## Reprise

This reflection on *Leadership for Powerful Learning* has highlighted the overwhelming importance of leadership in the pursuit of realising our collective moral purpose – the enhancement of student achievement and potential, irrespective of background. In doing this, we have stepped through four contrasting, but complementary styles of leadership each tasked in their different ways with achieving this goal, the underlying proposition being that a synthesis of these styles and skills should overcome both the challenge of 'social complexity' and the paradox of 'change and no-change' noted in the Introduction.

And so they should – being as they are based on decades of both accumulated wisdom and the evaluation of best practice. But even this should not lead to hubris.

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Network Type 1	Groups of teachers join together for a common curriculum purpose and to share good practice.
Network Type 2	Groups of teachers and schools join together with the explicit aims of: • Sharing practice • Pursuing school improvement by enhancing teaching, learning, and student achievement.
Network Type 3	System leaders collaborate in knowledge transfer about: • School improvement • Planning and implementing school improvement. Other stakeholders may join with system leaders to implement specific school improvement policies locally or more widely.
Network Type 4	Together, groups of networks (within and outside education) pursue system improvement that targets specified objectives such as social justice and inclusion.
Network Type 5	Groups of networks collaborate as agents for school system renewal and transformation.

**Table 4: Network types**

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is an estimate based on distributing the 21 McREL leadership responsibilities via a content analysis evenly across our four leadership styles.

<sup>2</sup> Each of these Implementation Strategies provides practical tools for leaders to use in each of the four domains. They are described in operational detail in *Leadership for Powerful Learning* (Hopkins and Craig 2015c) and for obvious reasons of space are only briefly described here.

## About the author

Among many educational roles, **David Hopkins** has served as Chief Adviser to the UK Secretary of State on School Standards, Dean of Education at the University of Nottingham, an Outward Bound Instructor and an International Mountain Guide. With Wayne Craig, David led the Powerful Learning school improvement initiative in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. David is Emeritus Professor at London's Institute of Education, and founded the Adventure Learning Schools Charity. In 2013 he completed his school improvement trilogy with the publication of *Exploding the Myths of School Reform* (ACER Press).