e-leading

The value of trust in leadership

As a leader there are many skills and traits required to engage staff and to feel a sense of success. Depending on early experiences in our careers and behaviours of those leaders we were exposed to, we value different competencies as more or less important. How we prioritise leadership capabilities will vary based on our perspective, personal experiences and interactions throughout our professional lives.

Words always top of mind when describing good leaders are knowledge or technical capabilities, communication skills, confidence or presence. However softer and often unnoticed skills, most noticeably the ability to build trust, are essential talent in a successful and highly regarded leader. Building, earning or developing trust within all interactions, and managing internal and external relationships through ethics and with credibility determine your employees' willingness to engage with and follow you as a leader.

So how do we obtain trust from those around us?

Let's assume you are on the executive team within a medium to large school going through some changes in staffing, and a reduction in student numbers, also overseeing the administration and regulatory needs of the school. You have a self-assured style, hence being in a senior role, have the persona of confidence and authority and work a minimum 60-hour week. The perception is that you expect staff to "pull their weight", being involved in a diverse range of school activities, whilst managing their classes independently, which includes both their students and parents.

Recently promoted into the role, you are struggling to get traction implementing the changes to systems and processes you have identified as necessary to improve school outcomes, while also delivering to the school's strategic plan as established by your predecessor.

What do you do next?

This is a familiar story for those working within education, and similarly for those

within many businesses. The perceived pressure to create an impact and to "step in" and lead with determination often comes at the detriment of essential relationship development.

The need for trust is recognised by many leadership experts. Jack Welch (2005) states that his fourth rule of leadership is that "leaders establish trust with candor, transparency and credit". He notes the personal changes within many who take on leadership positions, highlighting that often it is "a real power trip" where your role becomes about having "control over both people and information". He defines trust as "what happens when leaders are transparent, candid and keep their word".

Several behaviours that build trust from Welch's perspective are:

- Give credit where credit is due
- Make sure your staff know where they stand, good or bad
- Take responsibility when things go wrong
- Recognise your team's success, offering them recognition
- Pass praise around generously.

Equally, Ken Blanchard highlights the demand for trust within his highly regarded and recognised servant leadership model, SERVE which is an acronym for:

See the Future
Engage and Develop People
Reinvent Continuously
Value Results and Relationships
Embody Values

Blanchard expands on "Embody values" to explain that true leadership is "built on trust" which is demonstrated when executives "walk the talk". His research supports that servant leadership is a way of life for those successful in executing honest and ethical values and behaviours, which is reinforced by his evidence that bad leadership leads to organisational failure.

Blanchard proposes that trust is built when professionals:

- Embed organisational values into team operations and activities
- Share their organisation's vision, communicating values to others at all levels of the group
- Develop or amend personal behaviours to be in-line with values
- Recognise and reward those actively personifying the values.

Reflecting on the previous scenario and similar situations within many of our schools, there is value in clarifying school values and beliefs to ensure alignment in behaviours and engagement through understanding. True to the comments from Welch and Blanchard, this cannot be done through a series of dictated presentations or lectures from the school leaders; it must be through collaborative analysis, collegial discussion and debate, resulting in consensus as to:

- The present values and ethics of the school
- Agreement as to whether these are values we want to uphold
- How agreed values will look from all aspects of the school community.

Identified through tangible examples and shared story telling of positive role modelling from various school activities and members this will create an even platform for progress and alliance as a school group. An affirming process, this will create a position of vulnerability for leaders, where they may and should be challenged through a healthy examination of school activities and expectations that are dissected, assessed and ultimately improved on. Often talking about the 'elephant in the room', this

allows new leaders a chance to show their awareness, respect for and dedication to the school's employees, ownership of the long-term vision and commitment to achievements.

For our previous scenario debate should include indicators of successful classroom organisation, appropriate hours for work including extra-curricular activities, acceptable behaviours with peers, students and parents, systems and processes required to support staff in executing and living the values, clarity around career development and personal growth, opportunity for self-reflection and development, and recognition systems to identify positive and outstanding interactions or outcomes within the school.

A suggested list of questions follows for executive teams to discuss with each other, staff and students, with the ultimate goal of alignment of school values through behaviours and language to generate a trust based school environment.

- **Why** are/are not our values important to our school?
- Are they **consistent** with our current educational vision?
- What do our values **look like** in our executive team, teaching staff and students?
- What **professional development** will assist us in developing or extending these values?
- How do we **share our vision** with the broader school community?
- How to we **reward and recognise** those staff and students embodying the values?

References

Welch, J and Welch, S 2005, *Winning*, HarperBusiness Publishers, New York.

Blanchard, KH 2007, *Leading At A Higher Level*, Pearson/Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ.

Quotes on trust

Trust yourself. Create the kind of self that you will be happy to live with all your life. Make the most of yourself by fanning the tiny, inner sparks of possibility into flames of achievement.
Golda Meir

To be trusted is a greater compliment than being loved.
George MacDonald

Trust is hard to come by. That's why my circle is small and tight. I'm kind of funny about making new friends.
Eminem

The trust of the innocent is the liar's most useful tool.
Stephen King

Whoever is careless with the truth in small matters cannot be trusted with important matters.
Albert Einstein

Trust yourself, you know more than you think you do.
Benjamin Spock