Strengths Based Capacity Building in Schools
Why and How?
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A deficit trap in Christian schools?

– Culture of schooling focused on deficits
– Theological Tension: Human sinfulness or created in the image of God
Emerging mental health issues among children and adolescents

Issues need to be acknowledged

Need for:

• Some crisis interventions
• Preventative, growth-based interventions for all
Recent trends in Psychiatry & Psychology

Positive psychology

– A reaction to deficit pathologies
– Dangers mindless “happyology”
– Widespread applications
Some key starting principles:

1. We all have strengths we can use alongside others.

2. Fulfilment can be found by using strengths that energise/engage us towards purposes with wider meaning.

Exploring our strengths and our core purposes can be important generators of meaning and wellbeing… for students, for staff, and for a school as a whole.
3. Faith and spiritual resources can be important generators of “purposes beyond ourselves”.

Unpacking notions of “leadership”
Leadership is not about superheroes, or “special” people.
Facing challenges or new opportunities usually requires the contributions of many...
Change requires us all to be participants
The nature of the challenge?

Technical?

Adaptive?
Unpacking notions of “leadership”

Leadership is best explored by focusing on the leadership needed in a group… and what we can contribute to it.

Whether or not we see ourselves as leaders, we CAN exercise leadership

If we can discover and use our own leadership strengths… …and help those around us do likewise.
What does it look like when it is all working…
Think of a time when you were part of a group you felt was effective, where something rich was happening, generating energy, action and increased commitment and trust?

What leadership strengths were contributed to make things happen?
The leadership strengths needed to make things happen:

**People dimensions: how we engage with others**
1. Connecting people: Growing trust and relationships
2. Really listening deeply

**Creating a secure base**
7. Clear, positive structures
8. Reliable communication
9. A culture of optimism

**Developing shared directions**
3. Focusing on the future together
4/5. Building head and heart commitment
6. Helping everyone contribute

**Pacing the journey**
10. Timing and strategic sensitivity
11/12. Balancing persistence and learning from experience

Source: NCLS Research
“Lead with your Strengths” Peter Kaldor & John MacLean
Key Leadership Strengths:

Source: 2006 National Church Life Survey
- 10,000 church leaders from 25+ denominations
- 450,000 attenders & their perceptions of the leadership and vitality of their churches

Engage with others
1. Listen deeply
2. Build mutual connections

Develop shared directions
3. Envision together
4. Explore options creatively
5. Inspire heart commitment
6. Empower people to contribute

Create a secure base
7. Create clear, positive structures
8. Develop reliable communication
9. Build a culture of optimism

Act with purpose
10. Move to action
11. Maintain resolve
12. Learn and grow from experience

www.leadwithyourstrengths.net
Who has all these strengths in equal proportion?
We all have a different blend of strengths…

So why beat ourselves up about who we are not!
Two key principles:

1. Work with what you have
   - Know your own strengths and make use of them

   Working with our strengths is important …
   1. To making our contribution as effectively as possible
   2. For our own well-being

→ Think of one way of using one of your strengths this week to make a difference in your life or role – and give it a go.
2. Find others with complementary leadership strengths to work with.

Together we can be more than the sum of our parts.
A critical question for those with authority in groups or organisations:

Do we have the necessary leadership strengths in our teams? How can we make best use of them, or find others to complement us in what we are doing?
Effective leadership
– The inner journey

What we do is important
but who we are is foundational

Exercising effective leadership is not just about action, but also about internal reconstruction!
Personal Foundations

- Spiritual foundations
- Clarity of purpose
- Sense of self & knowing what drives us!
- Integrity
- Supportive relationships
- Balance and boundaries

We need to develop these personal foundations... ...before they are needed!
Three core goals for strengths-based leadership capacity building:

1. What strengths do you bring to making a difference? And how can you use them well alongside others?
2. What are your core purposes?

3. How firm are your foundations?
Living this out:

Who does this matter for?

Students?

Staff?

Principals?

What does it mean to model an ongoing learning community that builds capacity, grows resilience and develops purposefulness among all?
Living this out...with students

The Wycliffe team

– Bill Little  *Head of Senior School*
– Adam Osborne  *Year 9 Co-ordinator*
– Edwina McCarron, Robert Marks and Elizabeth Williams
– And all the Year 9 crew
Living this out with students

Ben Weir
Teacher, New River Leadership
Living this out...with students

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The difference it has made
Not just for students...

Helping staff explore their own leadership capacities
Leadership capacity building intensives

Sequenced 6-8 day learning experiences
done in 2 day blocks spaced over several months

- visits
- preparatory readings
- opportunities for experiential learning
- mutual reflection in collaborative times for personal reflection
- resources for use and sharing back in own contexts

Taking time out can be an important balcony moment at various stages in life...for anybody

Based on Lead with your Strengths
by Peter Kaldor and John Mclean
Shaping the culture of a school or organization

A slow sometimes complex journey!

- Listening to the perspectives and ideas of all
- Growing shared direction & purpose
- Understanding people’s fears and anxieties
- Pacing change
- Ensuring people take time on the balcony
- Maintaining hope and optimism
A slow sometimes complex journey…
…but a potentially critical one!
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