Leadership is About Influencing Others

A discussion with Rob Nairn, President of the Western Australian Secondary Schools Executive Association.

Something of a late comer to education, but an early candidate for leadership positions, Nairn’s leadership skills were forged in “griefy lean” lower socio-economic schools. Those skills were honed largely through self assessment and critical analysis – a process of building on what worked, and discarding what didn’t.

Nairn believes the key to being a good leader is getting people involved, and to successfully achieve that requires personal commitment and leading by example. He contends that a motivated leader creates an atmosphere that others want to be part of. “Enthusiasm is catching” he says, and observes if you can create motivation and pass it on, it reaches a critical mass where it becomes self generating.

“A part of getting others involved is to be motivated and enthused yourself. To get people to embrace change and embrace values, there needs to be some point behind it, there needs to some benefit in it, either benefiting them, their students or the community.”

In Nairn’s experience people actually want to be involved. He says if you can show them that what you’re trying to achieve is worthwhile and help them feel they have something to contribute, it’s possible to harness and engage that desire for involvement.

Nairn says he’s personally never found himself in a situation where he lacks enthusiasm – even during tough times he remains motivated. He credits this to an ongoing process of reflection and taking stock of the positives. It also helps, he says, to set targets. “If you’ve got a goal, and you’re enthusiastic about achieving it because of the perceived benefits for you or your community or other people, and you remain focused on that goal then I think the enthusiasm stays.”

Collaborative leadership is Nairn’s preference, although he acknowledges there are times where a leader has to bite the bullet. He says sometimes a “hard” decision has to be made, and it ends up becoming the responsibility of a leader to make a decision. It requires a certain degree of pragmatism and flexibility, without resorting to being dictatorial. As much as possible he believes in encouraging people to adopt your vision as if it’s of their own devising, noting that an edict from the boss may be viewed with cynicism, but the same message from a peer might be embraced.

But achieving a goal isn’t the end of it – even when a certain momentum is attained, it’s not an invitation to sit back and consider the job done. Rather, Nairn describes it as an ongoing process, in which goals are constantly reassessed and new targets are set “so that you’re challenging yourself all the time”. And while he acknowledges the importance of learning from experience, and how there may be certain aspects of leadership he might refine over time, he emphasises the importance of a consistent big vision based on knowledge, inspiration and motivation – as key to building values driven leaders.