Leading Schools with a Values Lens

A discussion with Patrick Duignan, Emeritus Professor of Education Leadership, Australian Catholic University, and business consultant.

Many years involvement in educational leadership prompted Duignan to research the concept of authenticity in leadership – and how ethical leadership can be attained. Working from the premise that education is a value based process, its purpose he says is not simply to teach maths and science and such, but to form the person and equip them to be better human beings. “The biggest challenge of all is to ensure schools and teachers and educators do that - basically they don’t end up with a group of young people who aren’t transformed in any way as human beings and who only go out able to regurgitate facts and knowledge”. The key to the transformation rests with the leader – ask any student about who was their best teacher and why, and the response reflects not technical ability, but the esoteric capacity for inspiration. “Students will always mention two areas – one is giving them self belief, and the other is the confidence to go out and engage with others in the world, the big bad world out there.”

At the heart of leadership are relationships. According to Duignan, simply saying that you respect someone is meaningless unless it is demonstrated through one’s actions and behaviours. “I define leadership as an ‘influence relationship’. And I add the word authentic then because you can have negative influence or you can have positive influence.” He adds that “trotting out phrases such as “we have gospel values here” means nothing unless it is lived, unless it is modelled by the leaders… I have always argued that we know the values (but) do we live them, or are we pretending? Is there a huge gap between the rhetoric and the reality?”

Duignan says he’s seen lots of people who are technically adept, but they can’t relate to people. Many leaders fail because they haven’t grasped the art of relationships. “The people to be admired in leadership have got this down, this relationship thing – and you learn it. It’s just not natural to everybody – some have personality variables that help them, but we all have to work much harder at it.” Duignan describes teachers as being in a very privileged position of influence – knowledge is important but above all is engaging with students - “where you have engaged students you have excitement, you have learning, you have a totally different atmosphere.”

Of grave concern is what Duignan describes as a leadership crisis; an unwillingness of people to aspire to leadership roles. The reason? “It is because we haven’t grown leaders along the route. We have thrown them into positions and assumed that automatically once they’re in the position they’ll grow as leaders in those position. Unfortunately there is no direct correlation between the position and leadership. You can have the highest position in the land and be a useless leader.”

Identifying the gap between what people thinks makes a good leader, and the reality of leadership is an area in which Duignan specialises. He is frequently astounded by the chasm between how leaders regard themselves and how they’re viewed by others – and
the challenges this presents in communication. He says a robust culture of critique is required where staff have the freedom to honestly appraise leadership performance. “I know of places where, if the principal is present, the teachers will shut up…you need to be able to raise issues and questions because otherwise what happens is the principal and the leadership team might be legends in their own minds, yet when I talk to teachers I find a very different story.”

Yet for all the challenges Duignan is very optimistic. “I love the new generations coming through – despite what some people say, I believe Generation Y and Generation Next are fascinating people and have a huge capacity for good. They’re not burdened down with the kind of strictures I grew up with – nowadays they have so many choices…they seem overall to exercise wise choices and moral choices – they may not go to the church anymore but I find them very moral people, they search for meaning, they want a purpose in life, they have a bit of a materialistic streak as well but they have balance.”