

Principia

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Getting the Balance Right - a new metaphor for school leaders.

As children, getting the balance right seemed as tough as climbing the see-saw at the local park alone and trying to find some sort of equilibrium whilst keeping our balance.

The leadership journey is certainly more complex! In the editorial of the previous issue of Principia the world of education is described as an “ever evolving” one. Let’s suppose our see-saw is not fixed to the ground but a plank placed on a ball. What will happen to the equilibrium and the balance we thought we had established? All of a sudden, it’s not just about keeping your eye on one plane of movement (side to side), it could roll anywhere!

Add to this, people jumping on and off, or bouncing over some rough terrain. Not to mention inclement events! Still... we are not close to what is called a complex adaptive system (CAS). In these systems you can make a decision, take an action and not be sure what the outcome maybe. The very next moment you can do the same thing again and achieve a different result.

Schools are such systems. Any relational environment is both complex and adaptive.

The American military coined a phrase post 9/11 describing the environment as VUCA:

- Volatile
- Uncertain
- Complex
- Ambiguous (Roberts, 2005)

Whilst we are not suggesting that there is a comparison between 9/11 and school environments, we are suggesting that certainly the last 3 points are very relevant to schools, and for some schools also the first point.

School environments are more complex than our see-saw on a ball. Actually, even though metaphors like our see-saw help convey an aspect of what is being described they can not fully describe everything that is happening. They are useful, however, if they inform behaviour in the situations we find ourselves, rather than constraining us to certain contexts. Metaphors can be generative, and broaden or sharpen our perspective and responses to our contexts. Thereby generating new possibilities for action and interaction. A generative metaphor is something that can help us see the contexts and patterns we are all so used to in a different way. (Barrett, F. J., & Cooperrider, D. L. 1990)

‘Metaphors not only define our identity; they tell us what’s valuable, what’s feasible, and what to do next’ (McKergow and Bailey, 2014.) – in order to assist us in getting the balance right.

We believe exploring some common and useful metaphors for leadership can provide insights for school leaders grappling with the complexities of modern schools.

Hero Leadership

The idea of a leader as a heroic figure is deeply engrained in our society. Powerful leaders who are decisive, all-knowing, saving the situation, turning things around, avoiding disaster. The leader can be relied upon in times of trouble to pull things through. Whilst this is more prevalent in the corporate world it is still a widely held belief within education where, using the UK language, Superheadteachers were brought in to save ‘failing’ schools. This sometimes worked in the short-term but often as soon as the person left, the school once again ‘failed’.

Harvard Business School leadership writer Sharon Daloz Parks sums up the situation very nicely:

“It has become almost a cliché among leadership theorists to disavow a heroic command-and-control model of leadership. But the heroic image of leadership that prevails in the conventional mind is more than a model. It is a deep and abiding myth.” (2005, p 201)

So what do we see as some of the shortcomings of the heroic leadership metaphor?

Firstly, that the hero leader is seen as all-knowing and by definition then the followers are all-dependent; that people cannot rescue themselves but rely on the appearance of the hero. Secondly, the illusion of control; by being all-knowing and decisive, the leader can avert disaster by their efforts alone. We would suggest that the interdependent and complex worlds of schools are not so receptive to this outlook.

Thirdly, the metaphor suggests that if there is a hero leader there are followers who are a homogenous group, and therefore can be thought of as one group as opposed to individuals, and finally the hero is willing to destroy or be destroyed in pursuit of victory.

Grint (2005) identifies that the heroic model of solo leadership that attributes greatness, charisma and near infallibility to a single leader is flawed; 'both dangerous and dangerously naïve'.

Servant Leadership

The other leadership metaphor we are going to briefly explore is that of servant leadership. Robert Greenleaf (1977), inspired by a Herman Hesse novella, arrived at the conclusion that great leaders must first serve others, and it is this that shows their true greatness. It has become influential in a number of fields, and has been a significant influence for later thinking about the connection between spiritual practice and its connection and function in leadership. The focus of servant leadership is the importance of the leader in responding to the needs of their followers, and the importance of sustaining community through stewardship for the current time and holding it in trust for future generations (Greenleaf, 1991). So what might be the shortcomings of the servant leader metaphor?

Firstly, we believe that the metaphor does not sit well and is not as obvious in the 21st Century. In history and literature the master/servant relationship is multi-dimensional, however for most of us the relationship is seen as servant being opposite to master and this subsequently leads to confusion about accountability and authority. This leads to the second point in that the image of servant is not a positive compelling one to those who have traditionally been cast in such a role, for example women and ethnic minorities. Finally, the leader as servant has similar hierarchical issues to the hero leader metaphor, but from the other end! Within the literature the tension between responsibilities and authorities is given much discussion and adds to the richness, but this requires a level of persistence and therefore the abiding view for many of servant leadership is not compelling.

Additional considerations

In setting the scene further as to why we believe that a new, but old metaphor is more useful and relevant to the current educational leadership environment, we will first briefly explore some of the dilemmas facing leaders as identified by Binney et al (2009) which acknowledge the complexity of leadership:

- Direction – Acknowledging the limits faced by school communities while imagining a better future
- Timing – Waiting and seeing while also accelerating progress
- Relationships – Getting close while maintaining a professional distance
- Loyalties – Putting your own professional needs first while serving the organisation
- Control – Letting go while keeping control
- Self-belief – Showing vulnerability while being strong
- Understanding – Enquiring while knowing.

Grint (2005) also talks about leaders facing 'wicked problems', one that is difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognize.

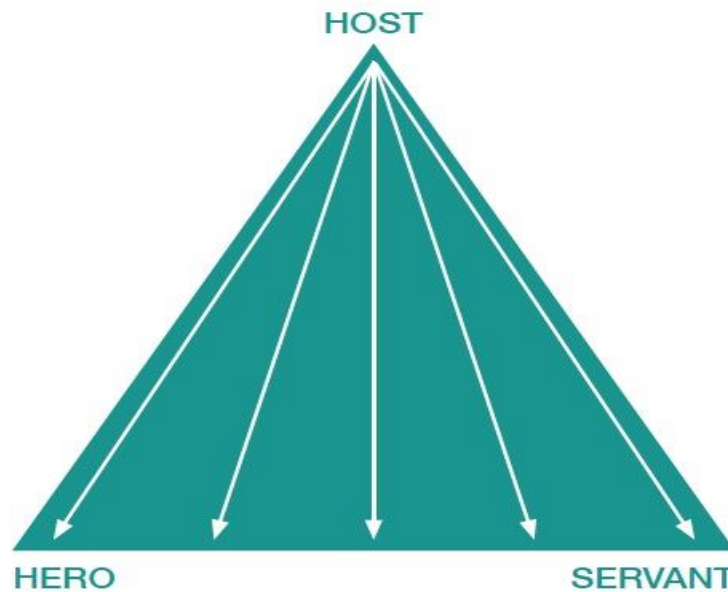
Host Leadership

More recently McKergow and Bailey (2014) have developed the Leader as Host metaphor and we believe this old but new metaphor provides some useful ideas for school leaders. We believe it is particularly useful in that it recognises the complexity of leadership, and is timely in helping leaders move on from hero or servant leadership metaphors to one that is more useful given the dilemmas faced by leaders in our current VUCA environment.

The Host Leader is 'someone who engages fellow participants in a purposeful endeavor' (McKergow and Bailey 2014). It is fundamentally about a relationship between the leader and others. Host leadership is about US not ME; getting results through engagement, building cooperation, enhancing relationships and pulling together; linking well to the focus of this journal 'Getting the Balance Right'.

So why do we see the metaphor of leader as host as useful in educational leadership?

The host is an image, we can all instinctively understand and relate to from both sides, as host and guest, as everyone has been in both these roles at some stage. Host and Guest are co-defining, it doesn't make sense to think of one without the other. Hosting is an activity as opposed to a defining characteristic of a person. This 'interactional view' is a key underpinning of the solutions focused paradigm, and offers an alternative view to the psychological 'person as a bag of traits' paradigm (Jackson and McKergow, 2007). As identified in the diagram below it recognises the host leader operates at many positions on the hero-servant leader continuum. The role of host may be acting as the total hero or absolute servant and many positions in between depending on the context – again, its about getting the balance right.



(Brent and McKergow, 2013)

The key question for the leader as host at every moment is:

As a leader am I going to step forward or step back?

Where stepping forward is defining expectations and stepping back is creating space for interaction. The host leader is in a continuous 'dance' between the stepping forwards, and stepping backwards, to find a balance that suits the interactions and relationships. To do this the host leader requires the following three skills:

- Awareness
- Flexibility
- Timing

Awareness of the range of possibilities and how they connect with the organisation and its work and the wider environment; Flexibility to actually act and perform effectively in the different places along the continuum, and; Timing to have the contextual knowledge and intelligence to know when to step forward, when to step back, when to move and when to change tack.

In conclusion, we believe that the metaphor of Host Leader is helpful in enabling leaders to get the balance right in the complex interactional worlds that schools are.

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