

Being there: developing Presence and Equality of Voice within a Leadership Team.

I have changed schools nine times since I started work as a teacher in 1984. I am not sure why, maybe it was a personal need for change every few years. I always left a school feeling quite good about it and would nearly always spend the following 12 months regretting that I had left such a great school. Each time, this pattern would repeat itself. I couldn't help myself. I would always move on. About half way through this journey, xxxxx, a colleague in a very comfortable eastern suburbs school, took me aside and said "You won't get a better school than the one that you are in. You really are crazy to leave." I left anyway, even though I kind of agreed with him. I told him that I was looking for my perfect school, but I didn't exactly know what that was at the time. So, here I am in the final 15 years of my career and I have worked in six of those schools that bump up against each other and I think that I found what I was looking for. Then I lost it. In the beat of a moment. Now I want it back again.

Not unlike living in the America of Kennedy's Camelot, I worked in a collaborative learning organisation straight out of Perkins' King Arthur's Round Table. I came to understand Senji's reasoning behind a broader systems thinking in relation to organisational learning. - every little thing that we do in an organisation impacts on the bigger picture. I reflected on Sergiovanni's Transformational Leadership model and considered the broad range of skills that a leader needs to balance all at the same time. I attended annual retreats where 20 people worked together on complex problems and agreed on the important questions before they set out to try and answer them. I explored new ways of learning and implemented them in my classroom. I worked alongside other school leaders and developed new ideas relating to teaching and learning. I spoke honestly and from the heart. Everything that I had thought about teaching and everything that I had learnt up until then was placed on the table and questioned. I didn't have the answers, but finally I was working in a place that was interested in finding the questions. I spoke freely and so did others. Some of the ideas were good. Some were not. But I was finally in a place where everyone was a learner. Where learning was the basis of the business of the school. It was great. So I left and tried to do it somewhere else.

The concept of presence which was reintroduced to me earlier this year in the Human Leadership workshop provided me with an aha! moment. I always knew that I needed to be there where I work - to be present - but the idea was almost too personal and subjective to spend much time thinking about. Senji wrote a book a couple of years ago with a group of other writers titled Presence and I didn't quite get it. I do now. It is about being there in your job. I was there in my last job, heart and soul. My project is all about getting back there again in my current job and helping others do the same. The dilemma that drives this work involves the not so delicate balancing of a Leadership Team that on the one hand wants King Arthur's round table, but on the other wants to go home at 4.30. It is interesting to reflect on my experiences this year during this team building exercise and see how that 4.30 finish that has so obstinately remained locked in the past has begun to give way. Slowly, the knights have begun to shine their armor.

On reflection, I have come to understand that there are two quite different sides to a successful team: while successful teams need to have members that are present and committed to the work of the team through their heart as well as their mind, successful teams also need to be very structured and have rules of engagement. We need to mix order, protocols, rules, norms and structures with the heart, soul and commitment of team members in the operation and work of the team. I believe that one without the other leads to unsustainable team work.

Protocols, rules, norms and structures enable all team members to have a voice, to be heard and have their ideas valued equally to others. Although in some high performing teams, these rules may not have been formalised or written down, I expect that they would be present. My argument is that if we do not formalise them and the team membership changes, then it is all too easy to ignore rules that have never been acknowledged by the group. These kinds of structures sustain the ongoing work of a changing team. They enable everyone to speak and table ideas, whether positive or negative. They accept that there are certain things that should or should not be said or done in a team setting, and also accept that these same things might be quite appropriate outside of the meeting time. Protocols and norms also protect team members as they begin to openly engage with the work of the team. They give permission for team members to be wrong or to suggest what might be seen as dumb ideas in the professional structure that wants all ideas open to scrutiny. How can anyone be fully present or give their heart to a team discussion if they do not understand what may happen if they do? How many leaders have said something in a meeting that suddenly causes the meeting to go belly up without fully realising what happened? Protocols, rules, norms and structures support the heart and presence of team members in a safe cocoon of formalised trust or understood rules of engagement.

The journey through Human Leadership has been a relief to me. It has given me permission to consider the human elements of leading that make my job worthwhile on a personal level. I have had the opportunity to link my professional role and responsibilities with my personal needs as a human being. It has reminded me before all of the acronyms and frameworks of the past few decades, why I passionately wanted to be a teacher. This project, in particular, has given me permission to think about the way in which I interact with others in a professional team setting and the ways in which we can allow all team members to unleash their own potential on a human as well as professional level.