

In Principle

In my early years of leadership, a mentor confidently espoused that leadership was not linear. I bemoaned this perspective, as a person who had long prioritised order and balance. If I had, however, known then that a year such as the one we experienced in 2020 would exist, I would have fervently concurred with him; leadership is most definitely not linear.

Stuart Johnston, Principal, Peninsula Grammar School



If ever there was a time in education that demanded of its leader's adaptability, flexibility, and stability, we have entered that time. Yet the mastery of these skills alone, even for the leader who is most adept at manoeuvring on a whim, will not see out the long game that is our new and confronting context.

What will enable the survival of any organisation in times such as these, are the shared values that underpin it.

It is timely as leaders that we revisit the foundations upon which our institutions are built, and harness these to ensure our communities live out these beliefs with fervour and feel supported by them. To do this, we must remember, always, that the role of the school leader is to serve.

Positioning ourselves as the redeemer, the omnipotent and all-knowing force in these uncertain times, in fact, at any time, serves only to create an unsustainable reliance that precludes a shared understanding of the vulnerabilities within us all; for when the redeemer does not have the answers, a vehemence grows and instability abounds.

Yet what I have come to learn throughout the past year and a half, is that the espousing of knowledge, particularly as it relates to the intricacies of education in this, the time of COVID, is rarely advanced through meaningful and sustained dialogue with those who sit

on the frontline of the battle, the leaders who are all too often overlooked by outsiders. For in their place, policy makers and pundits, politicians, and professional opinion makers, seemingly propel themselves to front of stage, eager to articulate their remedy, or voice their perspective, without the innate understanding or experience of the complexity that confronts the school leader today. What is lost here, in the mire of the masses, is the minutiae and the mission; an understanding of the magnitude of the challenge, the inherent knowledge, and the wisdom, that enables the leader to inspire in others the desire to create change.

So how do we bring our principles, our values, our norms, and beliefs to the fore in a time such as this? How do we create the necessary impact needed to engender certainty and celebrate change in equal measure?

The answer lies within the words that form the foundation of our institutions.

For in these words exists an actionable element, a routine that we can build into our interactions, be them with teacher, student, or parent. We should revisit them always, displaying them in our connections, speaking them in our daily conversations and living them in our own lives.

Actioning words has long sat at the nucleus of every Principal's purpose.

Holding fast to the values espoused in an organisation, particularly an educational one, is made particularly difficult by the unrelenting pace of globalisation. The opening of the free market and the growth of neo-liberal agenda in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, has given rise to the commodification of education and a dilution of purpose; often rendering words hollow as school's seek to increase enrolments and race to out-resource their competition, with little regard for the quality of the learning provided. The corporatisation of education has, without question, created a competitiveness that all too easily distracts it from the fundamental purpose of learning, universal knowledge.

This presents for the school leader, a perplexing conundrum.

What makes their school any different to a corporation? What makes them any different to a company CEO?

The answers lie in the moral imperative.

True professional educators, educational vocationalist (if you will), those who immerse themselves in the getting of wisdom and the pursuit of knowledge, understand

that the values, the traditions, and the rituals that define an institution create its culture, and these are non-delegable. Unlike the CEO, the Principal does not seek to advance the bottom-line, but rather to inculcate an environment of excellence. Success is not gifted to a Principal in the form of a lofty bonus or a luxury holiday, their gift is the success of their students and by extension their staff; for they work in the service of others.

The truest leader will inspire leadership in others through their service to the institution they represent. To do this, they must align who they are with the values that form the foundation of their environment and sit comfortably in this space, influencing those through their actions not words.

In a time such as this, it will be the alignment of our own values to that of the institutions which we represent that will create the legacy that allows for the overcoming of adversity and the ability to look confidently towards the future.

In principle, we share this responsibility, now more than ever before.

Biographies

Stuart Johnston is the Principal of Peninsula Grammar School and has been since 2010, a K-12 co-educational day and boarding school located on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria. An educational leader in both international and national school contexts, he is ardent in his belief, that the culture of a school is intrinsically linked to the values upon which it is founded.