

The challenge of leadership in international education

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When I was appointed to my first headship – of a state comprehensive secondary school in the United Kingdom – I was in my early '30s. My age created a framework for the rest of my career which only now am I beginning to recognize.

In that first headship most of my colleagues were older than I was and one or two were the age of my parents. Quite simply, it thrust me into a framework of learning. Added up together, they knew much more about leadership than I did and I was privileged to serve my apprenticeship amongst them. Looking back, they were remarkably patient and understanding.

And so the learning process went on: to my next headship where the average staff age hovered around 30 (to my increasing resentment as I headed past 40) but they still seemed to know as much as I did. And then, ten years later, I was off to the International School of Geneva and experiencing a new learning curve that became so steep it was sometimes hard to cling on in the turbulent winds that regularly sweep that school.

Then, and it is already five years ago, I moved to the IBO where, despite still telling my wife that I shall probably be 'late home from school' I have already lost the true sense of smell of education because although my task of leadership is similar, it is certainly not the same. There is nothing quite like being in a school.

And now I am looking towards retirement. I shall leave the IBO in May 2006 and the process to find my successor has already started. And then will come the big turn-around: instead of learning about leadership I shall start telling everyone about it. But, of course, it will be too late and no one will listen. Experience that takes 30 years to accumulate becomes stale, unfocused, irrelevant and frankly rather boring once the lifeline to reality has been disconnected.

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All that is by way of introduction. It is a long-winded apology for spending the next 30 minutes or so telling you about some of the lessons I have learned about leadership. It will be a personal selection, but only because I still have some credibility in this area. In any case, treat all I say with a large pinch of salt because this is a subject where books, higher degrees and so-called experts proliferate. Let nothing go by without a reality check with your own experience, your own school and your own leadership position.

So: I have already made my first point: you are all leaders. You may not be Principal, Director (or even less likely a Director-General!) but each one of you at some point during the week takes on an important role of leadership. And if you don't, if you

really never want to change anything, then it will do you no harm to listen so you understand better those who do.

And those of you who are still listening will have spotted my second point! Leadership is about change and is not the same as management which is often about maintaining the status quo. Leaders are not necessarily managers, though a strong degree of overlap is always a good thing.

- Managers meet objectives on time and on budget
- Leaders bring about change.

There is a fundamental difference and many organizations appoint one when what they really needed was the other. Today I am talking about leadership: the capacity to bring about change.

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Where to start? Well: if I start by writing down a list of the characteristics that I believe are the most important in leadership in international education, one word turns up again and again and again. I believe effective leaders:

- inspire other people with a vision
- know how other people see them
- are credible to other people
- are able to empower other people.

You will have noticed that the common word is ‘people’. For me that is the single most important factor about leadership: at its heart lies the sometimes unpredictable, often infuriating and occasionally irrational behaviour of other people – and of oneself. That combination is difficult enough to manage in a mono-cultural setting; in a multicultural setting it presents the most formidable challenges.

Of course mission statements and clear goals are important. Certainly we need a strategic plan to guide our future. Yes, we need reliable management structures and open channels of communication. Above all we must have sound financial policies or we simply won’t be around for very long. But the quality of each of these factors is determined by human beings: confident and motivated, worried and resentful.

In a recent comparison of head teachers in schools with senior executives in private enterprise in the UK, the researchers, Hay Management Consultants Ltd, took as their measure of successful leadership ‘the motivation, engagement and effort inspired in the people who are led’.

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For about six months I have been looking out of the IBHQ office window at the construction of a new campus for the International School of Geneva right next door. Two enormous cranes enable smooth and rapid changes to be carried out on the ground as the building grows day by day according to some invisible plan. The

cranes are tall, but rather slender and, especially in a high wind, they look quite vulnerable, out of all proportion to the huge bulk of material that they move around at ground level. The secret lies in their anchorage to the ground which is massive.

In leadership terms that anchorage lies in the quality of human relationships. If that is assured then the bringer of change, the leader, can operate with confidence over a large area of the school's activities. If it is not assured then the vulnerability of the leadership will be exposed and it will eventually topple to the ground.

Four words seem to me to encapsulate the nature of that relationship:

- trust
- expectation
- support
- forgiveness.

Each works in two directions: they bond together the leader and those who are being led. Each must trust the other, have high expectations of the other, support the other in good and bad times and forgive the other when mistakes are made. And to do that means knowing a lot about oneself and about the other person.

Let me therefore take as a starting point some wonderful words by the American writer, Ralph Emerson, who wrote in 1841:

Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole lifetime's cultivation; but the adopted talent of another, you have only an extemporaneous half possession.

In the next few minutes I want to help you to be a leader by being yourself.

How do I see myself?

Someone outside the IBO with whom I have been working quite closely for the past year reminded me recently of our first meeting in London. 'There you were', he said, 'a quiet, introspective person, tucked away in the corner of the restaurant'.

Come on, I thought. Is that me? Introspective? And then I thought "I for Introspection" and then I thought **INTJ** and then I thought yes: he is right.

I wonder if those letters mean anything to anyone in the hall this morning: I am an INTJ type. But what am I talking about?

Some years ago, when I was the director general of the International School of Geneva (Ecolint), I became involved with psychometric testing. With outside advice and help, I completed a range of tests known generically as MBTI, *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (Katharine Briggs and Isabel Myers were mother and daughter) which are based on the work of the Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung.

MBTI helps you to understand yourself and your behaviour better because it describes your preferences in four areas: how you are energized, what you pay attention to, how you make decisions and the kind of lifestyle you prefer. So:

- **I** means I have a preference for drawing energy from my own internal world: I do not need external stimuli. The opposite is **E** (external).
- **N** means I have a preference for taking in information through an intuitive sense and noticing what might be, rather than what is. The opposite is **S** (sensing).
- **T** means I have a preference for organizing and structuring information to make decisions in a logical, objective way. The opposite is **F** (feeling).
- **J** means I have a preference for living a planned and organized life (I am a very strong J!). The opposite is **P** (perception).

INTJ as a type is actually a rather uncommon combination for leadership (except amongst the Japanese) and there are certain things I need to watch. For example, I am likely to resent close supervision and control; I am likely to make others feel unnecessary or rejected; when I am tired I am likely to give way to outburst of sharp verbal temper; I often want to head off to bed at night when others (the strong Es) need to socialise in the bar.

There is a whole industry of psychometric testing. Research suggests that it is not a very reliable tool in making appointments which, unfortunately, is how it is often used. However, as a way of seeing myself and (if my close colleagues are prepared to take the same tests) seeing each other, I find the MBTI helpful because it tells me what I prefer to do. In other words, if I need to behave differently then I am going to have to work at it, to make a conscious effort, because it will not happen by preference.

How do others see me?

Each year, I undergo what is called a 360° appraisal. Once again it is conducted, analysed and finally presented to the Council of Foundation by an external consultant because, like the MBTI, it is a complex and technical process which must be linked to sensitive professional feedback. The instrument that I use has been developed in international organizations and I used something similar when I was director general of Ecolint.

Four different groups of people complete a detailed questionnaire: (1) members of the Council of Foundation; (2) staff who report directly to me; (3) a sample of staff who do not report directly (I do not choose the sample) and (4) members of the International Heads Representative Council. I also respond myself. The process is completely anonymous and I have no way of identifying any individual response except my own.

The instrument consists of sixty questions divided into six different categories of leadership. For example, the section concerned with 'organizational leadership' is divided into 7 questions:

- Ensures that the Organization is managed in an effective and efficient way
- Puts in place sound management policies and systems
- Ensures that the corporate management structure is appropriate to IBO operations
- Builds an effective senior management team
- Ensures that personnel policies and practices meet the needs of the Organization
- Ensures appropriate communications and information sharing processes across the organization
- Communicates effectively with the president, the Council of Foundation and its committees

and each response is graded from 7 (always) to 1 (never).

Again, I do not have time to go into the detail. The point I am making is that each year I get a detailed report of how others perceive my actions and that is what matters: not what **I** believe I am doing, but what **others** perceive me to be doing. The debriefing with the Council of Foundation is always a tough process but it is an integral part of my professional development.

360° appraisal is not necessarily suitable in all leadership situations but some kind of annual appraisal is and the leader who does not insist on an annual appraisal by whoever is responsible for his/her performance (often a governing board) is behaving unprofessionally and asking for trouble.

How do we see each other?

I am sure you are familiar with our increasing awareness of the different kinds of intelligence that make up the human mind. Not surprisingly, the international educator has been particularly interested in the concept of emotional intelligence and Daniel Goleman has suggested that emotional intelligence, our ability to manage ourselves and our relationships effectively, consists of four fundamental capabilities:

- Self-awareness
- Self management
- Social awareness
- Social skill

and each of these he has described in terms of a set of competencies. For example, it will not surprise you to learn that empathy is a key competency of social awareness; communication is a key competency of social skill.

Goleman has studied the effectiveness of six different leadership styles: coercive, authoritative, affiliative, democratic, pacesetter and coaching. Without going into detail, I think you can probably guess more or less what each of those looks like. Goleman's research suggests that the successful leader chooses (often unconsciously) a particular style to suit a particular situation. He shows how each of the styles is related to a different element of emotional intelligence and insists that the skills of

emotional intelligence can be learned at any age, but only learned slowly because they lie in the emotional centres of the brain.

The reference to this work is included at the end of my paper. The point I want to make here is that significant leaders across the world (the study was done with nearly 4,000 CEOs) put relationships with other people at the heart of their business. This is not just a warm fuzzy feeling coming from educationalists; it is widely supported by reputable research.

To be born British...

I was born British and I carry a British passport but I am not proud to be British. The adjective 'proud' seems to me to be wholly inappropriate since being British is not one of my achievements. It happened automatically when I was born. I am grateful to be British because it brings a number of very obvious benefits which, in turn, bring certain obligations.

Cecil Rhodes once said:

To be born British is to win first prize in the lottery of life

and, whatever his motives for saying it, at the time he was probably right. The pluses and minuses that come with birth are part of a global lottery and those who exercise leadership in an international context need to be very sensitive to its winners and losers. In the early 1990s, for example, I was in Kimberly in South Africa. My host was a Cape Coloured and on a visit to the nearby battle site at Magersfontein we got talking about the impending elections. 'The trouble with living in Switzerland', I said light-heartedly, 'is the referendum system. Hardly a week goes by without someone being asked to vote on something or other'. He turned to me and said without any apparent bitterness, 'I am now 65 and no one has ever asked me to vote on anything'. I shall never forget that moment of crass insensitivity.

I hope, then, I am aware of being British when I interact with other people who are not, because it most certainly affects the nature of that interaction. Being British means being lazy linguistically, believing that most other people either do, or should, speak my language. It means assuming that when I speak in English, those who also know it will understand me, when very often they will not. It means carrying around considerable historic baggage linked to an imperial past some of which still touches sensitive and even raw nerves amongst those with whom I work.

Being born British means I feel completely at ease with a set of Christian values, icons, literature and art even though I am not a practising Christian. They are an embedded part of my culture. It means reacting to the music of Elgar, Vaughan Williams, and Benjamin Britten in a way that is quite different to someone who is not British and has not lived for a long time in Britain.

I said I was not proud to be British, but rather I was grateful. More important, I think, is that I feel comfortable and at ease with being British because I think I understand what culture means and why it is so important (the 'software' of the mind). From an

understanding of my culture's symbols, its heroes and its rituals, I believe I am able to interact better with those from a different culture because I can begin to imagine their answers to the same questions. But I also know I shall get some of those answers wrong. Interestingly, I seem to get them wrong most frequently with Americans, probably because I believe that I don't have to try so hard because we are really first cousins.

By the way, I misquoted Cecil Rhodes because what he actually said was 'To be born English is to win first prize in the lottery of life' and I need to remind myself that I have virtually no point of contact with the cultures of Scotland, Wales and Ireland. I am actually English, as were Elgar, Vaughan Williams and Britten. This is indeed a complex and puzzling subject!

Will others react as I do?

Do you remember that I said a moment ago that, being an INTJ type, I am likely to resent close supervision and control? When I was sent the draft contract for my post at Ecolint I objected to the statement that 'the Executive Committee of the Governing Board will control the Director General'. It transpired that the word had been mistranslated: in French *contrôler* means to check (as in passport control), in English control means to regulate or to manage. This was easily rectified but more serious misunderstandings were soon to occur.

Being INTJ and sometimes preferring to work through that 'sixth sense' (N) rather than through what I can measure through the five conventional senses (S), I occasionally have hunches. I sometimes want to start something when I do not know exactly how, or even if, it will work out. It's a bit like skiing down an unfamiliar run: you are confident with your skill and your equipment and the run has been carefully classified. Even so there is a chance you will fall (no big deal) and a small possibility of a serious accident. If you are not willing to take a calculated risk, don't take up skiing. If you are not willing to take a calculated risk, don't take up leadership.

However, it soon became clear to me that there were members of the governing board at Ecolint who did not think as I did. They wanted to see all the way down the run before they set off; they wanted much more preliminary research; they were certainly not prepared to 'give it a go'. In short, they wanted a far greater sense of control. They were not being obstructive. It seemed to be a cultural difference reflecting the way we approached uncertainty and risk in our lives.

Some of you can probably see where I am heading, but let me share another example. Shortly after my arrival at the school I was asked to join the head of the secondary French section, Joseph Fischer, at a routine meeting of his faculty. He replied to a simple question from one of his teachers and then I was asked what I thought about it. 'Je suis tout à fait d'accord avec Joseph', I replied. There was an audible intake of breath, a shaking of heads and a strong sense of embarrassment. What had I done wrong? Well, quite simply I had referred in public to their doyen, their directeur, their chef, as 'Joseph' rather than as M. Fischer, something they would never have done, even though several were his personal friends. There was a very different cultural perception of authority amongst the French faculty.

I am, of course, heading towards the research of Hofstede, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner. It all points us in a similar direction so let me focus on Hofstede whose classic study was done with 116,000 employees of IBM in over 50 countries. The research suggested that work-related values are not universal, but reveal distinct national cultural differences. Four particular issues seem to divide the nations:

- Ways of dealing with social inequality (remember the directeur at Ecolint)
- The degree of tolerance for the unknown (remember the skiing example)
- Relations between the individual and the group
- The consequences of being born male or female.

So let's imagine that you are head of a school with an international mix of students and faculty. You have decided to introduce a new staff appraisal system which will contain the following features: an element of peer-group review, the regular assessment of departmental team performance, an annual review of individual objectives and regular feedback from students on lesson quality. A moment's thought will show you that each of those proposals will split your staff according to the four Hofstede issues.

To take just one example, so-called feminine societies (examples would be found in the Nordic countries and some, but not all, Latin American countries) are more likely to show a sense of mutual solidarity and friendly respect between teacher and student. For such a teacher the idea of student feedback on lessons is going to be far less threatening than for a teacher from a strongly masculine society such as Japan, Italy or Switzerland.

Of course, all this can so easily lead to dangerous stereotyping: 'the Swiss don't value women' or 'the French make dangerous drivers'. But for anyone working in a multicultural situation, Hofstede's research and writing do give an important reminder that other people may not react instinctively in the way I do.

Finally, does anyone really believe in me?

My final section is concerned with the word that is the key to any understanding of leadership. Honesty? Toughness? Physical fitness? Intelligence? Accessibility? Experience? I could go on, but it is none of these. The key word is **credibility**. Are you a credible leader: do people trust you and believe in you? Here are some factors that contribute to that credibility

1. *Do you embody the mission of your organization?* No one is interested in working with George Walker unless George Walker is perceived to represent something that is important about the IBO. That is why I take particularly seriously that part of my 360° appraisal that asks seven questions about personal integrity and credibility. Communicating the mission through writing, speaking and through everyday behaviour is an essential responsibility of the leader.

2. *Do you acknowledge your fallibility?* Do you show you can learn from mistakes, encourage useful feedback and necessary dissent. How do you react to the person at the end of a long, tiring meeting who has the courage to say, 'I'm still not prepared to go along with that...'
3. *Do you always play to the rules?* It is very tempting to take short cuts, to bend the regulations, always (of course!) in the best interests of the organization. It may, indeed, be in the best short-term interest but in the longer term it will erode your credibility. A sound organization will have an appropriate set of rules and regulations and a sound leader will stick to them. It may surprise you to hear that I have always welcomed working with strong teachers' professional associations.
4. *Do you have the necessary technical knowledge?* You cannot be an expert in everything, but there are certain key areas (finance is one of them) where a leader must understand broadly what is going on and be able to ask the right questions. I believe that the creation of key performance indicators (KPI) in these areas is helpful. What percentage of the school's income is being spent on staff? What is the annual staff turnover? What is the short-term sickness rate? How many hits are you getting on your public website? How many windows are broken each year? What is the IB Diploma pass rate?
5. *Can you achieve stakeholder symmetry?* This is a phrase used by the author, Warren Bennis, which reminds us that a leader is often required to balance a series of conflicting views. Imagine the following scenario: an African father (he is a junior diplomat) has made a formal complaint against a teacher (who is British) concerning the apparent humiliation of his daughter following the results of an internal assessment. The parent is a friend of the chairman of governors to whom he has copied his letter of complaint. At a very quick count that situation may involve you with 8 stakeholders: in the first line the parent, the student and the teacher; in the second line the teacher's head of department and the student's tutor; waiting in the wings are the teacher's professional association representative, the African ambassador and the chairman of governors. Someone is not going to get full satisfaction and their reaction will depend heavily on the credibility you have built up as a leader.

When I retired from Ecolint the staff gave me a present. It was a metal bucket, a pail, and I was very touched by the thought that lay behind it. I was often telling the staff that even the best institution makes mistakes, so a wise school will build up a reservoir of credibility by going the extra mile, making the extra effort, producing that extra quality. In that way you create a deep well of credibility into which you will dip your pail during those moments when things are not going well and you need to live on the credit that you have built up in the past. But be careful: you cannot live on past credit for very long!

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Let's end where I started: with my first headship. One day I was rung up out of the blue by the editor of the local newspaper who told me that he had received a complaint from one of my parents concerning the school's neglect of her daughter's

education. He was so shocked by her story that he was going to run an article about it. I investigated and concluded there was no truth whatever in the parent's claims which would do enormous damage to the school's reputation so I rang the editor and suggested he should contact people in the community – parents, governors, employers – to judge whether the parent's story rang true.

It was a huge gamble but two days later he rang me back to say he was no longer satisfied with the reliability of the parent's story. I said a silent prayer of thanks to everyone who had supported the school in a critical moment of need and reflected on the crucial investment of the time I had spent with all the different people who made up our community.

Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole lifetime's cultivation; but the adopted talent of another, you have only an extemporaneous half possession.

But before insisting on yourself, make sure you know yourself.

References

The very interesting comparative study carried out for Hay Management Consultants (Ricky Forde, Russell Hobby and Anna Lees) was published in December 2000 under the title *The Lessons of Leadership*. Their work uses the same examples of leadership style as Daniel Goleman in the article quoted below.

There are many sites on the internet giving information about the MBTI. Some even invite you to complete the tests to determine your own type but it is not considered ethically sound to do this without qualified preparation, feedback and support.

Daniel Goleman's article is entitled *Leadership That Gets Results* and is to be found in the Harvard Business Review of March-April 2000. There is also a very interesting article by Patrick Sherlock entitled *Emotional intelligence in the international curriculum* in the Journal of Research in International Education Vol 1 No 2 2002 pp139-158.

Geert Hofstede's classic book is *Cultures and Organizations* published in 1991 by McGraw-Hill. The implications of his work for schools are discussed in his later book *Cultures Consequences* published in 2001 by Sage Publications.

Warren Bennis's book, called *On Becoming a Leader* published by Century Business in 1992, remains my favourite book on leadership.

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