Dare to Make A Difference: Pushing the Boundaries of Your Role

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Thirty years ago the educational administration writer, Andrew Halpin, articulated an age-old administrative dilemma:

"...far too many principals allow their responsibilities to become obscured by trivia, with the result that they abdicate their leadership role and allow themselves to degenerate into mere functionaries. Routine and perfunctory activities have a specious attractiveness because they often allay anxieties that are inherent in the principal's leadership role. But we must avoid the mistake of confusing sheer routine activity with the productivity and creativity required for effective leadership."

Andrew W. Haplin How Leaders Behave (1967)

Today the same dilemma remains. In order to survive, many school administrators retreat to the office and immerse themselves in the day to day running of the school. They focus on maintenance, and often 'fire fighting' operations in order to keep their head above water. Issues of impact and future direction are often swamped by administrative demands such as developing school charters, understanding ‘Cases’ and global budgets, and implementing system initiatives. But, in order to dare to make a difference, administrators need to look beyond the mundane: to set their sights; to focus on leadership; and avoid surrendering to management. The fact is most of our schools are ‘over-managed’ and ‘under-led.’

Therefore, defining and clarifying your role as a leader and manager is one of the most important challenges for school administrators.

The Difference between Leadership and Management

The debate about the difference between leadership and management has preoccupied theorists and writers on organisations for many years: some have argued that leadership and management are two sides of the same coin; others have proposed that the two are separate but complementary concepts; yet another school of thought has reasoned that leadership is merely an aspect of management. Whatever the difference it is indisputable that there needs to be a balance between management and leadership. The problem is that, too often, the balance seems to be weighted towards management at the expense of leadership.

Conceptualizing the Difference between Leadership and Management

One way to understand this problem and therefore attempt to achieve the right balance is to distinguish between management and leadership using the total role concept (figure 1).
The Total Role Concept

The core and expected levels of the role represent management: the augmented and potential levels represent leadership.

The Core
The core represents the formal aspects of the role that are usually written down. They comprise the duties and responsibilities that are prescribed and understood to be fundamental to the role. Functions associated with the core include: planning and budgeting; organizing and staffing; controlling and problem solving (Kotter, 1990). They are seen to satisfy the organisational needs for efficiency and accountability.

Expectations
These represent the set of expectations that various groups have of the principal’s role. These may not be formalised or stated in the duty statement, but they are assumed and are implicit in the role, for example, the attendance by the principal at social and sporting functions. These expectations will vary from one school community to another.

Figure 1
Adapted from The Total Product Concept developed Levitt, T. (1986)
The Marketing Imagination
**Augmented**
These are the aspects of the role that you believe encompass your responsibility but are neither implicit nor explicit. These are the things you believe are important and you would like to do, for example, challenging the concept of literacy within the school community, or challenging the school to really become a learning organisation.

**Potential**
This represents the outer circle of the role. It comprises the initiatives, creativity and leadership aspects of the role. These are the aspects, together with the augmented role, that can make the difference.

**What distinguishes the inner from the outer levels of the role.**
The core and expected role functions necessitate rational decision making; tough-minded analytical skills, stabilising and structural processes, attention to the human potential, and political maneuvering. These exemplify the skills that most management courses focus on; the more tangible elements of the role, more concrete than abstract, more measurable, definable.

The leadership role – pushing the boundaries - requires inspiration, courage, experimentation, imagination, innovation, passion and vision. This aspect of the role is more intangible and spiritual. It is more ambiguous, abstract, symbolic, and cultural. The skills are conceptual rather than technical.

The inner circle is more to do with what you have to do while the outer is what you would like to do.

**Why is it difficult to move to a leadership role**

1. The management role is overwhelming. The task is all-consuming. We envelop the role with self imposed limits to form a comfort zone that prevents us from moving to the outer circles.

2. It is safe to stick within the core and expected role. To move or think outside our comfort zones is scary. We have a tendency to stay in the pack, stay in the mainstream, not make waves, not attract attention, not challenge or push.

3. The abstract and intangible nature of the leadership means that it more difficult to grasp and requires conceptual skills.

4. We tend to think short-term rather than long term. In an environment which encourages the ‘quick-fix’ we often lose sight of the bigger picture.

**Dare to Make a Difference**

**Vision**
While ‘Vision’ has become an overused word in the management literature it remains central to making a difference. To believe about what is possible
provides energy, purpose and direction. Blaine Lee (1997 p184) suggests that if you are uncertain about your vision ask the following questions: *If you did not have to work for a living what would you do? If you couldn’t fail, what would you do with your life?* These questions challenge our imagination and conscience.

**Personal Philosophy**
A well thought out and internalised personal philosophy, based on meaningful and significant values, will act as a guide as well as an anchor for exercising leadership. To understand and clarify your values, decide what is right, and what is worthwhile, will empower and allow you to be proactive rather than reactive. Covey (1989) believes that value driven people have the internal power to make choices in response to complex issues. This can provide the confidence to explore the potential of your role.

**Courage**
To break the security of the inner circles requires courage and determination. You must want to make a difference. To move outside our comfort zones and let go the safety and protection of the inner circle in the direction of our vision requires a sustained effort and the willingness to take calculated, deliberate and faith-filled risks.

**First things first**
This requires self-management and will-power. Learn the put ‘first things first’ (Covey 1989). Determine the real priorities of the role. To organise and execute around priorities will help you move in the right direction. Covey suggests that you focus on what is important instead of what is urgent. Because we are prisoners to urgent items of management, the important leadership areas are largely neglected. You need to believe that important items that will make a difference lie within the potential of your role.

**Environmental Scan**
Scan the environment for new opportunities. Become opportunity focused rather than problem minded. Focus on what is happening out on the horizon rather than be captured by the immediate and pressing events. The strategic gains are more likely to come from taking a term-long perspective based on recognising and seizing opportunities.

To make a difference, school administrators have to push the boundaries of their role.

**References**
Covey, S (1989) *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Melbourne: The Business Library

