The visible school leader

Set the tone, walk around, and ask questions; it's part of engaging teachers and students.

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School leadership's behaviour provides a powerful message to all about "what is important around here." School leaders should be visible and engaged in the fabric of learning. This does not mean that leaders must never leave their schools or that they lurk in the corridors, playing fields or canteens. It refers to the ability to be mentally and emotionally present, to be focused on what matters most, and to consider the needs of students both now and in the future. According to Kouzes and Posner, visible leadership is about growing personal and professional skills in leadership, actively modelling these to build credibility and providing clear articulation about what is most important. It involves getting out of the administration area and into the learning areas – the face-to-face leadership that builds trust. That's where you find out what is really happening and where you can make the greatest impact.

Rob Fyffe, chief executive of Air New Zealand, knows the importance of being visible. He visits staff regularly, talks to them and joins them in their work. Recently a surprised flyer tweeted that he had just been served his cup of tea by Rob. With over 10,000 staff, Rob makes this a priority because it keeps him in touch, it builds relationships and it allows him to see whether the organisation's values are being lived in reality. The size of your school does not stop you from being visible; it's your habits, beliefs and behaviours that do.

Visible leadership in the educational context is clearly focused on learning. In some cases you may be the expert learner, in others it will be other staff, students, parents or wider community that are the visible "teacher." While leadership does not lay with a single person, school leaders have overall responsibility for ensuring that high-quality learning happens and for keeping their finger on the learning pulse.

The art of visibility is in keeping a focus on the core - learner, expert learner, content and context. Consider the ways in which these interact and the effect this has on learning for current and future needs.

Visible leaders are adaptive systems thinkers and continually grappling with the future of learning at all levels. The Horizon Report 2010: K 1-12 edition highlights some key challenges for the future of education. One of these is that "students are different, but educational practise and the materials that support it are changing only slowly." In building your leadership visibility to cater for the changing needs of students, consider the following points:

- Determine your core focus. What are the beliefs and values that drive your school? If you are working towards changing educational practices, why and how? What common beliefs do you have that will drive this direction forward? What are the underlying assumptions of these beliefs? How does research inform your practices? Develop a focus and inquire into that focus, understanding that what you study grows. For example, in his research on Visible Learning, John Hattie reports on the importance of feedback, in particular the feedback that students give their teachers. The meta-analysis in this area points to

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Teachers Matter

an effect size of .72 – a significant impact. Consider what steps you would take if your core focus included gathering systemic feedback from students and acting on it.

In one scenario of a feedback focus, teachers gathered feedback from their students regarding their learning and how the class programme was meeting their needs. Teachers gathered this feedback from students in many different ways, including a plus delta chart, an online survey and oral feedback at the end of a unit of work. Those who were more confident sought feedback regularly. Susan Scott, in Fierce Leadership, refers to this as 365 feedback. It happens every day of the year rather than being a special event. Planning teams were able to discuss the feedback and share ideas on a regular basis and make changes to practice accordingly. Heads of department were visible leaders of the process, and the principal also encouraged conversation around the growth of feedback. This effectively increased the visibility of the feedback focus and modelled the teacher inquiry process.

• Protect and model the core. Once you have determined your core focus, be the guardian of the cause. Be relentless in moving the organisation forward. When new ideas, strategies and tools come along, always ask whether they will help move closer to the core or take the organisation further away from its direction. Be courageous enough to abandon the things that don't work. Build professional learning communities that focus on the teacher inquiry process, seeking to grow from what is already known; identify what you need to learn; and evaluate the effect of interventions to your core purpose. Visible leaders actively model core focus; build systems and structures that move the core forward; design professional learning and development opportunities to grow the core; and take an active role in professional learning and development related to the core.

By having a clear, tight focus school, leaders are better able to avoid burn out. They do not try to be all things to all people. In this respect having a completely open door is a myth. It may sound positive, yet without controls it waters down visibility. Suddenly leaders find themselves being interrupted, moving them away from the things that

matter and taking on the work that rightly belongs with others. Visible leaders build capabilities in others by role modelling, delegating effectively and developing school systems and structures that promote self management.

• Decide how you will be visible. The learning walk process is one way of being visible in learning areas (see www. thinkbeyond.co.nz for more information). Part of the learning walk process asks leaders to consider what they will look for, what they will ask students, and what they will listen for when visiting learning spaces. Regular, short, focused visits where you stop to ask students questions about their learning allows you to develop a learning picture from their perspectives. Growing your opportunities for hearing diverse student voices increases visibility, develops understanding and builds relationships; acting on their feedback is essential if credibility is to be maintained. Some key questions to ask students could be:

• What do you think is important in this school? What makes you think that?

• What are you learning at the moment? Why are you learning that?

• What happens when you don't understand? How do you get help? Does that work for you?

• If you could change one thing about learning in this school, what would it be?

• What helps you most with learning here? What gets in the way?

Choose one question to inquire into by thinking about what you want to know and why you want to know it. What will you do with the information?

Understand the importance of technologies

Greater collaboration within and between organisations, locally and globally, can be enhanced through the use of digital technologies, online environments and web 2.0 tools. The growth of your digital school presence helps to build visibility, both internally and externally, and says a great

deal about what your school and its leadership are all about. Consider these questions regarding the digital and online visibility of your leadership within your school:

• Is our software, hardware, support, professional learning and development, and online environment aligned with the school vision for the future?

• Are leaders developing their own understanding of information communication technologies (ICTs) and modelling their use?

• How does our school leadership communicate with staff and students digitally?

• Is that communication effective? How do we know?

• Are the school's ICT systems continually evolving to meet the emerging needs of students, staff and community based on their feedback?

• How are we using web 2.0 to enhance learning conversations that matter?

In reflecting on some of these questions, leaders can critically evaluate whether what they say and what they do are congruent in both face-to-face and digital learning environments.

If the research says "students are different, but educational practice and the materials that support it are changing only slowly" perhaps we need to ask ourselves: "How will my visibility positively influence the needed changes and create new learning opportunities for students?" Let's lead in a focused, smart and transparent way rather than getting bogged down by the irrelevant and the obsolete. 🅣