In all aspects of life the need for outstanding leadership is immutable. The evidence is clear that in high performing schools we have wonderful leaders – talented, passionate individuals who hold at the heart of their work a deep sense of moral purpose – the desire and drive to make a difference in the lives of young people. Do these outstanding educational leaders emerge by osmosis or chance? Some do, but the vast majority don’t. They develop and continue to refine their leadership practices through coaching, mentoring and other professional learning opportunities to ensure that they are the best professionals they can be.

The need for good leadership
High performing schools, and indeed organisations, are characterised by distributed approaches to leadership and a concomitant, deliberate investment in the growth of their current and future leaders. All professionals must continue to be committed to learning and all organisations are too complex to simply be reliant on the capacity of one or two individuals. A highly competent principal is a must for any school, but they cannot lead alone. Outstanding principals realise this and nurture leadership in others.

Arguably, the case for having the very best leaders in our schools is more important than most areas of enterprise. Schools work with our most precious, impressionable people – our children, our future generation. So, the development of our current and future school leaders must not be left to chance. The need for high quality leaders in all fields of endeavour remains an ongoing challenge. Data released by a leading Australian management consulting company, Mercer in 2013, noted that only 10 per cent of Australia’s top 100 ASX businesses had identified their future generation of leaders. A very interesting statistic to reflect on in relation to the school sector.

The need is just as acute in the schooling sector.

Succession planning, the commitment to building a distributed leadership culture and fostering the next generation of leaders are very real and immediate reasons for identifying future leaders. Regrettably, the sustained and focussed investment in high quality leadership development remains an ongoing issue for the sector. There needs to be a ‘pipeline’ of future leaders developed but regrettably in too many schools the development, of leadership is left to chance and circumstance. The development of our school leaders, particularly the next generation of leaders, should not be seen as discretionary or optional – it is a vital investment that accrues real benefit for our children and our school leaders.

Identifying leadership qualities
So, what are the essential skills, characteristics and or dispositions that should be fostered in our future generation of school leaders? Here are some of these:

1) Maximising relationships
The most fundamental of these centres around relationships, relationships, relationships. School leaders now and into the future will continue to be required to effectively and artfully manage a diverse complex, interconnected and sometimes dysfunctional set of relationships. These relationships require leaders who can establish trust and regard for children, parents and peers. The successful school leaders display authenticity and interest in others (Duignan, 2014). Parents and students want to know that their school’s leaders and staff care about them. Simply, children don’t learn from people (teachers) they don’t like! Moreover, high performing schools and their leaders display aspiration for all children despite their circumstance and need a moral purpose that I noted earlier in this article. The research validates this – greater levels of student and parent engagement improves individual outcomes.

2) Ability to be self-reflective
Related to the above, the next quality I would suggest is a desired one for any leader, current or future, is the capacity to be self-reflective and focus on continuous personal enhancement. Research by Harvard Business School (2013) notes that 75% of respondents in a study on the key qualities of high performing CEOs were the ability to be reflective, to be honest, affirming areas of strength and looking for areas of their leadership they could further enhance.

Typically, outstanding school leaders have a commitment to ongoing personal learning typified by professional reading, learning with peers, a pride in the work they do and a deep sense of connection to a ‘calling’ rather than the job of school leadership.

3) Professional fluency
Future school leaders must have that desire to always improve and commit to what I would term ‘professional fluency’. The education of our wonderful children is a very complex, shared and rewarding job.

School leaders must develop a fluency about their work that not only is about technical and subject knowledge, but a never ending desire to provide outstanding professional practice that involves finding the keys to motivating and supporting our teachers to make that difference for our children.

4) Resilience, responsive and innovative
The disruptive, ever-changing and turbid world in which we live will challenge our school leaders to be responsive, innovative and highly able strategic thinkers. The challenges presented to leaders will require leaders in our schools to display high levels of collaboration; measured risk taking; vulnerability to learning and possibility; personal resilience; and the fortitude to ask the necessary questions.

The next steps for school leadership
Parents will continue to expect schools to be safe, nurturing environments for their children whilst equally expecting schools to enhance their global citizenship. The partnerships with school parents and the broader community will be critical for school leaders in moderating the essential features of what will constitute ‘a good education’.

The identification, nurturing and ongoing development of current and future school leaders is a must for any school committed to the moral purpose of education – making a difference in the lives of all children regardless of circumstance and or ability. The immediate and long term cases for investing in school leadership is strong and has never been more urgent. Great schools are typically led by talented educational leaders.

Our Next Generation of School Leader – a Vital Investment?


Dr Stephen Brown is the CEO of the Queensland Education Leadership Institute (QELi), developing education leaders to improve student outcomes. Attracting participants from across Australia and the world, QELi is a partnership between the Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment, the Queensland Catholic Education Commission and Independent Schools Queensland.

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Dr Brown has undertaken consultancies in a range of settings and contexts within Australia and internationally, including the Philippines, Nauru, Scotland, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and China. He is a highly regarded expert in the areas of leadership development, organisational renewal and redesign, strategy, change management and capability development.

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