

EXHILARATING LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

In the midst of evidence that fewer people are seeking to be principals, that an increasing number of those who are appointed are falling by the wayside, and that stress, work intensification and complexity are at an all-time high, there are many for whom these trends do not apply: they find the work to be exhilarating. This paper draws on developments in five countries, and reports from 14 research-oriented workshops conducted in 2005, to show how leadership can be exhilarating rather than boring, discouraging, depressing or dispiriting, and how the balance can be shifted to exhilaration. Particular attention is given to the work of principals who have led the transformation of their schools, defined as change that is significant, systematic and sustained, resulting in high levels of achievement for all students in all settings, especially under challenging circumstances.

Attracting and sustaining appointments to the position of principal is a matter of concern in many countries. Also of concern is the level of achievement of students, in absolute terms but also as far as disparities in levels of success among different categories of student are concerned. The first concern may in fact be a consequence of the second, as policymakers respond to the student achievement issue by demanding more of the principal, to the point that the role is no longer sustainable. Sustainability in leadership is quite properly at center stage among issues in education at this time (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006; Fullan, 2005).

It is astonishing under these circumstances that some leaders find their work to be exhilarating. It is the purpose of this paper to explore the conditions under which leadership can be experienced in this way. The findings will challenge many of the orthodoxies about schools and school systems and the manner in which they are led. They challenge the traditional pattern of governance that is still based on a tri-level view – system, district, school – that has remained centralized, with little autonomy at the school level, far longer than has been the case in most fields of public and private endeavor. More broadly, they challenge what may be described as ‘the old enterprise logic of schools’, often described as a factory model of schooling, in which the classroom rather than the student was the most important unit of organization. Conceptually, they challenge the frameworks for school effectiveness and school improvement, where these assume traditional patterns of governance and an old enterprise logic. Transformation rather than improvement may be a better way to frame the effort.

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Setting the scene

Leadership can be exhilarating in all senses of the word, as reflected in the synonyms provided by Roget's New Millennium Thesaurus: animating, bracing, breathtaking, electric, elevating, enlivening, exalting, exciting, eye-popping, gladdening, inspiring, intoxicating, invigorating, quickening, rousing, stimulating, stirring, thrilling, uplifting, vitalizing. The antonyms of exhilarating from the same source are boring, depressing, discouraging, dispiriting.

Leaders who are exhilarated may encounter such moments but they have found ways to work around them, or if they cannot do so, their sense of exhilaration overrides them. They acknowledge that there are challenges to be addressed and problems to be overcome but dealing with them is an aspect of their work they find exhilarating.

This paper is about such leaders. It explores the circumstances under which the balance can be changed to achieve that exhilaration. It exhorts policymakers to create an environment in which this can occur without giving any quarter on an agenda for transformation, that is, change that ensures high levels of achievement for all students in all settings, especially under challenging circumstances, thus contributing to the wellbeing of the individual and the nation.

Exhilaration in leadership was reported in the first of a series of three publications. In *Re-imagining the Self-Managing School* (Caldwell, 2004) we described how the best practice of self-management had far outstripped its initial conception (as presented in Caldwell and Spinks, 1988; 1992; 1998). Self-management, or school-based management, refers to the decentralization to the school level of authority and responsibility to make decisions on significant matters within a centrally determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards and accountabilities. We found that a remarkable change was under way and this was the subject of nine workshops over nine weeks from February to May 2005 in Australia (1), Chile (2), England (5) and New Zealand (1). Conducting such workshops was itself an exhilarating experience and the outcomes were reported in *The New Enterprise Logic of Schools* (Caldwell, 2005). The concept of 'new enterprise logic' was derived from the work of Zuboff and Maxmin (2004). The main feature of the new enterprise logic of schools are:

1. The student is the most important unit of organization – not the classroom, not the school, and not the school system.
2. Schools cannot achieve expectations for transformation by acting alone or operating in a line of support from the centre of a school system to the level of the school, classroom or student. The success of a school depends on its capacity to join networks to share knowledge, address problems and pool resources.
3. Leadership is distributed across schools in networks as well as within schools.
4. Networks involve a range of individuals, agencies, institutions and organizations across public and private sectors in educational and non-educational settings. Personnel and other resources are allocated to energize and sustain them.

5. New approaches to resource allocation are required under these conditions. These take account of developments in the personalizing of learning and the networking of expertise and support.
6. Intellectual capital and social capital are as important as other forms of capital.

In each of these nine workshops, school leaders described a transformation. One or more of the six characteristics were addressed. A striking impression was that these leaders were exhilarated, despite the challenges and the problems, even though aspects of the work were boring, depressing, discouraging or dispiriting.

Five workshops followed the publication of *The New Enterprise Logic of Schools* in June 2005. These were conducted in Queensland and Victoria from July to October 2005. The findings are presented in the pages that follow, with implications drawn for policy and practice. A more detailed account is contained in *Exhilarating Leadership* (Caldwell, 2006a). The three publications will be combined in a forthcoming book under the title *Re-imagining School Leadership* (Caldwell, 2006b).

Leader voice

Listening to ‘student voice’ has been a priority in the movement to personalizing learning. It is a stepping stone to addressing the first element in the new enterprise logic of schools: ‘the student is the most important unit of organization, not the classroom, not the school and not the school system’.

It seems sensible to listen to ‘leader voice’ if the work of school leaders is to become more exhilarating and less boring, discouraging, depressing or dispiriting. Listening to leaders and acting on what is heard may be an important stepping stone to addressing the problems of leader stress and premature departure from the ranks.

Five workshops were conducted over twelve weeks in two states of Australia. Most of the 185 participants were principals, with a range of leadership positions among those who were not. They came from a representative cross-section of schools, with most from government or state schools, and the others from non-government subsidized schools, either Catholic systemic schools or independent schools. They came from a variety of socio-economic settings. There was a balance of male and female participants.

There were two distinctive governance patterns among leaders from government schools. Most were from Victoria, which is one of the most decentralized systems in the world, with a high level of self-management or local management (about 94 percent of the state’s education budget is decentralized to schools). The others were from the south east corner of Queensland a state which, in contrast to Victoria, has a relatively centralized pattern of governance and only modest levels of local management.

There were two ways in which participants could not be considered a representative sample of leaders. One was that they had volunteered to participate in these workshops. The other was that, with one exception, the workshops were an activity of a network of

leaders, that is, they reflected a pattern of operation in the new enterprise logic of schools. In each case it may be said that the leaders were predisposed to continuous professional development.

Participants were invited to respond to three questions:

1. What aspects of your work as leader are exhilarating?
2. What aspects of your work as leader are boring, depressing, discouraging or dispiriting?
3. What actions by you or others would make your work as leader more exhilarating and less boring, depressing, discouraging or dispiriting?

Participants were given a list of synonyms for exhilarating drawn from Roget's New Millennium Thesaurus: animating, bracing, breathtaking, electric, elevating, enlivening, exalting, exciting, eye-popping, gladdening, inspiring, intoxicating, invigorating, quickening, rousing, stimulating, stirring, thrilling, uplifting, vitalizing. Antonyms from the same source were included in questions 2 and 3.

The technology was the same as that used in workshops that shaped *The New Enterprise Logic of Schools*. Each group of participants was able to record its deliberations by keyboard entry, with responses from all groups displayed on a large screen for subsequent analysis. A document with all responses was sent to participants by email in the days following the workshop. The technology was developed by Sydney educator John Findlay and is known as Zing. It has a range of applications in educational and non-educational settings, including use by students in the classroom. It has wireless and internet capability. Its use for these five workshops was essentially for research purposes.

Participants were given 5-8 minutes to respond to each question. Groups range in size from three to eight. In some instances participants entered their individual responses; in others a group discussion was held and one member of the group listened and entered responses as they were generated. The atmosphere for this part of the workshop was itself exhilarating as participants generated a very large number of responses very quickly, and these were all displayed simultaneously on a large screen so that all could see what was unfolding. The largest number of responses generated in a 5-8 minute period was 162 by the 55 participants at one workshop for question 2 – one new response on screen every three seconds, with each participant generating on average three responses.

Themes among the responses were identified by the participants as a group when all responses for each question were on screen. After the workshop, the themes were refined by the author who then placed each of the 1413 responses in one of the 21 themes that were generated in this way – seven themes for each question. Summaries are contained in Tables 1, 2 and 3 and discussed below. Implications for policy and practice are drawn in the final section of the paper.

Work that is exhilarating

Participants in the five workshops generated 509 responses to the question ‘What aspects of your work as leader are exhilarating?’ Responses are summarized in Table 1.

There are some striking features in the pattern of responses. Each of the three top-ranking themes attracted at least 20 percent of responses, together totaling 67 percent. Each is concerned with good outcomes. Top ranking (26 percent) is exhilaration associated with success in a particular project, challenge, problem or grant; second ranking (21 percent) is associated with good working relationships with and among staff; the third for experiencing and celebrating the accomplishments of students (20 percent). The dominant pattern is therefore associated with the core purpose of schooling that can be summarized as ‘success in tasks related to learning and the support of learning, characterized by fine working relationships with staff, and enjoyment that accompanies good outcomes for students’.

Middle ranking (14 percent) among the seven themes is a more personal response by leaders to the work situation, with words like passion, challenge, living on the edge, great meetings and reflection. It should be borne in mind that each participant generated on average between two and three responses to this question, so that this theme is unlikely to have been the sole response of any particular person.

The last three themes are associated more with external matters, with community mentioned in 9 percent of responses and networks by only 1 percent. Nine percent referred to exhilaration experienced at being part of or witnessing the collaborative efforts of different stakeholders, conveying a sense of a learning community.

These patterns were generally the same for participants in each workshop. Where there were differences in rankings they were generally of one or two ranks only. It was not possible to discern an explanation for variations when the different locations and characteristics of respondents were taken into account. They are most likely chance variations. Most important, however, is the striking pattern of the three top ranked themes, and some implications are drawn in the final section of the chapter.

Work that is boring, depressing, discouraging or dispiriting

Antonyms for exhilarating are boring, depressing, discouraging or dispiriting, and participants were invited to describe aspects of their work that had these characteristics. A total of 527 responses was received, slightly more than the number of responses about aspects of work that are exhilarating (509). Responses are summarized in Table 2.

As in Table 1, there is a striking pattern among the themes that are ranked most highly in the analysis. Each of the top three themes attracted at least 20 percent of responses, with a narrow range of 22 – 24 percent, and a total overall of 69 percent. The top ranked theme

Table 1
Aspects of work that are exhilarating

RANK	THEME	ILLUSTRATIVE RESPONSES	NUMBER	PERCENT (%)
1	Success	Achieving success with a particular project; successfully solving a problem or meeting a challenge; realizing a vision; preparing a curriculum; winning grants and other resources for school; absence of complaints	130	26
2	Staff	Working with staff; observing staff as they address issues or adopt new practices; mentoring staff including beginning teachers; school-based research and development; dreaming together; having fun together	106	21
3	Students	Experiencing and celebrating the accomplishments of students, especially when needs are met; engaging with students	104	20
4	Personal	Personal development; passion for the moral purpose of schooling; success in the personal exercise of leadership; thinking quickly; personal reflection; receiving positive feedback; being challenged; living on the edge; never a dull moment; diversification in the work; participation in debate; experiencing a great meeting	69	14
5	Collaboration	Witnessing collaborative efforts of different stakeholders: staff, parents, students and others in community; experience in a learning community; enthusiasm of staff working together	47	9
6	Community	Working with parents and other members of the community; winning the support of the community for aspects of the school program; seeing them understand the 'big picture'	46	9
7	Networks	Working with others in a network or cluster of schools	7	1
TOTAL			509	100

is described as ‘performance of staff’ (24 percent) and this described the way respondents experienced the work of some of their colleagues: not making an effort, resisting or blocking change, not keeping up-to-date, or complaining. Second ranking was accorded to ‘administrative work’ (23 percent), referring to such matters as form filling, surveys, email, unnecessary meetings and, in one workshop in Victoria, the use of online recruiting procedures. Third rank was accorded the perceived lack of support (22 percent) from different levels of the system, lack of resources, complexity in bureaucratic arrangements, and lack of feedback.

The middle rank among themes for responses to this question is described as ‘external factors’ (15 percent), being a range of matters that were perceived to be outside the control of the school. Reference was made to culture, student characteristics, party politics and imposed curriculum

It is noteworthy that 11 percent of responses were related to perceptions of self or matters that were immediately concerned with the work of the leader. In some instances, these could well have been characterized as ‘administrative tasks’ but they were classified as personal in nature if the wording suggested this rather than the alternative. Included here were lack of time, problems in getting a message across, tiredness, absence of challenge, sitting in front of a computer or through meetings, loneliness and the enormity of the workload.

The sixth ranking theme was characterized as ‘constraints’ (4 percent), referring to matters related to the performance management of staff, with instances cited of barriers to selection and removal of staff. There were a few references to unions and the overall work environment.

As with the responses to the first question, there were no differences in rankings among participants in the different workshops that warrant observations that could be sheeted home to differences in the characteristics of the five settings.

In general, the over-arching theme is the influence of matters considered by participants to be either outside their control or due to the actions of others. Indeed, 89 percent of responses are covered by this statement. Some might say there is a familiar pattern here. The early studies of satisfaction and dissatisfaction by researchers such as Frederick Herzberg were sometimes criticized on the basis that it is a human response to attribute satisfaction to achievement of success (as in patterns of response to Question 1) and dissatisfaction to the actions of others (as in patterns of response to Question 2). However, the reader is invited to take the patterns at face value, or suspend judgment, until those for Question 3 are considered. There are some surprises!

Table 2
Aspects of work that are boring, depressing, discouraging or dispiriting

RANK	THEME	ILLUSTRATIVE RESPONSES	NUMBER	PERCENT (%)
1	Performance of staff	Staff not making an effort; resist change; blockers; use outdated pedagogy; make complaints	126	24
2	Administrative work	Filling in forms or reports or surveys, email; including those required for legal purposes; preparing timetables; unnecessary meetings; governance issues; online recruiting procedures (government schools in Victoria)	122	23
3	Lack of support	Lack of support from different levels of the system; poor understanding at higher levels of nature of schooling; unfairness or inadequacy in allocating resources to school; complexity in hierarchy or bureaucracy; lack of feedback	115	22
4	External factors	Factors outside control of school or leader including culture of blame; unmotivated or disengaged students; lack of support from parents; purposeless meetings; death of student; having to reinvent the wheel; party politics; need for marketing to maintain enrolments, imposed curriculum	81	15
5	Personal factors	Lack of time, difficulties in communication; personal judgments not suited to school context; tiredness; absence of challenge; enormity of task; workload; loneliness; tough decisions; sitting in front of computer; meetings	59	11
6	Constraints	Constraints on school in performance management; unions; work environment	23	4
7	None	One participant found no aspect of work had these characteristics	1	0
TOTAL			527	99

Shifting the balance to exhilaration

Question 3 was ‘What actions by you or others would make your work as leader more exhilarating and less boring, depressing, discouraging or dispiriting?’ The 377 responses were organized according to seven themes, as summarized in Table 3.

The biggest surprise, running counter to the criticism of findings of research on satisfaction and dissatisfaction reported above, is that the largest category of response reflected the view that the keys to shifting the balance to exhilaration lay in their own hands. It calls for a personal response. With 33 percent of responses, this is the strongest theme of any for the three questions posed in the workshops. Items illustrated in Table 3 reveal two kinds of personal response. One refers to personal lifestyle to become more tolerant, secure a better balance in life, and have fun. The second referred to the way participants carried out their work. A frequently mentioned item here was to delegate more. Others could see the benefit of mentoring and coaching and seeking greater clarity in their role. There are important implications here, and these are taken up in the final section of the chapter.

The second ranked theme is described as ‘professionalism’, with 21 percent of participants seeing the need for greater accountability, enthusiasm, openness, willingness to take risks and innovate, teamwork and a capacity for strategic planning among their colleagues. One might argue that this is another area where the leader can take action without recourse to new policies, although the fourth ranked theme of autonomy does express this view.

Taken together, the two top ranked themes on personal and professional matters account for 54 percent of responses. The remaining 46 percent are more clearly connected to actions by others. The third ranked theme is concerned with resources, with 19 percent calling for additional resources to enable them to give more attention to meeting the needs of students, if necessary shifting more funds from the centre of the system to schools. Resources may be in the form of emotional support, with several participants referring to times of crisis and trauma, as experienced with tragedies that occur from time to time.

It is noteworthy that just 9 percent of participants called for greater autonomy for the school, especially in respect to personnel matters and freeing the school from ‘administrivia’ and ‘ministrivia’, with the latter a term coined in the one workshop to refer to demands for action or information that are made by ministers of education. This was one of two themes where a difference among responses at the five workshops seemed to be connected to the characteristics of the setting. While only 9 percent of 185 participants gave a response that reflected the theme of autonomy, it was the top ranked response from participants at the workshop in Queensland, where schools have limited autonomy compared to their counterparts at the other four workshops in Victoria. At the Gold Coast, 25 percent of participants gave such a response. In no other workshop did this number exceed 6 percent.

Table 3
How to make the work more exhilarating

RANK	THEME	ILLUSTRATIVE RESPONSES	NUMBER	PERCENT (%)
1	Personal	Achieve better balance in personal life; become more tolerant and sensitive; more time to have fun; study leave; delegate more; improve internal communication and relationships within the school; greater clarity in role and supervision (of self); mentoring; coaching; saying no	125	33
2	Professionalism	There needs to be a higher level of professionalism among some staff, with accountability, enthusiasm, openness, shared values, willingness to take risks and innovate; teamwork; strategic planning	78	21
3	Resources	Additional resources to allow greater focus on students; reduction in class size, shift funds from centre to schools; getting sense of priority; more time; full time deputy; building a capacity to focus on meeting the needs of individual students; support in times of crisis and trauma	73	19
4	Autonomy	Fewer constraints on schools, including industrial; more careful thought at the system level about policies before requiring implementation in schools; separation of education and politics; less administration ('administrivia' or 'ministrivia') unless clearly connected to learning outcomes; greater sensitivity to schools; greater capacity at the school level to select, manage and reward the performance of staff	34	9
5	Community	Higher level of support from community in sponsorship, marketing, goodwill and	23	6

		communication		
=6	Recognition	More recognition of achievements of self and school and less blame and cynicism by others toward the school	22	6
=6	Networking	Networking with other schools for mutual support	22	6
TOTAL			377	100

The remaining themes drew relatively few responses, with 6 percent for each of community (for higher levels of support), recognition (of achievements of self and the school) and networking (to seek mutual support).

Implications for policy and practice

A large majority of participants (67 percent) reported that exhilaration was associated with success in the core business of the school, summarized in the statement: ‘success in tasks related to learning and the support of learning, characterized by fine working relationships with staff, and enjoyment that accompanies good outcomes for students’. The major implication is the importance of building the capacities of leaders and their colleagues to maximize the probability that they will experience such success. These capacities are concerned with curriculum, pedagogy, strategy formation, vision building, alignment of staff and the community to the vision, working well with colleagues, and having fun along the way. Programs for leadership development and ongoing professional learning should be concerned with these matters.

There was similarly a large majority (69 percent) in views about aspects of work that participants found boring, depressing, discouraging or dispiriting, with roughly similar numbers reporting concerns about the performance of staff, administrative work, and perceived lack of support. Taken at face value, a major implication is that actions by leaders and others should seek to minimize these concerns through policies that strengthen the hand of the school in selection and performance management of staff, minimizing the amount of administrative work, and providing more support, through additional resources and greater sympathy and understanding of those who are in a position to provide support.

While responses to the second question seemed to transfer the burden to others, the keys to shifting the balance to exhilaration, and by implication making the work of leader more attractive and sustainable, lie to a large extent in the hands of leaders themselves, as evidenced in responses to the third question. Getting a better balance in life was important, but equally important was the need to delegate more. An important implication is the need for *serious* distribution of leadership. The word ‘serious’ is emphasized here. It is not simply a matter of having more people with designations of authority and responsibility, although this may help. It is about having a very large number of staff having a leadership role and having all work together in common cause. An example of distributed leadership on this scale is Mt Waverley Secondary College in Melbourne

where 90 of 135 staff have a leadership role and there is continuing professional development for all (Caldwell, 2005, p. 47). It may be that insufficient attention is given to building a capacity in leaders to distribute leadership in the school.

The issue of school autonomy is an important one. On the one hand, just 9 percent of participants expressed a wish for more, although this number was 25 percent in the more centralized Queensland setting. It seems that the amount of autonomy was not a concern for most participants in Victoria. On the other hand, however, there is clearly a wish for more authority in respect to personnel matters, ranging from selection and, where necessary, removal of staff, to the gamut of activities related to performance management. Most important, however, is that there was no indication of any kind that participants sought total autonomy for their schools so that they existed alone and were self-sufficient apart from the provision of a fair share of resources to meet the needs of students. A high level of autonomy and a high level of support from other sources are not mutually exclusive. Such support may come from different parts of the school system through traditional arrangements, or from networks of schools and other entities, or from places that are sourced by the school itself according to its needs and priorities and what is available.

An interesting development in Victoria is the increasing number of independent non-government (private subsidized) schools that are establishing their own institutes for research and development, with school-based action research linked to the professional learning needs of all staff, networked learning with other sources of professional support, and business arms that make a range of services available to other schools.

These developments in respect to networked support in school systems that enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy are consistent with key elements in the new enterprise logic of schools:

- Schools cannot achieve expectations for transformation by acting alone or operating in a line of support from the centre of a school system to the level of the school, classroom or student. The success of a school depends on its capacity to join networks to share knowledge, address problems and pool resources.
- Leadership is distributed across schools in networks as well as within schools.
- Networks involve a range of individuals, agencies, institutions and organizations across public and private sectors in educational and non-educational settings. Personnel and other resources are allocated to energies and sustain them.

Responses in these workshops suggest that a broader concept of network is required, and that it should not be restricted to a small formal frequently meeting group. A high level of adaptability and flexibility is required. With this qualification, operating according to the new enterprise logic can be an important factor in ensuring that leadership is exhilarating.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the finding that much of the initiative for making leadership more exhilarating should be taken by leaders themselves, the chief conclusions that are drawn lie in the areas of governance and organizational logic. School self-management or school-based management is critically important, and the main responsibility of those who are not employed in schools is provide support to schools. Unprecedented levels of such support are needed if expectations for personalizing learning are to be achieved. Traditional top-down or bottom-up approaches have their place but they will not suffice in the future. Operating laterally is likely to be more important than operating vertically if expectations for schools are to be realized and leadership is to be sustained (see Hargreaves, 2004 and OECD, 2003).

The 14 workshops reported in this paper were conducted in four countries in the last 12 months. The process and the product illustrate that ‘the world is flat’ in education. Indeed, the same forces are at work in education as in society in general, as reported in Thomas Friedman’s *The World is Flat* (Friedman, 2005). Herein lies a challenge to endeavors such as the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement and its associated conferences and publications. How can knowledge be more effectively networked to shape the work of policymakers and practitioners in their efforts to achieve transformation in school education? An illustration of the scale of the challenge is contained in the following statement by Hedley Beare, former Chair of ICSEI and eminent leader in shaping policy and practice in Australia:

I have just thrown into the recycling bin a heap of textbooks on bureaucracy, structure, corporate culture, organizational behavior, change theory, and the like. They are all good. I studied them in graduate school [at Harvard], as a chief executive I applied their theories in setting up and leading school systems, I have taught them to principals, lectured and given addresses on them, and supervised research on their topics. Their ideas have been very constructive. I could discard them because they no longer apply. Their frameworks were good but the world has changed radically and they simply do not fit twenty-first century conditions. There is a new world ahead of us. (Beare in Caldwell, 2005, p. 1)

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