

Gateways to International Leadership Learning: Beyond Best Practice

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Abstract

In this article we challenge the widespread advocacy for leadership learning to be tied to decontextualised lists of 'best practice', especially at an international level. After reviewing some of the reasons for why such lists may do little to promote the improvement of leadership practice we suggest that energy could be more usefully concentrated on leadership learning and what has been labeled 'informed' (Dimmock, 2000) or 'wise' practice (Davis, 1997). Building wise practice stems from an awareness of how leaders learn best and the conditions which allow these methods to take root. Such conditions include resilience, intuition, ego, voice, curiosity and experimentation. As such, we suggest learning leadership and the results of this learning are often one in the same. Learning to be a better leader, however, does not simply happen; it needs to be purposefully framed with the individual and organizational context within which it resides. To this end, we conclude the article by outlining four flexible learning gateways which school leaders may use to inform their practice. The four gateways are: what I believe is important; what others think about me; what I am dealing with now and; what ideas are out there.

This paper is partly based on: Walker, A. (2004) Gateways to leadership learning - within and beyond context. Keynote Address presented at the Australian Secondary Principals Association National Conference/ ANTSEL Biennial Conference, Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia 26-29 September.

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Introduction

Go to almost any country, state or leadership centre website and you will find a list of what are variously labelled school leadership standards, qualities, competencies or descriptors which are championed as beacons for practice¹. In general, these competency prescriptions provide different levels of item detail and purport to capture 'best' school leadership 'practice', but are remarkably similar regardless of the context within which they are developed. As the competencies fashion maintains its momentum, there are calls to pull-together a list of 'international' best leadership practice. In this article we argue that such a move risks compounding the already problematic notion of 'best practice' and would do little to enhance leadership learning or, consequently, improve leadership practice internationally.

This is not to discount totally the value of the multiple lists of 'best practice' which have appeared over the last few years – such as those generated in the United States, Australia, Hong Kong or the United Kingdom. Such work, for example, can be valuable for describing a generic principal's job, and for developing an initial understanding of the broad role of the principal. Nor does our argument question that such lists have added to what we know about good leadership (for example, see Hallinger and Heck, 2002). We also recognise the considerable progress underway to shape competencies more usefully and realistically. For example, the innovative work coming from the Western Australian Government Schools Leadership Centre (<http://www.eddept.wa.edu.au/lc>) makes significant progress toward addressing many of the problems facing standardised lists of best practice through engaging principals in collaborative practices.

Regardless of progress made, however, the efficacy of any list can be gauged only by its ability to influence practice in schools, strengthen professional relationships and improve student learning and lives. Perhaps the most strident criticism of compiling and promoting static lists of best practice is their inability to account for the context within which school leaders live and operate. Taking such issues into account, certain questions need to be asked. Key among these are: Is there a 'best' way to go? Can we realistically build an international list of 'best practice'? Or is it largely a futile quest which distracts energy from the real challenge of improvement where it counts? In this article we suggest that a more useful path to take internationally may be to reconceptualise 'best' practice in terms of leadership learning with the

aim of developing what Davis (1997) called 'wise' practice. To do this we attempt to track the following argument:

Current conceptions of best practice, usually presented as long lists of predefined competencies, while having their strengths, do little to improve practice. We will review, upfront, some of the reasons for this and suggest that an inability to address context is perhaps their overriding weakness, especially at a cultural or international level.

Current conceptions of best practice may be usefully replaced by greater concentration on leadership learning, self awareness and professional growth – or what some call 'informed' (Dimmock, 2000) or 'wise' practice (Davis, 1997). 'Wise' practice may have more useful application across countries and cultures than collections of lists. We will look at a little of what is known about leadership learning in context and touch very briefly on what 'methods' seem to help leaders learn.

Certain 'learning conditions' allow these methods to be more fruitful. As we discuss these conditions – which include resilience, intuition and ego – we suggest that what it means to 'learn' leadership and the 'outcomes' of this learning are often one and the same.

Finally, leadership learning does not happen by osmosis, it must be purposefully framed and grounded within the particular context of the school and the leader. To this end, we briefly outline four flexible learning gateways which school leaders can use to inform and develop their own practice and that of their school communities.

Problems with 'Best Practice'

The identification, application and intent of lists of best practice, internationally or otherwise, expose a number of problems which combine to limit their effectiveness in terms of improving school leadership practice. These problems relate predominantly to context and stem from the definition, use and intent of best practice, as well as their tendency toward fragmentation and imprecision.

The Identification of Best Practice

The search for leadership best practice follows business trends. At its most basic, the idea is that in order to 'win', companies need to be the 'best'. To help them in this quest, management *gurus* and academics study the 'best' companies and 'best' leaders (i.e. those who make the largest profit or are the best known) and sketch an outline of what they

do. They then combine, compare and synthesise these and come up with a list of what they do – this is then labelled as ‘best practice’. In these terms, defining best practice implies an attempt to ‘bottle a prescriptive formula’ (Walker and Stott, 2000) by studying successful organisations and/or their leaders. Denrell (2005) points out the dangers of selection bias, of basing best practice just on successful organisations. He cites the example of a widely distributed study which extolled the attributes of top entrepreneurs. While claiming the findings to be reasonable, Denrell commented:

The only trouble was, the speaker failed to point out that these self same traits are necessarily (also) the hallmark of spectacularly unsuccessful entrepreneurs. Think about it: Incurring large losses requires both persistence in the face of failure and the ability to persuade others to pour their money down the drain (p. 114).

Identifying best practice in educational leadership is also problematic given that recent comprehensive reviews have shown that the influence of leadership on school outcomes is indirect rather than direct (Hallinger and Heck, 1999; Hayes, Christie, Mills and Lingard, 2004). Referring to this conclusion, Glatter and Kydd (2003) rightly ask, ‘so how (then) do we judge what practice is ‘best’?’, or indeed, what ‘best’ refers to? It is unclear whether ‘best practice’ refers to individual or corporate practice, whether it focuses on specific techniques or methods, or on an overall view of what ‘good’ leadership and management is thought to be about (Glatter and Kydd, 2003).

Fragmentation through Best Practice

Lists of best leadership practice can have the effect of fragmenting professional practice (Loudon and Wildy, 1999). That is, they place the messy, unpredictable reality of leadership under neat coloured headings, thereby implying that leadership is a logical-rational, somewhat sterile, exercise – life in school is not like this. Within any single day, or even incident, principals exercise a whole range of competencies which appear, at least on the lists, as unrelated (Loudon and Wildy, 1999). Given what we know about the importance of principals acting in coherent ways, lists can present a false picture.

A core belief underlying ‘best’ leadership practice is the perceived need for standardization and control. This is based on systems thinking or a mechanical and linear approach to leadership. In such a view, schools need lists of best practice in order to compare, predict and even

control the outcomes that result from leadership practice. In writing about the efforts to improve education in the US over the last two-decades, Thomson *et al* (2002) note the:

adoption of a rationalist planning model in which there is measurement of indicative features of the education system, target setting for improvement, testing to see what movements have occurred, the publication of comparative data about schools, districts and states, and the creation of simulated and actual educational markets. There is also attention paid to documenting 'best practice' – the model by which improvement is said to occur – and intervention to jolt those who are not improving at all or quickly enough into the approved action (p.6).

Some writers (Keene, 2000; Stacey, 1996) have argued that such a perspective is so far from reality that it is actually counterproductive. They argue that a Newtonian worldview fails to provide organisations with a model for coping with the increasing pace of change and that the principles of complex evolving systems may be better equipped to do so. Complexity theory suggests that the desired order we seek through the application of lists of best practices is the antithesis of effective leadership. As Keene (2000) states, 'The very act of control may prevent the creativity and innovation we seek and as a result starve the system of the myriad options open to it only through serious play and experimentation. The ability to anticipate and invite surprise rather than seeing it as the harbinger of ills is necessary in a complex [school] environment which constantly challenges and questions and welcomes deviation from the status quo' (p. 3).

The Precision of Best Practice

Short or long lists of best practice imply a sense of precision which is difficult to realise in professional contexts (Louden and Wildy, 1999). Lists by their nature are intended to imply some sort of standard of performance. Depending on the list, this can produce different problems. In some cases, competency lists are so general and open to interpretation that if used to judge or select a principal, or for self-evaluation, the same principal can be classified as outstanding or outstandingly awful – depending on who's doing the interpreting. Conversely, other lists try to be so detailed that they break competencies down into their minutest detail. Usually this does not solve the problem of interpretation of competence, but carries the additional risk of breaking leadership down and presenting it as a

cookbook – or ‘leadership for dummies’. Lists that are either too loose or too tight do little to improve principal leadership and can stifle both creativity and curiosity. Through setting often unattainable and unrealistic benchmarks, ‘lists’ can channel practice away from leaders exercising intuition, hold the risk of damaging self-esteem and stifle leaders’ curiosity about new and different ways of knowing. In other words, they attempt to make sense of leadership for school leaders, but only from a detached and often prescriptive perspective. In this way, they exhibit a lack of trust in leaders themselves while, at the same time, elevating leadership rather than leaders.

Judgement by Best Practice

When used, or misused, by central authorities and pushed onto the profession in their various forms, lists of leadership best practice can easily become more destructive than constructive. For example, in some systems they are used for principal performance management, promotion and even selection. Given the uncertainty and immeasurability of lists of best practice, it is difficult to be convinced of their efficacy in such important situations, especially if transferred across contextual boundaries.

A related problem is that the public pronouncement of best practice on stone tablets runs the risk of pushing principals toward espousing what is considered by the few to be best practice, rather than building or trusting their own ‘egos’ and theories-in-use. Davis (1997) notes the possible destructive consequences of leaders trying to mimic over generalised lists of ‘best practice’:

Its (best practice) too confident hope ordinarily smashes to ruin against the rocks of reality. Commonly it ignores reasonable options by its insistence upon a singular path. It unrealistically elevates expectation beyond possibility. It ordinarily diverts attention from the practical to the theoretical. Amidst the wreckage of frustrated efforts, individual practitioners become cynical, even if they refuse to admit their distress (p. 1).

The Intent of Best Practice

While reinforcing the ambiguous nature of contemporary school leadership practice within a complex and uncertain environment, Glatter and Kydd (2003) point out an interesting twist in relation to

competency lists. They hold that central authorities in recognising the ambiguity faced by schools have, perhaps with good intention, increased regulation to reduce this ambiguity. This regulation has included commissioning lists of what the 'best' principals should do. However, an unintended result of this has been to increase the complexity of the change process required to implement policy in schools. In other words, increased prescription has produced even more of the tensions which typify the lives of leaders – such as those between control and flexibility, or innovation and stability – which, in turn, has led to increased uncertainty and confusion, rather than less, and demotivated school leaders along the way. Davis (1997) describes this phenomenon:

Examples of education best practices litter common memory. From efforts to apply cardinal principles to abandoned teaching machines, from problem solving techniques to total quality management, invention and advocacy of best practice have advanced like wind-driven prairie fires. Because they carried the imprimatur of 'best', school officials and citizens alike routinely urged its general use across all school settings, for all pupils and teachers, and for all school offerings. The brilliant spectacle of advocacy, like the prairie fire, dies when the winds calm, as they always do, and the results total significant loss of commitment, time, energy and talent. The wreckage evidences failed crusades (p. 1).

His main argument appears to be that the misuse of lists of best practice can seriously challenge the self-esteem, resilience, flexibility and creativity of leaders – all of which are vital for effective learning.

Best Practice in a Vacuum

Thai teachers perceive the current content of reforms like student-centred learning as 'foreign' in origin and in nature. Discussions about educational reform in Thailand often assume that people are speaking the same 'language'. In fact, many English terms such as student-centred learning or school based management have been imported from abroad and have no equivalent in the Thai language. When these terms are translated into Thai, educators are often unsure of the true intentions behind the words or phrases. This leads to numerous interpretations and considerable confusion as to both intent and approach (Hallinger, 2004, p. 17).

Within each of the above issues lies perhaps the most strident criticism of lists of best practice; that is, they separate leadership performance from the context within which it occurs (Walker and

Dimmock, 2002). Louden and Wildy (1999) provide an example of how lists can neglect context. A key statement of 'best' practice on almost any version you pick up is something like 'The principal must (they often use such language) provide regular and constructive feedback'. It sounds good, but, as they point out, such feedback would require very different knowledge and skills if given to a dedicated, focused teacher about their work, than to a teacher accused of abusing their power with students.

The problem of context becomes even more troublesome in the development of lists of international best practice which, presumably, would be as applicable in Tsingtao and Tripoli as in Toowoomba or Tamworth. As principals are aware, it is not only the context you work in (the school), but also the context of who and what is involved in the broader environment that affects what you do and how you do it. As and when this context shifts, so does what is required in terms of leadership performance (Southworth, 2002). As Glatter and Kydd (2003) tellingly note: 'indifferent management can be good enough to secure survival in some contexts, while even talented leadership can fail to prevent closure or amalgamation in others' (p. 234).

Trying to construct an international list of 'best practice' magnifies the problems of those associated with more defined boundaries. The development of such international lists risks ignoring that educational leadership is a socially bounded process and, as such, is subject to the cultural traditions and values of the society or group in which it is exercised. Leadership thus looks different in different settings (Dimmock and Walker, 2005; Walker and Dimmock, 2002). A growing number of international studies have identified quite distinct conceptions of educational leadership in native indigenous communities (for example, Bryant, 2003; Fitzgerald, 2003) and in different national settings. For example, one of the main distinctions between US and Chinese societies, such as Taiwan, is the Chinese group orientation in contrast to American individualism. In group-oriented societies, the role of the principal often seems to focus on developing and ensuring harmony among staff and enforcing common, standard approaches to governance, organization, curriculum and instruction (Walker, 2003). In contrast, in many English speaking and non-English speaking Western societies principals are more likely to consider the individual needs of both teachers and students in the operation of the school (Cheng, 1995) – organisation and leadership generally focus on task achievement rather than the maintenance of relationships.

A more specific example can be taken from the endless thrust for more participatory leadership. Although put into policy and included on lists of best practice in places such as Hong Kong, they have largely failed. Leung and Chan (2001) explain that, '(participatory management is) based on the principle of equality and a contractual relationship between the boss and subordinate – (this) is culturally alien in a Chinese society like Hong Kong' (p. 245). They argue that such approaches, originally cloned from places like Australia, depend too much on a culture of individualism which simply does not hold in Hong Kong. They explain that Hong Kong and Australia differ in that Hong Kong has, '...retained considerable elements which support hierarchical power relationships between juniors and seniors' (p. 243).

While exposing the problems of static competency lists we do not suggest that the idea of leadership best practice is one that should be totally discarded, but agree with Glatter and Kydd (2003) that it is often employed far too casually and so holds the potential to mislead. And we also suggest that it needs to be broadened and conceptualised in terms of what is 'best' and how this is defined and presented in different cultures and contexts.

In summary, lists of 'best practice' carry at least four risks and these are accentuated when lists attempt to cross too many boundaries. First they assume that there is a best way to lead and that nothing else is good enough. In other words, they assume that there is 'one best way' to lead regardless of context or culture. There is no leadership formula within countries or cultures, and this is magnified when examined internationally. Leadership in Western, English speaking cultures looks very different to that practised in countless other cultures. The simple fact is that there is no 'one best way' to lead in schools and if there is we do not know it. Second, through setting often unattainable and unrealistic benchmarks they can guide practice away from leaders exercising intuition, hold the risk of damaging self-esteem and stifle leaders' curiosity about new and different ways of knowing. In other words, they attempt to make sense of leadership for school leaders, but only from a detached and often prescriptive perspective. In this way, they exhibit a lack of trust in leaders themselves while, at the same time, elevating leadership rather than leaders. Third, they are almost anti-learning as well as de-motivating in that they assume that we know what to do and no longer need to experiment and learn – this can detract from the resilience leaders need to survive and flourish in their jobs. Finally, they can often be interpreted as denying the principles of

ongoing or continuous learning which are constantly held up as the way forward for schools.

From 'Best' to 'Wise' Practice

Problems associated with inflexible lists of best practice should not cause us to look away from improvement, but rather to broaden the search for ways to develop leadership in schools. One direction we can take is toward what Dimmock (2000) calls 'informed' practice or what Davis (1997) calls 'wise' practice. While commenting on leadership across cultures and arguing against 'best practice' Dimmock (2000) suggests that rather than searching for one best way of leading, principals can more productively draw on a combination of experience and evidence collected in specific contexts or cultures. The key here is that leaders, in various ways, research their own and the school's practice to help inform what promotes better leadership and learning.

While acknowledging that notions of 'best' practice are so entrenched at policy, government and managerial levels that they are unlikely to fade away, Davis (1997) advocates the pursuit of what he calls 'wise practices' to balance the impossible dream of 'best' practices. He says that three assumptions drive this possibility:

1. Leaders understand what guides their professional endeavour. *They possess wisdom of practice.* Some can articulate their reflections, legitimizations and rationalisations. For others their wisdom is tentative, but their practices exhibit their tacitly held understandings.
2. Best practices are never contextualised, and individuals portrayed as best practice practitioners are always exemplary individuals. *Wise practices are situated thoroughly in their context.* Other professionals learn about these and acknowledge the practices enhanced authenticity and credibility – they ring true.
3. Best practices are an ideal, but circumstances and life seldom unfold as leaders wish they would. Consequently, reality *will* be, not just *must* be – a central consideration of leadership. (p. 2) *Wise practice recognises the central importance of the practical to educational decision making.*

In Davis's terms, improving leadership practice rests not just on long lists of what it might look like, but on a personal, professional learning orientation and awareness which can result in wisdom, or 'wise' practice. Wisdom can be defined in terms of the insights which emerge and accumulate through simultaneously applying intuition and collecting and analysing knowledge and evidence in specific leadership situations (Dimmock, 2000). Eruat (2000) holds that leaders aspire to what he calls 'a maturity of judgement' – which can be equated to wisdom. He suggests that such wisdom is neither purely analytic nor purely intuitive, but involves the ability to reflect upon issues in order to explore how others might perceive them and how they might impact the future. The exercise of professional wisdom therefore involves the process of applying personal knowledge (often informed by codified knowledge) to a unique set of circumstances while taking into account a 'range of implications and conflicting perspectives' (Glatter and Kydd, 2003, p. 239). In other words, wise practice is about learning, and this only takes true meaning when it happens in context.

In essence, reconceptualising practice from 'best' to 'wise', particularly in terms of its international appropriateness, is about seeing leading and learning as one in the same. Perspectives on leadership learning taken from writers such as Eruat (2000), Goleman (2002) and Kotter (1996) highlight self-awareness and self learning as an essential path to improved leadership practice. Kotter (1996), for example, claims that leadership learning is sustained through the development of five mental habits. These include: Risk taking, or a willingness to push oneself outside of comfort zones; Humble self reflection, or an honest assessment of success and failure, particularly the latter; Solicitation of opinions, or the aggressive collection of information and ideas from others; A propensity to listen to others and; Openness to new ideas – a willingness to view life with an open mind (p. 183). Goleman claims that: 'The crux of leadership development that works is self-directed learning: intentionally developing or strengthening an aspect of who you are and who you want to be, or both.' (p. 107). The basic argument is fairly straight forward – if you're not aware of what you're about, then you cannot manage yourself, if you can't manage yourself, you'll find it very difficult to lead others effectively.

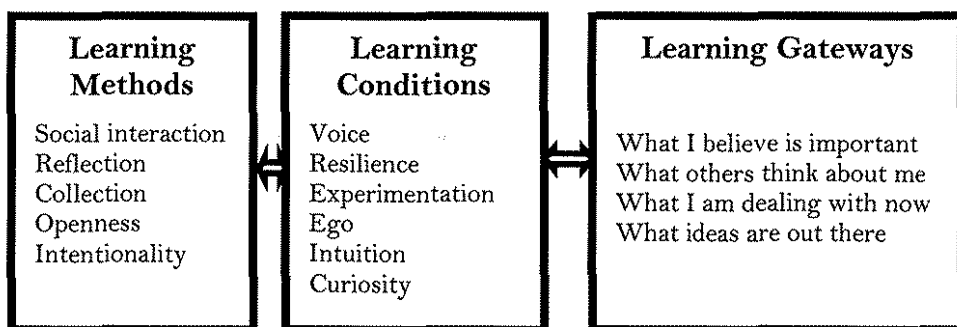
Leaders who do not seek awareness in context tend to lack emotional intelligence, the foundation of trust, and without a commitment to self-evaluation, leaders operate at a severe disadvantage (Braden, 1998; Kouzes and Posner, 2001; Spreitzer and Cummings, 2001, p. 241).

Looking at what we know about leadership learning, wise leadership practice happens in context and can be seen to develop broadly through methods which include social interaction, reflection, collection (of ideas and evidence), openness and intentionality or design; which all spiral from knowledge of self, not simply lists of what have been identified by others as best practice.

Knowing how leadership learning happens, however, is of as much use as any other list unless placed in the context of leadership. Wise leadership develops through building what we call personal 'leadership learning conditions'. These are in fact the conditions that leaders need both to learn effectively and to lead effectively. The conditions through which leaders can best apply their learning include finding voice, building resilience, experimenting, building ego, growing intuition, and being curious. For example, for principals to be reflective, and open enough to collect and analyse evidence – some methods of learning – they need to be resilient, willing to experiment and actively curious. The conditions we describe are not intended as an exhaustive account, but are illustrative of some important conditions which appear useful for the learning of 'wise' practice. When put together, learning methods and conditions underpin a design for making sense of leadership 'practice' across cultures and contexts (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1

Ways to 'Wise' leadership practice



Leadership Learning Conditions

Finding voice

Cutting through the jargon, many of the books and articles that promote leadership spirit and spirituality (see Creighton, 1999) are really about leaders finding their 'voice'. Kouzes and Posner (2001) suggest that applying best practice can lead to a failure to find this voice and often results in leaders simply adopting a vocabulary that belongs to someone else. Finding voice in these terms is not a technique learned from a list of competencies, it's a matter of establishing the conditions within which leaders can learn to make sense of their leadership. The same authors provide a useful analogy of an artist as a way of describing the quest for voice. They explain in the artist's words: 'There are really three periods in an artist's life. In the first we paint exterior landscapes. In the second we paint interior landscapes. And in the third period, we paint ourselves. This is when you begin to have your own unique style' (p. 89).

The same appreciation can be applied to the art of leadership internationally. Lists of best practice help leadership learning at stage one – painting exterior landscapes – where it's mostly about copying other people's styles and trying to mimic the 'best leaders'. If we are to progress through levels however, and truly realise who we are as leaders and what we can do to make schools better, we need to paint, with the help of others, ourselves in our context – this is the art of leadership. Let's not be confused here, in echoing Davis's (1997) thoughts, this is not about a 'search for perfection – perfection is neither natural nor particularly human; leadership is not a game for perfect people' (Kouzes and Posner, 2001). What it is, or should be, and also what makes it so exciting is the process of discovery, even when this includes the unexpected and the failures. Finding voice then is a condition conducive for learning, as is the building of resilience.

Building resilience

A second condition for learning 'wise' practice internationally is building resilience, or the ability to survive and continue learning through adversity. Too often, when times get tough, leaders revert to standard, imported solutions and so lose the drive to learn. Coutu (2003) makes the claim that: 'More than education, more than experience, more than training, a person's level of resilience will determine who succeeds and who fails' (p. 6). She also describes three qualities of resilient

leaders. First, they have the capacity to accept and face reality. Through being open to reality (or context) they prepare themselves to lead in ways that help them survive and endure hardships. They create a condition for learning by training themselves before they actually have to. It is interesting to note that resilient leaders are realists, not optimists. In his increasingly cited research, Collins (2001) found that resilient people have very down to earth views on the parts of reality that maintain survival. In other words, resilient leaders don't just conjure a sense of the possible; they look at themselves, others and the situation honestly through collecting evidence and ideas, and through looking inside themselves.

Second, resilient leaders have an ability to discover meaning in their work and lives. They realise that values systems are important for long term growth, and use these as scaffolding when times get tough. In other words, they continually clarify their values and what they stand for – this is learning, and this is leadership. As Kotter (1996) concludes when discussing leadership learning, '(that) the very best lifelong learners I know seem to have high standards, ambitious goals and a real sense of mission in their lives' (p. 183). Third, resilient leaders have the ability to improvise – they can cobble together solutions to problems even when they do not have ready-made or obvious tools for doing so. This quality involves developing intuition and a willingness to experiment, and even fail.

Experimenting

Resilience is partly built on the accepted notion that to prosper, schools must develop a learning orientation – this is also supported in the personal learning literature. Glatter and Kydd (2003) claim that efforts to build organisational or personal learning cultures are, 'logically incompatible with the notion of 'best practice'' (p. 236). To support this argument and then suggest an alternative path, they cite a conclusion reached by Levin (2001) after he completed a study of the reform process in four countries:

The reality is that we do not know how to solve the educational and social problems we face. Success is not a matter of simply implementing someone's nostrum. The problems are deep seated and multi-faceted. In such a situation the only way forward is to focus on experimentation and learning (p. 198).

Glatter and Kydd (2003) further explain their argument for establishing the conditions of continuous learning and experimentation:

1. Notions of continuous learning and improvement imply that practice is never 'best'.
2. Continuous improvement recognises the tentative and experimental nature of most of the educational changes we face in schools.
3. Such an orientation militates against easy acceptance of imported, purported solutions – such as lists of 'best' leadership practice (p. 236).

In other words, their position is that establishing conditions which encourage the recognition and acceptance of failure, which are often linked to experimentation, is a powerful source of leadership learning and leadership itself. In fact, some suggest that learning is not possible when failure is unacceptable, or as Chapman (2002, p. 59) claims, paradoxically, if we don't learn from failures then failures will continue. According to Glatter and Kydd (2003), 'This suggests that the potential for learning from unsuccessful practice may be at least as great as that from practice which is perceived to have been successful' (p. 237). Questions must be asked about where this happens in reality.

The fact seems to be that many school leaders feel as if they are in the 'firing line' without adequate support. As a result, learning from errors or failure is actively avoided – why risk failure if not supported by, for example, the central agency? It seems that a principal's job is sometimes framed more by 'making others look good' than making a better school. In other words, the interests of the school's community are not always the interests of policy makers or politicians. While leaders feel safe only when they avoid errors, and when the basis for building a school image is overly sensitive to political and policy appeasement – which often takes the form of decontextualised regulation – they are unlikely to develop 'wise' practice.

In sum, schools as organisations need to adopt a 'learning system' model to embed a culture of learning and experimentation, and this implies learning from failures, not just what works. Therefore, it is axiomatic that a key condition for effective leading and learning is a willingness to 'chance your arm' – or find ways to make sense of leadership within a school environment often typified by tension and multiple pitfalls. A willingness to learn from failure is at least partly based on leaders having confidence in their own judgment while,

paradoxically, being realistic enough to recognise that sometimes they can be wrong.

Building ego

For leaders to learn better practice through experimentation they need a healthy belief in their own abilities – this can be labelled ‘ego’. Braden (1998) suggests that the leader’s job is to build her own and her organisations self-esteem, and that this requires a healthy ego. Eraut (2000) found that in many ways, workplace learning, ‘depends on confidence, motivation and capability (knowledge and skills previously acquired), which in turn depend on how staff are managed within the microculture of their immediate environment’ (p. 118). In line with literature on resilience, ego can come only when leadership is aligned with reality, and when this is accompanied by leaders being: ‘Open to available facts, knowledge, information, data and feedback’. And then openly asking; ‘What needs to be done?’ (p. 15). The basic argument for building leadership ego is that confident leaders work out what is important in their leadership (painting their unique style) and so are more likely to display consistency, predictability and coherence. These, in turn, encourage trust and promote a better handle on constructive and destructive emotions.

A key component in establishing conditions for ‘learning’ ego is that of trust. For principals to build ego is for them to trust in their abilities. To feel this trust, leaders need to know that the system they work for actually believes in them. If they are judged solely on a series of what Bottery (2002) calls ‘cold’ education indicators, such as those proposed in lists of ‘best’ practice, this can lead to conditions where suspicion reigns and morale plummets, often leading to professional cynicism. In fact, O’Neill (2002, cited in Glatter and Kydd, 2003) claims that the overall effect of trying to base leadership on long decontextualised lists is that they actually distract professional attention away from the needs of students and staff, and towards those of the regulators. This can distort the aims of professional practice, reduce trust and damage confidence in practice. In short, leaders without ‘ego’ are more likely to revert to other people’s solutions – as on lists – but without the requisite underpinning beliefs to support these. Healthy leadership ego requires building an authentic core of beliefs, values and actions and this requires active self-evaluation and ongoing learning, which cannot come just from simple lists.

Growing intuition

A simple definition of intuition is that it is the way we translate our experience into action – it comes from learning through both success and failure over a period of time, as well as from the discoveries which partner these. Intuition is learned, it is neither magical nor mystical. Klien (2003) puts it nicely by explaining that intuition is, ‘a muscular rather than a magical or mystical view’ – and is therefore something which can be acquired, just as strength can be increased through exercise. As he says: ‘Intuitive decision making improves as we acquire more patterns, larger repertoires of action scripts, and richer mental models’ (p. 11). In other words, it is about an important condition for learning, and for leading.

Klien (2003) worries that the development of intuition and wisdom can be devalued by current leadership trends – namely that of over-standardisation. Chief among his concerns is that organisations and their leaders are increasingly constrained by organisational policies, pre-determined procedures and the rampant growth of metrics, or demands for measurable objectives. While acknowledging the assistance these can provide leaders in making decisions, he believes such conditions prevent the growth of intuition, or the learning of ‘wise’ practices. Klein (2003) suggests that leaders are forced increasingly to find refuge in detailed lists of procedures and competencies and that this reduces the conditions necessary for learning and transfer of experience and craft knowledge. He states: ‘There is a strong tendency in our culture to proceduralize almost everything, to reduce all work to a series of steps. But you cannot reduce intuition to a procedure.’ (p. 24) – it is only about learning. Intuition, as with experimentation, depends on the final condition discussed here – that of curiosity.

Being curious

Long leadership lists tell leaders to actively engage with evidence but, at the same time, supply predetermined answers. A programmed view of effective leadership discounts the creative tension which accompanies the piles of contradictory evidence confronting leaders. Not acknowledging this tension through hiding in lists has the effect of stifling leaders’ curiosity – a key learning condition. In positive terms, the strain created by being uncomfortable, anxious and ‘not knowing’ can produce a creative tension which leads to new insights and then change. Creative tensions typify the environment within which leaders

work today, and this is not amenable to logical, simple codified knowledge, it also requires personal knowledge. Personal knowledge stems from the development of practical and creative intelligence, not just analytic intelligence. In other words, personal knowledge depends upon a capability for curiosity, not simply 'knowing that'.

Engaging with the tension which emerges from working with dilemmas and contradictory messages produces a form of cognitive conflict which in turn prompts curiosity. Cognitive conflict is the tension that is created when what a person believes they know and value is challenged by what actually is, or by alternative positions. This tension often emerges when we critically reflect on new data. In other words, when a person is exposed to new data he or she can come to realise that there is a difference between what they think they know and what is being revealed. Such a condition should lead to active curiosity and exploring the different ways to proceed in practice. As used here, (Walker and Quong, 2004b), curiosity has a number of characteristics in that it requires leaders to maintain an open mind; actively wonder about things; ask lots of questions; and show interest in the possibility that things are not always as they seem at first glance.

Curiosity is also about reframing, or the capacity to see things in new ways – ways that generate fresh options for leadership action and for learning. Common examples of reframing include using different perspectives or new angles to examine an enduring problem; getting different people involved in brainstorming and discussion; or looking below obvious or surface issues. Developing conditions which encourage viewing issues from multiple perspectives helps form the bedrock of creative effort and possibility. Curiosity is intimately related to ego, resilience and intuition in that it stimulates interaction between self-knowledge, new and others' knowledge, memory and experience.

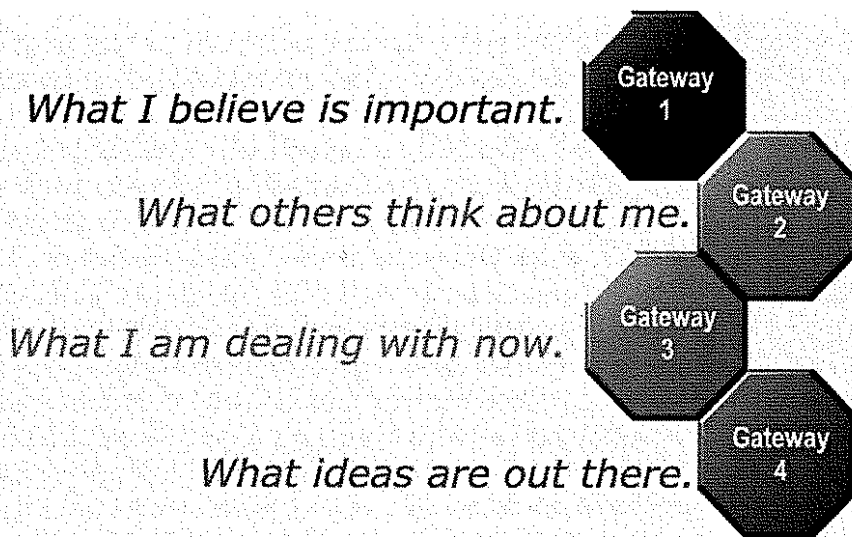
Four Leadership Learning Gateways

The discussion so far has suggested that an alternative and perhaps more realistic way to improve school leadership internationally is to promote 'wise' practice through embedding learning within the contexts and cultures which frame schools and leaders' lives. Approaches to improving practice therefore do not depend on a list of best practice, but rather on a flexible learning design. This should not be taken, however, to imply that the search for better practice should be some loose, flighty process, learning must still have form and guidance. Learning happens

best if it uses grounded methods, is underpinned by 'learning conditions' and follows a design. Here we suggest a design in the form of four interrelated gateways (Walker and Quong, 2004a; 2004b). These gateways (see Figure 2) are best accessed in a disciplined fashion by leaders themselves, in their context and in partnership with their peers, school community and others important to their learning. The gateways suggested are obviously not the only ways to frame learning – but if properly implemented may help leaders to make more sense of who and what they are, and what they are trying to achieve.

Figure 2

Four Leadership Gateways



What I believe is important

The first gateway is designed to encourage leaders to begin or to refresh their thinking about their principalship and what they want from it. It is an opportunity in Goleman's (2002) terms to begin the process of identifying the ideal and real and related personal strengths and weaknesses. This is obviously a very important starting point for all leaders, and particularly for leaders of Professional Learning Communities. The basic argument is that what is needed to improve leadership is of little use if leaders have not clarified what 'improve' really means or what they believe they are in the job to achieve. In other words, the direction leadership takes must be framed by what the leader

perceives as important in their role as a principal. Reflecting on 'what is important' encourages a strategic approach to learning, for example through reviewing personal vision and direction, and setting learning goals. What is important is clarifying and articulating values and beliefs, identifying dilemmas, ways of operating, relationships with others and, importantly, how to maintain a balance between work and life.

What others think about me

The second gateway acknowledges the importance of collecting information, perspectives and evidence about leadership from members of the school community. Finding leadership voice and its influence on schools is of little use unless it collects and analyses the opinions of others. This gateway is designed to start this process and collection can take any number of structured or unstructured forms – 360° scans are one way of opening this gateway. One of the major purposes of leadership learning for leaders is to discover what they 'don't know they don't know' and about the failures they have faced – it is not just about confirming what is already known, or what they want or think they need to learn. The advantage of finding out what others believe is that it not only lets leaders know where others are coming from, but it also stimulates professional curiosity about self. 'Why do they say that I'm a good leader but still make little difference in teaching effectiveness or student learning?'; 'Why did they say that about me?' 'Why do teachers think I need to do that...?' 'Am I missing something?' 'Do others know me better than myself?' Asking such questions identifies gaps between espoused theories and theories-in-action, checks intuition and builds resilience. Answers to such questions can be used to drive or guide learning about ways to build 'wise' practices through setting learning goals.

What I am dealing with now

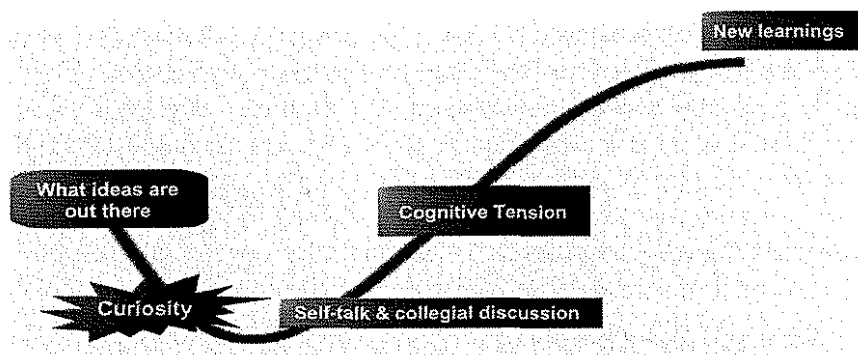
This learning gateway provides a structure for identifying learning needs directly from the leader's unique internal school context and from policy/external demands. In other words, through identifying issues which are currently active in the school. The gateway is important to help leaders link current needs identification with what they need to learn (or relearn) to deal with the current issues or problems faced in their school. Performance management systems and coaching, or the identification of fears, needs and concerns within the school community

are processes that can open this gateway. Although some suggest that identifying needs should ideally be proactive rather than reactive, in reality, many learning needs stem from more immediate issues – learning is therefore both proactive and reactive. Using and dealing with issues *in situ* provides powerful learning experiences. Through identifying current issues leaders are, in fact, clarifying current organisational and leadership needs, fears and concerns and using these to stimulate curiosity and build resilience and intuition – or ‘wise’ practice. As with the other gateways, the issues identified can be used to identify learning goals to improve practice.

What ideas are out there

The fourth gateway involves discriminately scanning the literature, what’s happening in other schools, ideas held by colleagues, fellow principals and others to trigger professional curiosity and ‘better ways to do things’ in your school. The idea here is that through discovering what is happening elsewhere, or what others are thinking and doing, leaders are exposed to ideas, concepts and other information which can help them reflect upon how to improve school leadership practice. This is not a search for a single textbook or blueprint, but holds that through discovering what is happening elsewhere, or what others are thinking and doing, leaders are exposed to ideas, concepts and other information which can help them reflect upon ways to improve practice. Mentoring systems and peer action learning programs are ways in which this gateway can be opened. Seeking and ‘listening to’ ideas from elsewhere can stimulate curiosity to the extent that it, hopefully, will promote both self-talk (internal dialogue) and collegial discussion (social interaction) about school leadership. Through thinking about and discussing what else is ‘out there’, principals are in fact attempting to ‘make sense’ of other ideas within their own context/s. Stimulus discussed and discovered can ignite new ideas and questions which, in turn, produce cognitive tension – or the desire to know more. As discussed above – this increases self-awareness. When this happens within a particular context, learning follows and the leader develops new knowledge, skills or beliefs, and so builds capacity. This process can be illustrated through the ‘J – Curve’ [see Figure 3] (Walker and Quong, 2004b).

Figure 3
The J-Curve



The four gateways are obviously not the be all and end all, but they can provide a worthwhile starting point for building 'wise' practice. The table below (Figure 4) introduces a number of 'triggers' which may help operationalise the four gateways. It is not the purpose of this article to discuss these in any detail as this is done elsewhere (Walker and Quong, 2004b), but they represent at least some of the avenues and processes for learning to lead and leading to learn.

Figure 4
Learning Gateways and Possible Learning Triggers

| Learning Gateways | Learning Triggers |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| What I believe is important | Values and beliefs Direction Strengths and weaknesses Relationships Balance |
| What others think about me | Success or Failure Failure Trust Openness Strengths and weaknesses |
| What I am dealing with now | Critical incidents Emerging opportunities Trust Reaction |
| What ideas are out there | Innovations Other expertise Other ideas Other practices Codified knowledge |

Conclusion

In summary, our argument has been that any search for a generalised 'list' of international school leadership 'best' practice may, on its own, be a frustrating exercise. Given the spread of vastly different contexts and cultures both within and between societies, and the state of our knowledge about what leadership works, the search for improving practice must be grounded in context and based on ongoing learning. This in no way claims that leaders cannot learn from colleagues in different contexts, they can and regularly do, but that few learn how to be better leaders simply through exposure to a collection of competencies which may or may not hold cultural currency in their school community. 'Wise' practice results from engaging in learning methods which have been shown to help leaders learn. This happens when certain learning conditions are built – such conditions are both the process and the product of leadership and provide a realistic environment for learning. Applying learning methods within learning conditions requires a purposeful design, conceptualised here as a set of gateways which school leaders can use to frame the practice of learning.

NOTES

1. It should be noted that there is an increasing awareness of the need for contextualization and differentiation in terms of standards. Examples of this include attempts in Hong Kong and the UK to differentiate levels of leadership (see Walker and Dimmock, 2005; and NCSL website <http://www.ncsl.org.uk/>), refinement through profile dimensions (see Begley, 1996; and Walker, Begley and Dimmock, 2000) and the exciting Western Australian Leadership Centre project 'An innovative approach to leadership standards: attributes in context' (See Loudon and Wildy, 1999, and <http://www.eddept.wa.edu.au/lc> and <http://isp.ecu.edu.au/ssl/index.php>)

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