

School leaders as architects of change

Daniel Xerri looks at the benefits of recruiting outsiders to offer leadership to struggling schools.

Introduction

A fascinating study published in the *Harvard Business Review* identifies the qualities of the most effective school leaders. Hill *et al* (2016) list five types of leader and label each one by means of a job title to highlight specific characteristics associated with each leadership category: Surgeons, Accountants, Soldiers, Philosophers and Architects. Based on interviews with 411 leaders as well as an analysis of their actions and impact over a seven-year period, the study concludes that Architects are the most effective kind. Architects turn around a failing school by progressively improving students' scores, consolidating ties with its community, and developing teachers' professionalism. Nonetheless, despite the high level of effectiveness they display, school leaders who act as architects of change are rare and unappreciated. The study's results have some important implications for TESOL management.

Visionary leaders

Hill *et al's* (2016) study found that Architects are usually leaders who enter education after having successfully worked in industry for around 10 to 15 years. Their motivation for becoming school leaders is that they want to maximise their impact on society. They believe that failing schools are badly designed or inadequately serve the community. Once they take on a leadership role, Architects seek to engineer a favourable environment for teachers and a school that properly



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serves the local community. They do this because they believe that effective change can only happen over a long period of time and once all stakeholders participate in the process.

Architects adopt a holistic perspective of school transformation and their impact is durable because they target the needs of all parties. They improve learning by providing students with different pathways for different abilities and they enhance teaching by offering teachers professional development and mentoring opportunities. Collaboration with the community a school forms part of enables students to acquire a better understanding of what contribution they could make. Architects do not solely strive to transform a school but they also direct their efforts at changing the community for the better.

Strengthening ties with the community and redesigning a school's environment involves a substantial amount of effort and hence the effects of the changes

made by Architects take time to manifest themselves. However, around three years down the line, students' examination results start improving and continue doing so even after a number of years following an Architect's departure from the post. An Architect's effect on improvement in examination results is 15 to 23% higher than that of other leadership types. In the long run, this even has an impact on a country's gross domestic product given that successful students are much more likely to have higher earning power once they are employed.

Unsung heroes

In spite of their effectiveness, Architects are the least recognised, rewarded and promoted types of school leaders. This is because the changes they implement take longer to translate into visible results. Instead of aiming for immediate outcomes, Architects redesign schools and transform communities so that impact is long-term. Another reason for which Architects are not adequately celebrated might be that they are deemed outsiders given the fact that they typically originate from outside education. Their status as outsiders goes counter to the belief that school leadership is best left in the hands of teachers with plenty of classroom experience. However, the fact that they do not enter the post via a career spent exclusively in the classroom is a plus since it enables them to take a broader perspective of things. Yet another reason could be that as leaders they are humble and do not exhibit the kind of thirst for recognition seen in other types of school leader identified by Hill *et al* (2016).

Implications for TESOL management

Hill *et al* (2016) found that one of the most publicly celebrated, rewarded and promoted types of leader are the Philosophers. These are good at the talk of the game, but their work has no impact on student achievement or a school's success. Despite enthusing teachers with impassioned speeches about the value of good teaching, they are entirely ineffective as leaders.

Interestingly enough for those of us working in TESOL, Philosophers are typically English or language teachers who consider themselves to be seasoned teachers rather than leaders.

The results of the study I reviewed above should resonate with those involved in TESOL management because they help to underscore the importance of the notion that in order to enhance a school's practices and output it might sometimes be necessary to bank on the leadership provided by those who have not been immersed in the system for far too long. The study's results seem to be aligned with the business axiom that the most effective changes happen when introduced by someone from outside a field of activity. Insularity hampers innovation and people who have operated in a particular domain for a long time might struggle to conceive of ways of transforming practices and cultures because their field of vision is not sufficiently broad. Hence, in order for change to be more effective, external players might need to be brought in so that a stagnant situation can be reinvigorated. However, in the world of business it is also recognised that even the best leadership talent is only transferable if mapped to the challenges of the new context in which it is going to be operating (Groysberg *et al*, 2006). Thus, adaptability is an important feature of effective leaders.

The above ideas can be applied to TESOL management if we accept that school leaders need not necessarily be senior teachers, especially in the case of schools that are struggling to be competitive (Kowal & Hassel, 2011). In fact, Hill *et al* (2016) challenge the belief that effective school leaders are a product of lengthy classroom experience. Despite the value inherent in the latter, teaching is not necessarily the best form of preparation for leadership. In order to guarantee sustainable improvement, it might be far more important to recruit leaders with relatively less teaching experience but with the kind of background, qualities and vision identified in Architects.

However, for more Architects to occupy leadership posts in schools it is crucial to first create the structures that facilitate the recruitment of leaders from outside education. As Finn & Northern (2014: 5) point out, 'Recruiting executives from outside education means scrapping hurdles that prevent talented candidates from crossing over into education.' It might not always be possible to find effective leaders from among those toiling away in the English classroom, but transforming a school, its teachers, students and community by means of the revitalising views of someone coming in from the outside is surely a good thing.

References

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