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Taking Your Leadership Pulse

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Exploring four realities of their leadership helps urban principals spearhead change.

How can school leaders generate change when realities like gang shootings and leaky plumbing keep schools in crisis mode?

In the past few years, I have explored school leadership by observing the work of 85 urban school principals in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and France (Riley, 2008, 2009). I have witnessed how demanding urban leadership is, but also how enriching it can be—"the best job there is!" one leader enthused—because principals can transform students' lives.

A key challenge in the business of transforming lives is learning how to lead so that deep-rooted change becomes possible. And a key to leading for change is to understand how the actors, systemwide policies, and relationships operate in one's immediate situation. As we observed and interviewed principals, my research team developed a tool that leaders can use to take this "leadership pulse." We call this tool the four realities framework.

The framework is a self-review that helps leaders explore four elements that influence a principal's ability to manage change: the physical reality of the environment, the social/political reality, the emotional reality, and the spiritual reality. The framework is used to guide many school leaders throughout the United Kingdom. We help leaders work through questions about the four realities, assess strengths and weaknesses, and then make concrete plans for change.

The framework encourages honest response. Establishing trust is important to taking the leadership pulse as a leadership *team*, which we encourage schools to do after leaders have reflected individually. It's essential to set up conditions under which everyone feels comfortable sharing such weaknesses as how their emotional responses might get in the way of dialogue with parents. I always help teams negotiate rules for confidentiality before they respond to the key questions and plan actions as a group.

Taking the leadership pulse is also about gathering community information. It helps leaders develop an approach that's rooted in the immediate context of a school and neighborhood and that also takes into account the wider political environment.

Four Realities and Four Leaders

A glimpse of the real-life challenges of principals I have studied and coached illustrates how leaders experience each of these realities and how reflecting deeply on what's happening in each sphere can help

principals generate change. Here I share specific questions and practices leaders can use to explore each reality.

Physical Reality

The physical reality encompasses the day-to-day logistics of managing a school. Hiring and scheduling staff, for example, are part of this reality. So are facilities. The physical state of the buildings has a significant effect on everyone in a school. Some research (Riley & Rustique-Forrester, 2002) indicates that marginalized pupils are particularly influenced by a poor physical environment. They see smelly toilets and cracked windows as a profound mark of disrespect and think, "If the school doesn't respect me, why should I respect the school?"

The effect of the physical surroundings in urban communities is complex. Students may have to deal with rubbish, rats, lack of play space, and poor street lighting. They may know about drugs and gang culture; their lives may be constrained by fear and prejudice. But they may also know the richness of different languages, cultures, and beliefs. Many enjoy the support of friends and family and opportunities for sports and cultural events.

As the following story shows, school leaders need to know the complexities of their schools and neighbourhoods—positives as well as negatives.

A principal we'll call Bridget[1] leads a culturally diverse urban school in the United Kingdom. Most of the students live in high-rise apartments surrounding the school. Seventy percent are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, 60 percent speak English as a second language, and 50 percent have special needs. As she took stock of her leadership situation, Bridget quickly realized that staffing and discipline problems were one reality she would have to get creative about:

> When I first came here, we had staff come and go at a rate of knots. Some came and lasted a day, then went again. ... So the behavior deteriorated quite a lot, and we had children running around the building and the playgrounds, swearing at whoever they fancied swearing at. It was fairly chaotic. ... [Then] one of the key stage managers [administrators] took long-term sick leave, one had to go into hospital, and one started looking for another job.

Bridget initiated new practices that considered the needs—and potential contributions—of the community around the school as well as the crisis within. When she invited parents to begin volunteering in the school, it created a stronger school-family connection and opened up dialogue.

> We had to ... put in place discipline training quite fast and agree on a code of conduct and a set of rules. ... We appointed a leadership group and with the help of the authority, moved some poor staff out. ... A huge number of our parents are not employed and have fairly chaotic lives, and that chaos comes into school. We tapped into the desire on the part of the local community to be part of the school. We've had drop-in sessions [when parents come to volunteer or meet at the school]. ... We've formed this multi-group meeting as a vehicle. We've now got a community room set up.

The physical reality often gets the lion's share of leaders' attention, to the detriment of the other three. The imbalance is quickly evident when leaders write their initial responses to the question of how they see these four elements operating; far more writing appears in the "physical" section than in the others. This is useful because leaders immediately see that they are spending most of their time and energy on the day-to-day, never stepping back to look strategically at where broader change or broader supports are needed.

For example, one group I guided through this self-assessment noticed that many of their responses concerning the physical reality described immediate behavior problems from specific kids ("Mark keeps bullying Rashan") They realized they were being so reactive that they were taking no time to examine their

behavior policy strategically. This team committed to develop a new behavior policy, with student input, within a year.

Key questions to explore the physical reality

> What do the students in my school experience as they go about their daily lives in the community?
> How do students feel about the physical state of our school?
> What positive qualities or resources exist in the neighborhood surrounding my school?

Social/Political Reality

This reality encompasses not only the social landscape of the school (the relationships among people) but also the reality of students' home lives. Some students in urban neighborhoods lack stability; they may have a parent in prison or have to leave home to escape abuse. Neighborhood tensions—such as gang violence—may become extreme and involve students. Understanding this fact helps a leader realize why urban kids do not always react well to change.

Michael, an urban principal in the United Kingdom, became aware of social tensions in the community. Achieving clarity and focus about the problem of ethnic conflicts enabled him to develop an innovative but appropriate response.

Although Sherman High School had traditionally served predominantly white, working-class students, students now come from a wide range of cultural and economic backgrounds and nearly half speak a home language other than English. A high proportion of students are eligible for free school meals. Many families are refugees; student mobility is 15 to 20 percent.

Although low achievement was a major problem, Michael realized that the starting point for change would be uniting a divided community:

> [This community] used to be cut off from everywhere and people have developed this insular-looking view. ... Social disadvantage, poverty, and unemployment are high. When the Bengali population moved in, the housing policies caused great outbursts of racism stirred up by the British National Party. ... So our biggest issue has been to bring the communities together.

Some Sherman students had been involved in aggression within the school that mirrored the more serious events happening outside. Rather than just cracking down, the school found a way to help these students reflect on the community conflict.

> We've set up this project [in which certain students travel to Belfast] for young people from the school who have been involved in conflict. It's a weeklong residential experience aimed at encouraging them to get to know one another's cultures. We chose Belfast because it's a divided community, although one divided by religion, rather than ethnicity. We try to move students out of their comfort zone. They work together in ethnically and gender-mixed groups ... cooking, cleaning, shopping, and so on. And they meet young people from Belfast [from both Catholic and Protestant areas] to explore the differences and the similarities between pupils and communities, and to develop skills in conflict resolution. ... The work that we've done with the groups that go to Belfast changes the climate because kids don't want others to be hurt.

An integral element of the social reality is the political reality, generated to a large degree by the attitudes and decisions of politicians. When reflecting on this sphere, school leaders can come to see themselves as victims rather than players with influence. Many participants in our study expressed anger at political decisions, such as a decision to close a school that had been particularly successful with black boys. I've found leaders also often shy away from exploring political landscapes ("education is above all that"). We must avoid both traps. The challenge for leaders is to develop open-eyed awareness of political realities

without becoming overwhelmed by frustration and anger. Principals can do so by frequenting professional gatherings, reading education media avidly, and networking with other school leaders.

Key questions to explore the social/political reality

- What relational alliances or tensions should I be aware of in my school or neighborhood?
- Who are the prime movers for change in my community?
- Where is the district superintendent coming from politically, and what does he/she value?
- What key policy issues or decisions are coming up in my district?

Emotional Reality

Physical and social conditions inevitably affect the third reality leaders must attend to: emotions. Emotions can be intense in an urban school. Because they must remain calm and proactive, urban principals often experience a disconnect between difficult actions they must take—such as confronting a pupil wielding a knife—and the emotions they feel as they act. Many school leaders experience periods of exhaustion, frustration, or even depression.

It's essential for leaders to remain aware of their emotions, and at times they may need to publicly acknowledge emotions that might get in the way of communicating or developing relationships with people. Exploring this reality should help leaders take the crucial step of figuring out what situations—or even people—set off inappropriately strong reactions, and why.

One good idea is to keep an "incident diary" for a week. For any critical incident that occurs, list what happened, what action you took, and how you felt at the time, then try to divine overall patterns. Once you realize what pushes your buttons, you can better train yourself to take a step back when you feel an emotional response getting in the way.

Healthy anger, however, might help a principal become clear about something that needs to be changed and muster energy to change it—as Vickie, principal of Highland Preschool, discovered.

Highland is in an urban area in the United Kingdom characterized by poverty, high mobility, and crime. Drugs, teenage gangs, and racial tensions abound. The preschool's playground is right next to a parking lot behind the school. When Vickie came back from a holiday to find that the lot owner had put corrugated sheeting all around the space,

> I was absolutely furious. ... It's badly put in and cemented to the bottom. I mean, our children play there. ... I'm going to bring it up (at the next area meeting). ... We talk about working in partnership with each other, but somebody did that ... [and] they didn't think about the effect. They didn't discuss it with us.

At the time, Vickie was working through our Leadership on the Front-line program. She used her critical incident diary to understand why she had such an overwhelming reaction and realized that this incident epitomized for her the way people often neglect the human needs of children in cities.

Key questions to explore the emotional reality

- What pushes my buttons? What makes me unusually irritated, angry, or excited in a good sense? Why?
- In what ways do my emotional responses sometimes get in the way of acting effectively?
- How can I draw strength from my feelings? What helps me do so?

Spiritual and Ethical Reality

The spiritual reality is about beliefs that drive leaders. For some, this reality is linked to religious faith, for others, to a strong commitment, such as to social justice. This reality includes a drive to help young people gain a sense of who they are and who they might become. Revisiting and strengthening this area leads to a deeper wisdom, which enables leaders to make tough decisions in support of change, even if that means taking risks.

Luke is head of a small Catholic elementary school in a socially deprived neighborhood in the United Kingdom. Luke endured a lot of family trauma growing up. After he escaped being killed in the 1989 disaster at Hillsborough football stadium in Sheffield, England, Luke realized he needed a meaningful purpose for his life. He traveled and reflected on his spiritual values for a year.

> I came back here with my heart set on being a teacher. I wanted to improve things for children. … I now enjoy developing teacher's skills to develop the children's skills. … You have to put children first.
>
> There was a teacher who was letting down and bullying the children and the staff. … So we had a meeting to discuss her areas of performance that had given grave cause for concern and she's been off ever since. It's very stressful. … She had been here for all but her first year of teaching. … But I'm doing it for the best interests of [the teacher], the children, and the school.

Luke found that reflection, as part of taking his leadership pulse, helped him reaffirm the fundamental beliefs behind decisions like this one. It's crucial that teachers have an ongoing awareness of what grounds them spiritually so they can make solid decisions quickly in a crisis. Yet leaders I consult with invariably say they haven't spent any time reflecting on their spirituality or ethics for a long time.

Key questions to explore the spiritual/ethical reality

> What drives you? What are you trying to do as a leader besides keep the school running as usual?
> What brought you into this profession?
> What sustains you?
> How have your home background and your life experiences shaped what you believe?

Clarity and Vigor

Taking their leadership pulse gave the principals described here an opportunity to reflect on their personal, social, and contextual challenges. Gaining clarity about these realities strengthens leaders' capacity to tackle challenges with vigor and to spearhead changes that improve students' lives.

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Endnote

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

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KEYWORDS

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