

# Reflections on ‘The 21st Century Principal’



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Recent years have seen a proliferation of research and opinions published about what it means to be a principal in the 21st century. The world that we seek to prepare our students for is one of rapid social, cultural, and technological change, and accordingly the skill set we seek from our school leaders is changing. At the same time, educational systems around the world are re-examining their own purpose and relevance, and principals – not surprisingly – are left to ponder what lies ahead for their profession, what changes might come next, and what skills and experiences will prepare them for a long and successful career in school leadership. In my own career in education, which has spanned teaching, principalship, and system leadership, I have never felt more positive about the opportunity and potential that lies before principals as I do about the current context in Queensland. In this article, I offer a system leader's view of the qualities and behaviours that make a successful principal as well as my own perspectives on the enduring relevance of the system, and how it can and should support your important work.

Notwithstanding the widespread changes in classrooms and the world beyond them, it remains as important as ever that principals are expert communicators who are able to share their vision, collaborate with others and influence the 'big picture'. They need to become more generous in sharing experience and knowledge to inform their colleagues' school improvement activities and professional development; equally they need to be proactive in seeking support and drawing resources and support from the system. They need not be experts in every aspect of technology, curriculum design, finance, or wellbeing but they need to have sufficient appreciation and understanding of all of these issues to provide leadership and oversight of them in their own schools.

In order to get the best out of their staff, great principals know that they need to trust and empower. They listen, they understand people's talents and passions (and nurture them), they recognise the areas in which they need development (and nurture them even more), and ultimately they empower them and trust them to take responsibility and grow. Growing the capacity of a team requires that principals recognise achievements, but also a preparedness to have honest conversations

that challenge teachers to be self-aware and to take responsibility for their own improvement journeys. It is always challenging to balance the improvement needs of the individual, whether these are to address weaknesses or to take capabilities to the next level, with the improvement agenda of the school. Astute principals find alignment between the two and invest wisely in professional development that has a defined purpose and measurable dividend.

The more time I spend in educational leadership, the more I become concerned about what I see as the lost art of listening. In the early days of our teaching careers, listening is natural as we absorb the lessons of our leaders and colleagues, follow their advice, and observe their conduct. Somehow, however, as we progress through the leadership ranks and gain more confidence in our own knowledge and intuition, we can overlook the need to listen with a truly open mind. As primary school leaders, your greatest wish is that your school represents your students' first step in a journey of lifelong learning, so it is important to apply the same high expectations to yourself and to your staff. Great leaders are truly lifelong learners in that every interaction with another person, a staff member, a student, a parent, is an opportunity for learning. They understand that listening does not weaken their own ideas, but challenges and ultimately strengthens them. Listening provides not only the opportunity to hear new ideas and concepts, but also to receive feedback on your own performance and advice on how to constantly improve.

Similarly, great principals will embrace data about their own performance in the same way that they would teach a student to approach feedback on their own work. The provision of data, at least in the Queensland context, is not a punitive measure, nor is it designed to shame or embarrass you. It is designed to help us identify the areas in which your efforts have succeeded so we can replicate them elsewhere. It is also designed to identify the areas in which you are struggling so that we can direct resources and energy towards targeting the specific problems of practice. The integration of data into management and capability building is a relatively new development for our profession, and system leaders are learning about what makes this work. The great 21st century principal

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does not abandon data when it confounds them, instead they become part of the solution. If data is not relevant or helpful, or if there are blind spots where data is lacking, they feed this perspective back into the system and seek to co-design solutions. They also use data to their best advantage, by developing their own data plans that specify what data is necessary, what it will say, and how it will inform planning and performance measurement.

Great principals embrace evidence for the rich and valuable resource it is and find ways to use it to their advantage. If your data signals areas of weakness, work on these. If it signals strengths, be reassured about the wisdom of your approach and build on that success. Importantly, be generous in sharing your approach and results with your colleagues so that they might embrace your successes and avoid your mistakes. Don't be reticent to raise your problems and challenges amongst colleagues to bring collective effort and wisdom to addressing problems of practice. Similarly, don't be reluctant to seek help from your colleagues or from the many central resources that are available to you. It is this cycle of collaboration that ensures the continuing value and relevance of our system.

This brings me to my perspective on the relevance of the system itself, and I acknowledge that for many years, we saw education systems worldwide swing pendulously, often with changes of leadership and political climate, between competing individualist and collective paradigms. At one extreme, schools were like empires, each focused solely on growing and improving their own within their own walls, and they envisioned themselves as being in competition with other schools (and often, with the central system). At the other extreme, the desire for a whole system focus meant that the individual strengths, needs and contexts of each school became lost as they were treated as cogs in a much larger machine.

The fluctuation between approaches over many years and across many jurisdictions has been undoubtedly frustrating for principals, who feel they are constantly having to adapt and re-adapt to new expectations and ways of thinking. Our efforts to reform and realign the Queensland system were understandably met with some cynicism: did a focus on autonomy signal another abandonment of the system thinking? Did a focus on accountability (including through data) contradict the promise of autonomy? Would the realignment of school, regional, and central levels fundamentally alter what each party could and should do? How did the concepts of autonomy and accountability sit against each other?

The idea that we could talk about autonomy at the same time as we sought accountability and asked principals to help grow the system may have seemed counterintuitive to many, but in truth autonomy and accountability are

two sides of the same coin. To justify your autonomous status you must be able to account for your actions, and for autonomy to be successful, you must be willing and able to draw on the resources of a larger network. Terms such as 'joined-up autonomy', 'networked autonomy', or 'connected autonomy' are variously used to describe what is essentially the same thing: we want the system to support you, and while you are accountable at the local level, we are also accountable at the system level for the performance and outcomes of our students. The system is not a machine but a network, one that gives to and receives from principals, and that will perform at its best when all parties give generously and receive willingly.

Autonomy does not describe a series of empires dotted across the state, competing with each other for resources and success. You may not be cogs in a machine, but nor are you to be completely disconnected from each other. Although you have autonomy in your local setting, you have many connectors to the broader network that is our system. The number and strengths of your connections will be largely up to you, but stronger connections give us the best chance of lifting the system as a whole, as opposed to having some schools flourish while others plateau. I firmly believe that the networks principals create between themselves and with others in our system become the backbone that holds us together.

A recent think piece by Steven Munby and Michael Fullan talks about the power of the networked 'leader in the middle'.<sup>1</sup> This leader has an intimate knowledge of their school and great relationships in their community, and they feed this perspective upwards into the system. They do not succumb to what can become a tug-of-war between those who develop policy and those who implement it, instead they become co-designers of policy solutions, contributing advice, creative solutions, and local perspective at all stages of the policy cycle. They find and drive efficiencies, and constantly work towards improving performance.

An organisation like the Queensland Association of State School Principals is testament to the fact that principals are already good at doing exactly this, and that the system paradigm simply needed to be adapted to build on this strength and elevate all schools to the next level. Your group speaks both to the diversity and the mutual interest of your profession. Michael Fullan talks about great school leaders in the following terms: they are attuned to 'the big picture ... sophisticated at conceptual thinking, and (at) transforming the organisation through people and teams'.<sup>2</sup> I think that this is as close to a perfect summation of the 21st century principal as one could hope for, and I am confident that the system we have in Queensland is rapidly maturing and supporting principals to be just that.

<sup>1</sup> Munby, Steve and Fullan, Michael. 2016. Inside-out and downside-up: How leading from the middle has the power to transform education systems. Education Development Trust. Accessed on 15 February 2016 <http://www.michaelfullan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/EdDevTrust-Global-Dialogue-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Fullan, Michael. 2014. ACT: On the move [video]. Accessed on 10 January 2016 <http://www.michaelfullan.ca/act-on-the-move/>