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## Some lessons in leadership learnt in my 44 years in education

**Ross Ecclestone**

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Looking back on his political and diplomatic career, Colin Powell, former U.S. Secretary of State, summarised his approach to leadership with a great one-liner. “Leadership,” he stated, “is the art of achieving more than the science of management says is possible.” When I read Colin Powell’s thoughts on the art of Leadership I was struck by the similarity between his insights and my own thinking. School Principalship, it seems to me is the art of achieving more than the theories of school management say is possible. Similarly, leadership in the classroom is the art of achieving more than the theories of learning say is possible. This is because *leaders primarily focus on people and managers focus on task*. The bottom line in leadership has to do with personal attitudes, beliefs, relationships, feelings and values. These are the attributes that constitute the filter through which we all, leaders and those being led, make sense of the world. Rules, strategic plans and bureaucratic requirements are the tools of management. They have their place, but they are of secondary importance when it comes to the Principal’s ability to influence a team of teachers and students. School Leadership can only be measured in terms of influence. No perceived influence; no Leadership.

“School Principalship, it seems to me is the art of achieving more than the theories of school management say is possible”

My educational experience spanned across four states of Australia: half in SDA schools and half in the WA and NSW public systems. In the years 1989 to 1995 I was a District Inspector of Schools in S.W. Sydney, and later was the Director of Schools in the Hills District in Sydney’s N-W. From 1995 to 2006 I had the privilege of being the Principal of Epping Boys’ High School, Sydney.

It is said that teachers are life-long learners. As I look back over my personal and working life it has certainly been the case for me. As a classroom teacher I learnt much from my students. As a Principal I learnt much from the teachers I sought to lead. As an Inspector and Director I gained invaluable insights

into those things that really mattered in schools. I viewed first hand practices that led to success and I saw behaviours that resulted in bringing a school to its knees. I believe it was these experiences that provided me with a rich tapestry on which to draw during my eleven years as Principal at EBHS.

In this brief article I seek not to canvass or decry the latest theories of management, but to draw together the strands of what seem to me, after 44 years, to be the essence of practical leadership. I would argue that Powell’s lessons are really timeless principles. There are several instances where I particularly liked his turn of phrase and I confess to borrowing a number of these gems.

May I share my *Ten Lessons of Leadership* with you.

### Lesson 1

**The day teachers and students stop bringing you their problems is the day they cease to regard you as their leader; they have either lost confidence in you, or concluded you do not care. Either case is a failure in Principalship.**

Teachers will cease to bring you their problems when:

1. you or your administrative staff erect barriers or establish filters that make access difficult; or
2. a climate is fostered where to seek advice from “the boss” is perceived as indicative of weakness or incompetence; or when
3. allocation of blame replaces genuine assistance in the search for rational solutions.

The climate for healthy problem solving is created when mistakes by others are turned from negatives into positive learning experiences. It is enhanced when the leader himself readily acknowledges mistakes, models problem analysis and engages in group problem solving.

**Question 1.**  
**Are you approachable?**

## Lesson 2

**An amazing amount of expert opinion and elitist theory crosses our desks daily. Remember “experts” often possess more data than judgement and “consultants” can be so inbred that they bleed like haemophiliacs when they are nicked by the real world.**

Read widely, listen to consultants, learn new skills, seek mentors but remember, leadership does not result from blind obedience to anyone. This lesson is a double edged sword. Equally we should not expect blind obedience from those we seek to lead. Encourage your team to challenge you. It is worth noting that the day you have a “yes man” on your staff one of you is redundant (and here I borrow one of Powell’s gems).

**Question 2a.**  
**Do you challenge expert and elite opinion?**

**Question 2b.**  
**Do your teachers feel comfortable enough to challenge you?**

## Lesson 3

**You do not know what you can get away with until you try.**

There are two philosophies in leadership:

One says;  
“If I have not explicitly been told **yes** to an idea, I can’t do it.”

The other says;  
“If I have not explicitly been told **no**, I can try it.”

The latter leads to creative, vibrant leadership. The former is characterised by dull maintenance of the status quo. Good Principals take risks. If you wait for permission to do everything you will likely do nothing.

Another aspect of this same lesson is the tendency some Principals have of waiting for 100% of the relevant data before they will act. In refusing to act until all the relevant facts are totally clear we may avoid risk, but we also replace action with analysis. Powell calls it “analysis paralysis”. You have no doubt heard it said that it is easier to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission. Try it, it works!

**Question 3.**  
**Do you suffer from Analysis Paralysis?**

## Lesson 4

**Never avoid looking below surface appearances for fear of what you may find. You cannot solve problems you do not know about.**

So many in leadership opt for the comfort of subscribing to the “If it ain’t broke don’t fix it” syndrome. Often this is a veiled excuse for laziness and lack of action.

This lesson fits well with lesson one. When you have open relationships and communication with teachers, students and other staff, they will draw your attention to matters that require fixing and of which you were unaware. You care for them; they watch for you.

**Question 4.**  
**Do you know or care what is really going on in your school?**

## Lesson 5

**Organisational Charts, Official Titles, Action Plans, Five - year Targets and Theories of Management, on their own, do not achieve anything. Caring is the glue that holds things together.**

Have you ever noticed that teachers will often readily commit to and emulate certain individuals, who on paper, have little or no status?. Why? Because they are perceived as talented caring people! Good Principals are not threatened by such people, they value and nurture them, because their pizzazz, passion, drive and genuine empathy is a powerful and positive influence in the school. Regardless of their position on the organisation chart or their official title they are key people in establishing a climate of achievement.

**Question 5.**  
**Do you gather talented, caring people around you, or do you slavishly adhere to the formal line of command?**

## Lesson 6

**Successful Principals are not overly dependent on the latest management fads and stereotypes - they have learnt the art of Situational Leadership.**

This lesson was graphically brought home to me some years ago when visiting a principal for the purpose of his annual Performance Management

“  
*It is worth noting that the day you have a “yes man” on your staff one of you is redundant*  
”

Review. Bill (not his real name) welcomed me and after pleasantries proudly produced a glossy *Five Year Plan*. I acknowledged it as being very professionally produced. I also recognised that it very closely reflected what was then regarded as the latest recipe for the *Self Managed School Plan*. Our conversation went something like this:

**Me:** I follow the plan Bill. It is well written and it comprehensively addresses all the major areas one would expect. Since you are now in your second year of this plan tell me what has happened so far.

**Bill:** We have created the eight core committees representing all the stakeholders. (The jargon was perfect.)

**Me:** Great Bill. However, I would like you to share with me what you regard as the most significant development that has taken place.

**Bill:** I scheduled meeting times and all eight committees have met fortnightly and here are the minutes of every action taken. (He handed me a very comprehensive file)

**Me:** The organisation is impressive Bill but what actually happened in terms of the quality of teaching, staff morale and student results?

This conversation continued as we probed and explored each facet of the plan. It soon became very obvious nothing had changed. Staff morale and the reputation of the school in the community was languishing. Student results were below standard. Some faculties were teaching from ten-year-old programs.

Bill had failed to grasp that the present situation in his school demanded innovative action, not incessant faculty talk producing glossy plans and window dressing. Bill's plan was an impeccable reflection of the latest theory of management in terms of process, jargon, rules, resource allocation and finances but it failed to result in any appreciable improvement in the key issues concerning the quality of teaching, staff morale and student engagement.

**Question 6.**  
Do your school plans reflect the real needs of your school community?

**Lesson 7**  
Never let your ego get so close to your position that when it goes, your ego and self worth go with it.

A healthy sense of "self" is important to all of us. Our sense of self worth is constantly developing from childhood through to old age. For example, the young Ricky Ponting lived entirely for cricket. However, by the time retirement came from representing Australian cricket and holding the Australian cricket captaincy, Ricky could see himself in other roles beyond cricket. Contrast this with several notable Olympic swimmers. Psychologists call this "ego differentiation", to emphasise the need to achieve positive self-concepts based on pursuits and interests beyond those of "the job". Ego differentiation is important to the role of school leadership.

Change in direction is an inevitable part of life and career. Sometimes it can be threatening and unpleasant, but always remember God has a habit of opening alternative doorways before you even realise the current one is closing. I have experienced this lesson in both church and secular employment. In both situations I was blessed with new challenges, new friends and increased job satisfaction.

**Question 7.**  
Is your self-value defined by your position?

**Lesson 8**  
Perpetual optimism is catching ; so is pessimism and cynicism.

Optimism is an attitude of mind; a way of looking at life and the big picture. This was exemplified by the Master Teacher when he asked, 'How many loaves and fishes do we have?' The response was 'not many; just a few.' 'Great,' said the Master Teacher, 'let's get to and share it all around.' And thousands went home that day filled and satisfied. Furthermore, there were ample leftovers! In other words, optimism amplifies and expands.

In all my years of experience I never saw a really successful pessimist and I never saw cynicism produce a positive result. What I have noticed great Principals are almost always great simplifiers. They can cut through argument, debate, political correctness, pessimism and cynicism. They have the knack of optimistically presenting simple, practical solutions that can be easily understood.

**Question 8.**  
Are you known for your simple optimistic solutions?

“Great Principals are almost always great simplifiers. They can cut through argument, debate, political correctness, pessimism and cynicism”

## Lesson 9

### The value of a “Critical Friend” is inestimable.

One of the most valuable lessons that I have learnt in my experience is the paramount importance of having a “critical friend”. A teacher, a parent, a deputy principal, a head of department or someone who understands your role and someone whom you trust and in whom you may confide. This special person needs to be someone you respect for their intelligence, judgement and capacity to anticipate. They need to have drive and initiative, but above all they need to be someone who is loyal and acts with integrity not self-interest. When recruiting, the successful Principal has attempted to surround himself/herself with such people rather than showponies with unbridled ambition.

#### Question 9.

Have you cultivated a loyal colleague who can act as a “critical friend”?

## Lesson 10

### The Principal need not be a grim workaholic; rather, have “fun” in your command.

The hectic pace of school leadership sometimes threatens to overwhelm and seems to demand we run at a breakneck speed. Resist this pressure. Spend time with family. Spend time with teachers. Get to know as many of your students as is possible. Principals are not pretentious professionals who occasionally descend from their ivory towers to pontificate, gesticulate and otherwise try to influence the performance of an imagined grand orchestra. They are people who care about and spend time with their teachers and students. Use that time to introduce fun into your administration.

A last word. A Principal’s role, like any leadership role, will at times be lonely. Sometimes the need for tough unambiguous decisions may temporarily isolate you from the rank and file. Perhaps, for how long, depends on whether your school community perceives you as a leader who cares for people or majors in tasks and structure. **TEACH**

#### Question 10.

Did you have any fun today?

## Editors Note

A suggestion (agreed to by the author):

1. Copy this page and cut off the My Leadership - 10+ Personal Reflections.

2. Place the list in a personal space where you will be frequently reminded of these important principles.
3. Assess your leadership traits by creating a score based on a Likert-like scale for each item – Infrequently = 1, Sometimes = 2, Usually = 3, Always = 4.
4. Include progressive personal and collegial assessments in your performance audit.

### My Leadership – 10+ Personal Reflections

- |  |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Am I approachable?  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 2. Do I challenge expert and elite opinion?                                | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Do my teachers feel comfortable enough to challenge me?                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 3. Do I suffer from Analysis Paralysis?                                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 4. Do I know or care what is really going on in my school?                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 5. Do I gather talented caring people around me?                           | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Do I slavishly adhere to the formal line of command?                       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 6. Do my school plans reflect the real needs of the school community?      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 7. Is my self-value defined by my position?                                | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 8. I am known for my simple optimistic solutions?                          | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 9. Have I cultivated a loyal colleague who can act as a “critical friend”? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 10. Did I have any fun today?  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

#### \*The key:

Infrequently = 1, Sometimes = 2, Usually = 3, Always = 4.

“Principals are not pretentious professionals who ... pontificate, gesticulate and otherwise try to influence the ... grand orchestra. They are people who care about and spend time with their teachers and students ... to introduce fun”