In the midst of the global pandemic we are reminded of the phrase from the famous opening paragraph of Charles Dickens’ novel, A Tale of Two Cities, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” I’m sure this paradox resonates with all of us, as we consider the impact of COVID-19 on both our personal and professional lives.

It is in the spirit of the theme, In Principle, that I reflect on how the AIS Leadership Centre team at the ANSW, has responded to this paradox during 2020. In particular, what has the ‘best of times’ meant for delivering on our strategic intent: to develop courageous navigators for the emerging future, leading from head and heart?

In the context of our work, we have seen the worlds in which the people we serve, from teachers to school principals immeasurably disrupted, their school schedules dramatically changed, and their school communities probed to think differently about how learning is prased and how schooling is shaped. And from those conversations, we have seen and heard teachers and leaders at all levels meet these challenges with integrity, agility and professionalism. We admire the work they do and continue to strive to support them as best we can.

What have we learned so far from this rapidly changing environment? How can we leverage the experiences of disruption and school leaders’ newly revealed capabilities, into leadership learning journeys into the future? What next in professional learning for leadership?

The impact of COVID-19 has triggered us to re-examine both ‘What we do’ but more importantly, ‘how we do it’ and, to question our assumptions about the efficacy of the current approach and its capacity to engage, challenge, stretch and support leaders in their leadership learning. Our examination challenged our previously held assumptions of what quality practice in leadership learning looks like and called us to experiment, evaluate, research, re-design, act and re-evaluate at an accelerated pace.

As such, as we look off the year, our beliefs have shifted and have been re-shaped. Yes, leadership can be learned effectively but only if the leadership learning is highly contextualised to the alternate format.

Challenges and Opportunities

One of the challenges of managing remote learning fatigue. We have an innate human need to ‘syncronise’ with each other when communicating and it takes a lot more work to seek the usual cues we need online. And we don’t realise it until we are restless and worn out after a virtual hour. So, we shortened the day using a ‘flipped classroom’ approach, with content viewed or read prior to the session. This created more space for participants to connect, express and engage with each other, thus leveraging the individual and collective learning that the pandemic experience generated.

Equity and opportunity to contribute are key determiners of engagement. Breakout rooms, therefore, called for intentionally crafted disciplined dialogue protocols to set the expectations for the collaborative conversations and to foster participant voice within them.

The ability to transform the hearts and minds of others, to connect through joint action and spaces for ideas and thinking to evolve organically, requires psychological safety. We fostered this by adding 10 minutes of ‘unstructured time’ at the start of the session in which participants were asked to share a positive story and/or share something they are grateful for. To check-in with how people are feeling, we used quick pulse surveys. To convey the sense of presence for others, techniques were used that ‘felt the present’s facial warmth and through this, their humanity were used alongside a posture of calm authority. Psychological safety was also created by being explicit about the style, tone and norms to be used at the start of each session. Naming this up front removed unconscious that can be sources of anxiety.

Strategy development processes using innovation methodology require deep, broad, directed and fast paced collaboration, an interesting and exciting challenge in the online space. Rather than defer, waiting for the ‘ideal’ time for this work, we created highly related, well-directed, fast-paced disciplined facilitation processes, led remotely by the Leadership Centre team. School leaders embraced the challenge of forging ahead with this important work online, with high levels of energy, engagement, and responsibility for the work and each other.

What endures?

While flexible in design and format, we held to our core philosophy, that leadership learning is an ongoing inner journey of self-knowledge and discovery, and an outer journey of knowledge and skill acquisition, and to our principles of practice.

Knowing oneself provides stability in the face of change -a deep understanding of one’s emotions, strengths and weaknesses, needs and drives, sources of frustration (and reaction to problems) and engagement in self- transformation (Jokinen, 2005). Knowing who you are -your deepest purpose- gives you both clarity and resilience. As Frankl urated in 1944, “He who knows the why for his existence will be able to bear almost any hour.”

Our evidence base affirms that the inner journey of leadership learning is an engaging self, which has been particularly important in these challenging times. McCulla and Degenhardt’s (2015) research involving participant learning in the AIS Leadership Centre’s National Flagship Program discovered that because of the sustaining nature of the inner journey outcomes, it was given precedence over developing any specific knowledge or skills required to lead and manage a school. In my own doctoral research into the longer term impact and outcomes of a principal preparation program, there was strong recognition of the way the ‘inner’, personal journey and the ‘outer journey’ of skill and knowledge complemented and interwove to shape understandings and conceptualisations of leadership as a whole and sustained participants in their roles regardless of the professional and personal challenges they experienced (Davies, 2020).

The future

So, what does the future hold for leadership development for school leaders -what we do, how we do it and why?

What we do continues to evolve as we support leaders to be courageous navigators for the emerging future, learning (from head and heart). The enduring focus off the inner journey is critical to our ongoing work at all career stages. And we learned that the online environment, if carefully constructed, enables quality learning in both. Any concerns that this could not be achieved has given way to optimism. A timely and relevant expansion of the inner journey takes us into consideration -Neuroleadership and Theory U, an impactful transformational methodology for solving adaptive challenges at a personal level, (ways of being, connecting to the higher aspects of self) and at systemic level (a framework for organisational thinking).

The outer journey attention to futures and foresight knowledge, skills and understanding, crisis leadership and risk management, and the Adaptive Leadership Framework to support individuals and organisations adapt to changing environments and effectively respond to recurring problems, continues to strengthen. Our theoretical framework, the Australian Professional Standard for Principals, is practiced through a future focused lens, the ultimate outcome being successful learners, confident, creative and actively informed learners, confident, creative and actively informed citizens who are ready and prepared for the future world of work and life.

References


Biographies

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In the Dean of the AIS Leadership Centre. Since 2012, Jennifer has held the positions of Associate Dean and Leadership Consultant at the AIS Leadership Centre. In these roles she has worked with school leaders within the independent sector of New South Wales, as well as nationally and internationally. Prior to 2012, Jennifer led her own leadership consulting business developing and facilitating programs aimed at building individual and team leadership capability, change leadership, strategy and organisational sustainability in both education and corporate sectors.

Jennifer holds a PhD in Educational Leadership, a Master of Business Leadership and Management (with distinction) from the Graduate School of Business, Curtin University WA and is an accredited Coach with Growth Coaching International.