

Educational leaders - when to breathe, when to push

As a male drawing on the much-used metaphor of birth as a narrative device, I realize that I open myself up to potential derision from my female colleagues. The truth is, I could not resist borrowing the motif from Australian philosopher and theologian James Thwaites. In a chapter on transitional leadership from his book *Renegotiating the Church Contract* (2001), Thwaites contrasts the juxtaposition of pain and new life as essential processes through which we must engage. He states, “This primal journey of letting go and trusting pain to give us life is one we must all take time and again.”

Thwaites’ alarming principle of leadership, strikes at the heart of a dilemma for leaders in education. The rapidly shifting landscape of higher education, calls out for radical, courageous and strong leaders to step up to the significant challenges ahead, but also in the knowledge that the pain that comes with such change will be no less painful than anticipated. As with most good leadership, much of the decision-making needs to be made in less than ideal circumstances and into a context that is often complex and unforgiving. For education administrators textbook responses often become devoid of meaning in the crucible of real life, especially as we make crucial work-based decisions of when to breathe, and when to push.

The backdrop to this reality, which spans the sector both sides of the Atlantic, is a forced exploration of the fundamental question; what is education for? This questioning could also be seen to extend to the student population it serves, as the worth of a university education shifts in value and status and student debt rises to an all time high.

Attempts at an answer involve challenging traditionally held notions of how learning occurs, how teaching should be organized and what are the best frameworks for higher education to thrive. These contexts exist in very real ways as anyone who has taught a class of students will attest. Traditional paradigms of the lecturer with the keys to a body of knowledge unlocking them in the lecture theatre to eager sponge-like undergraduates taking copious notes, is now only myth. Increasingly, faculty have to deal with short attention spans, 'customer' expectations and pressure to engage in an 'infotainment' university culture. One could point to other changes in the traditional higher education (HE) landscape such as increased regulation (quality, standards and performance targets), and large student populations that legislate against intimacy between academics and their students. The increasingly perceived repositioning of HE as simply another service provider in the marketplace has also been instrumental in shifting campus culture from a collegiate model of interdependence towards a business style top-down management model. Some feel that the balance has tipped too far in favor of students, with websites dedicated to 'rate my professor' cruelly lambasting any academic who dares to fall short of expectations in the classroom. Others institutions seek to retreat to an elitist ivory tower in order to defend itself against the rapidly changing mode of education. British Government advisor Richard Lambert exemplifies what he considers to be crucial in offering brilliant education when he stated at a recent lecture, "Oxford University is a national jewel, one of the great centres of learning in Europe and among the dozen outstanding universities of the world. It has three extraordinary assets: its unique approach to teaching, its scholarly resources, and its exceptional research." It is revealing that there is no mention here of the students whatsoever. Quite a contrast to

Chip Anderson's (2004) call to a revolution in education in which the focus is on drawing out inherent gifts and strengths latent in the student body. This indeed would be a unique approach to teaching, where, to quote Anderson, "The seeds of greatness required to achieve to levels of excellence are already within the students we want to help." (p.14)

But what kind of institutions will be in a position to facilitate such a radical education, and what kind of leaders will lead them? Faced with such a yawning gap between rapidly changing higher education, and the exciting possibilities, what role could a so-called strengths approach play with those of us administrators committed to fully engaging with this so-called revolution?

My own introduction to strengths and my strengths themes profile came three years ago (Communication, Activator, Ideation, Strategic, and Connectedness). I experienced the now typical quick and high peak of connecting with the possibilities that strengths offered, followed by the equally dramatic dip in wondering how to process this priceless gift. I felt like the owner of some shiny new piece of technology, but without the instruction booklet. I tweaked and fiddled with then various knobs and dials knowing that I was so close to some magical moment, but was left frustrated and confused by this unfulfilled promise of wonder. Like most early adopters, I experienced the rush of discovery alongside the cruel bump to earth of wondering how to process what I had. To suggest that strengths are 'better caught than taught' would be to only describe a small part of my own journey. It is true to say however, that it has been a necessarily slow trek with built-in timeout moments designed to take in the vistas and splendour of my new terrain. Given this time, I have increasingly become more intentionally aware of how such strengths operate – not just in isolation, but more importantly how they function

together in tandem. It was this that began to slowly make sense in my role as an administrator in the department where I currently work, and to convince me of the day-to-day potential of living a life built around my strengths. One of the more obvious ways that I was able to impact the culture of the department was to inject a sense of identity. It was clear to me that while students had an understanding of the practical course expectations required of them, they seemed to lack a certain vision and ownership of their undergraduate programmes. I was able to use both my Communication theme alongside my Strategic and Connectedness themes in implementing a plan to create a greater sense of community amongst the cohort. This was achieved by setting up a 'buddy' scheme where students were partnered with their peers right across all years of the cohort. The scheme was accompanied by initial briefings from me to set up the project with the older students mentoring the younger. This had the effect of galvanizing the cohort with a greater flow of ideas and practical support between the different year groups. The project was so enthusiastically received by the students, that we adopted it as a model for the various other undergraduate programmes across the School. This small but significant window into how my strengths operate together was to prove invaluable as it tuned my strengths radar up a notch and made me so much more conscious of the practical transition from having a strengths profile, to seeing a living translation on a cold Monday morning in my workplace. This is a small example of me engaging with more intent with something that had been historically pretty instinctive, and yet at the same time somewhat mysterious. Strengths give us a language and an acute awareness of what we have already unconsciously known from quite a young age. There is a significant surge in confidence

however, that comes with such a revelation and development of our inherent gifts and talents.

The other significant benefit of walking with colleagues on a journey of strengths discovery, is how much more tolerant of each other people become. Whereas in the past my Activator strength would clash horribly with my more Deliberative colleagues, I found myself valuing their more considered approach. It would be stretching things to suggest that unbridled harmony has broken out in the School Executive meetings, but a certain appreciation of the different and complex configurations of my colleagues' personal strengths has emerged. It has also led to a blurring of duties in some cases, as we identify and pick up projects and tasks off each other normally confined to our much defined job descriptions – again something that had been absent historically.

It would be naïve to suggest that a quick exchange of each other's strengths profile would transform how administrators address the complicated educational landscape described above. It would also be idealistic to expect that everyone we work with, become converts to a total strengths lifestyle experience – although not implausible. But as Chip Anderson (2002) said in concluding his manual for student strengths development, "Learning about talents and developing them into strengths so that you reach your maximum potential isn't just good for you; it's good for everyone." Nobody says that these journeys we are all on comes without pain, but ask any mother who has the experience of birth fresh in the memory, and they will tell you it is simply a fine balance of knowing when to breathe, and when to push.

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References

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