

Leadership with resonance



Challenging times call for new qualities in leadership. **Steve Munby** of the National College for School Leadership believes the most important is resonance

Every year I visit many schools, children's centres and local authorities. I speak to leaders at all levels about their challenges and hear about their worries and their successes. Over the past 12 months I have become increasingly convinced that what is needed most of all at the moment is what I want to call resonant leadership.

When you strike a musical triangle wrongly it judders and makes a horrible noise, but if you strike it well it resonates perfectly and a pure note rings out. Resonant leaders are able to strike a pure note, so that they, their teams and their organisations resonate.

Rather than forging ahead on their own, resonant leaders are more like conductors of orchestras – they energise those around them. This is particularly important during uncertain times when there is a greater risk of confusion and dissonance. Knowing which notes to strike as we respond to the scale of change becomes crucial, as is the ability to keep those we lead motivated and focused on what will best serve the interests of children and young people. This, I believe, is the kind of leadership that is needed more than ever in the coming months and years.

Key characteristics

I think there are five key characteristics of resonant leaders.

1. Resonant leaders know themselves and develop their own leadership style

There is no one model that works. The key is to be tuned into the kind of leader that you really are, to know your own strengths and weaknesses, to develop the leadership that works for you in the context that you are in – not what worked for someone else who is a different kind of leader in a different context.

Although we can learn a lot from working with and alongside great leaders, we should not aim to become exact copies of them, but instead strive to develop our own leadership signature style. Each of us has our own personal way of making change happen – our credo. It is a combination of our skills, our personality, the context that we find ourselves in and the core values and beliefs that we hold. We all need to develop and refine our own signature leadership style. Of course, if the context changes then we may need to amend our leadership style.

Resonant leaders are authentic and true to themselves. In a world of greater autonomy and diversity and, indeed, uncertainty, the leaders who will be successful will need to know themselves very well indeed.

2. Resonant leaders motivate and energise others

As with the conductor of an orchestra, our role as resonant leaders is to help those we lead to understand their connection to the bigger picture and the part they play in it, to be energy creators and to help all those we lead to work together to create a resonant culture.

How often have you come across a person who, invariably when you speak with them, makes you feel so energised? It is a positive, enriching experience and that is what resonant leaders do again and again.

Resonant leaders are exceptionally good at prioritising their presence and at demonstrating empathy at the right time and in the right context. Now this can come across as intuitive, but I also think that this is a finely tuned skill that really can be practised and learned.

If we are to give the best of ourselves as leaders we have to make judgements all the time as to where our presence is most needed. And once we have made that judgement we need to make sure we are 100 per cent there. The danger is that if we are only half present then we end up not really being present at all.

Resonant leadership is also about ensuring that the organisation is set up to get the best out of people and to motivate them. It is about how we make sure that everyone is tuned in to the ways of working in the organisation. The people who work for us are not stupid: they are smart. If groups of staff behave in ways we think are inappropriate or unhelpful, there is invariably a good reason for it. They are doing the smart thing under the circumstances.

What we have to do is ensure that they experience a greater sense of achievement and of purpose if they choose the option that is best for the organisation. Our job as leaders is to create an environment with resonance, like an orchestra, where everyone knows their part and plays their part well. If we want to change behaviours, we need to make it more interesting and more personally rewarding to play the new tune rather than the old one.

3. Resonant leaders focus on improvement

Knowing yourself and motivating others will get you so far but unless you achieve better outcomes it will all be for nothing. In education, our leadership is not for its own sake but to make a difference to the lives of children and young people and that is, rightly, how our leadership should be judged.

I think it is time to speak in praise of improvement rather than transformation. Of course an organisation that does not innovate will die – but so will an organisation that innovates too much, especially when that innovation comes from outside rather than being generated from within.

Now there is a balance to be struck here. We must continue to look outwards and to seek new ways of solving problems. And there are cases when dramatic transformation is the only sensible and reasonable solution. But too often we can get enticed by the next new initiative because it is exciting and different.

So what we need, I believe, are two things. First of all we need more evidence-based policy development



– founded on hard evidence of what works. That is why I am so excited about the development of teaching school alliances in this country. The whole idea behind them is that developments in the future will be led by practitioners, based on what works and what has proved to be excellent practice – practitioner-led research, continuing professional development and leadership development.

Secondly we need to focus more on the development of staff to improve the quality of teaching. We need to ask ourselves how seriously are we taking teacher development in our schools – how far are we focusing on the detailed slog of improving quality in the classroom or are we too easily sidetracked?

Building on the best

Resonant leaders seek to build on the best practice. They work hard to recognise the potential of those they lead and empower them further – making sure they are given sufficient challenge and the necessary confidence. But resonant leaders also readily challenge underperformance in a robust and rigorous way. They make sure that pupils' interests are not sacrificed for the comfort of adults.

Interestingly, our research tells us that those in their second headship are more likely to move at pace on performance management and accountability systems and to take tougher decisions more quickly. That tells me that effective performance management is as much about confidence and skill as it is about knowing the procedures.

In our new approach to the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), we propose to revitalise our guidance and training for prospective heads on performance management and we are also building in even more time for prospective heads to work alongside a head in another school, observing effective performance in action. We are making a commitment that all those who complete NPQH will be competent at performance management.

So we need to focus more on improvement than on transformation, identify the bright spots in our organisations and build on them, focus on developing capacity to improve teaching and learning, and be excellent at developing an effective performance management culture. What is more, that improvement culture will be even more successful if there is a strong emphasis on collaboration.



4. Resonant leaders are collaborative

If we want all schools to improve then we need to be outward-facing, resonant leaders developing a deeper, more powerful sound not just in our own organisations but across a much wider group. We have to create, as it were, a bigger orchestra and enable that larger group to play in tune.

There is a concern that 21,000 schools and academies and 3,000 children's centres doing their own thing without working together may create discordance in the system, may not make use of the best practice and talent effectively and, ultimately, may not serve our children and their families well.

In spite of the challenges, whatever happens, we must not step back from being collaborative. First of all, because leadership is a tough job and collaboration helps us be personally and professionally resilient. Also, resonant leaders recognise that working with others will ultimately make their organisations stronger and more effective in the face of challenges.

I think the growing number of chains of academies and hard federations offers great opportunities for leaders and for the system. I am a fan of these more formal collaborations. They make the best use of good leadership and expertise, they tend to lead to stronger governance, they can open up exciting opportunities for succession planning and career progression and they can help to secure efficiencies in the system. My hope is that more national leaders of education (NLEs) and academy converters will consider sponsoring an academy as this agenda develops.

New collaborations

In addition, many schools and local authorities are looking at how they can develop new collaborative arrangements as part of a trust or federation or partnership. Conversations about new forms of collaboration are increasingly taking place all over the country as we move towards the exciting prospect of a sector-led school improvement strategy, with school leaders in the driving seat and helping to shape the future of the system.

There are many examples of collaboration prospering around the country, but I do worry about complacency. Some leaders are waiting for someone else to create the new collaborative culture for them, or they are carrying on as if all the old systems and support networks will still be in place. But it is no use waiting around for collaboration to happen. It is time to be proactive. However, we also need to be careful and to choose the right kind of collaboration, which will work for our context.

What can we do individually and collectively to help to create an effective collaborative culture across the wider system?

First, the mission and motive have to be based on moral purpose and about doing our best for children and young people. Collaborations and chains will not have lasting support if they are about empire building or self-service.

Secondly, we should collaborate as partners – both as learners and as sharers of our own practice. No matter

how good we perceive our own organisation to be – even if we are a national support school or a teaching school or a successful chain of academies – we should welcome new ideas and challenge from our peers.

Collaboration can also make us better placed to compare our achievements with those in similar circumstances and endeavour to be as good if not better than those around us. In the City Challenge regions of London, Greater Manchester and the Black Country, as well as in many other localities, I have seen families of schools data used really effectively to support collaborative improvement. As David Hargreaves has termed it, this is “collaboration with a competitive edge”.

We want to do more to untap the potential of collaboration. That is why teaching school alliances and the new specialist leader of education (SLE) role are going to be such an important step.

5. Resonant leaders create a narrative that others can believe in

Our colleagues must believe that under our leadership we can take them to a better place. That requires a narrative that is both positive and achievable. Our narrative must have resonance with those we lead – it must make sense to them in their context and in the changing world that they are experiencing. For us as leaders it requires us to see the big picture and the changes that are coming, to look again at our context and our community and to create a vision that provides real meaning. It must create resonance out of potential dissonance.

This is very tough because the context is rapidly changing. The good thing is that if we are resonant leaders and we have built up trust and empathy with our colleagues then they will understand if we need a little time to develop the right new story for the future. The other great thing is that we don't have to go up on the mountaintop on our own to receive a blinding flash and come down again with a new vision. We can develop that new vision and new narrative with our colleagues.

The best leaders are good at stepping back to enable others to step up. As Tom Peters says: “Leaders don't create followers: they create more leaders.”

It has been a year of tumultuous change, and the pace shows no sign of slackening. In complex, fast-moving times leadership has never been more important, but the lone leader forging ahead in a heroic manner is unlikely to meet the challenge. It's the leaders who energise, motivate, collaborate and bring their organisations along with them who offer the leadership we need. It's time for leadership with resonance.

Steve Munby is Chief Executive of the National College for School Leadership: www.nationalcollege.org.uk. This article is based on his speech to the National College's annual conference, held in Birmingham in June. For the full text, go to www.nationalcollege.org.uk/events/conference2011.