The Seven Principles of Sustainable Leadership

by

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A school district puts an heroic principal into an underperforming school - then sees all his work unravel within months of his subsequent promotion. A charismatic leader accepts a principalship in a nearby school and takes all his teacher-leader disciples with him. A principal of a magnet school boosts her institution's reputation by attracting top students from all around the city, but robs the nearby neighborhood school of its best talent which sees its own performance then plummet. Teachers in a high school watch four principals pass through their school in five years and conclude they can easily wait out all other principals and their change agendas in the future. A school district confronts a highly unionized school by assigning a succession of increasingly authoritarian principals to it, only to see the union's resistance to change become even more entrenched.

These examples of unsustainable leadership and improvement efforts are not hypothetical. They emerged in a Spencer Foundation-funded study of educational change over three decades in eight high schools in the US and Canada, as seen through the eyes of over 200 teachers and administrators who worked there in the 1970s, 80s and 90s (Hargreaves & Goodson 2004). This study has shown that one of the key forces influencing change or continuity in the long term is leadership, leadership sustainability and leadership succession. Most processes and practices of school leadership, our study shows, create temporary, localized flurries of change but little lasting or widespread improvement.

There are exceptions, though. From the first day of their appointment, some leaders thought hard about how they would identify and groom their successors. One founding leader of an innovative school was careful not to raid the best teachers from surrounding institutions, and avoided inflicting injustice or fuelling jealousy by doing so. One or two courageous leaders responded to high stakes testing by improving learning for all in the belief that raised scores would follow, rather than letting an obsession with results stifle the learning process. These leaders did more than manage change or implement reform. They pursued and modeled sustainable leadership.

Sustainable leadership and improvement are more than matters of mere endurance, of making things last. We define sustainable leadership, in line with the environmental field, in the following way.

Sustainable leadership matters, spreads and lasts. It is a shared responsibility, that does not unduly deplete human or financial resources, and that cares for and avoids exerting negative damage on the surrounding educational and community environment. Sustainable leadership has an activist engagement with the forces that affect it, and builds an educational environment of organizational diversity that promotes cross-fertilization of good ideas and successful practices in communities of shared learning and development.

This definition suggests seven principles of sustainable leadership that we will illustrate from the Spencer study.

    1. Sustainable leadership creates and preserves sustaining learning.

    In education, the first principle of sustainability is to develop something that is itself sustaining. To sustain means to nourish. Sustaining learning is therefore learning that matters, that lasts and that engages students intellectually, socially and emotionally. It is not achievement results, but the learning behind them that matters most. The prime responsibility of all educational leaders is to sustain learning (Glickman 2002; Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003).

    Talisman Park's new principal responded to a newly mandated, tenth grade literacy test (on which graduation would depend) by trying to shield his experienced staff from its time-consuming effects. With his staff, he decided that the most expedient way to get good results was to boost the achievement of students who, pretests showed, fell just below the passing grade. While the strategy made the schools results look good; those students who really needed help with literacy were cast by the wayside.

    Meanwhile, the principal of a neighboring, more ethnically diverse high school with a high number English-as-a-second-language students, did not concentrate on the literacy test in the short term, but on how to improve literacy for all students in the long run. Teachers worked together to audit and improve their literacy practices and focused for an entire month with parents and the community on improving literacy learning for everyone. While the immediate results were not impressive, by the second year, the school scored above the district mean, and by the third, it had become the district's number two performer, well ahead of more privileged Talisman Park, which had opted for the 'quick-fix'. Paradoxically, sustainable leadership that promotes sustaining

learning goes beyond temporary gains in achievement scores to create lasting improvements in learning that are also measurable.

2. Sustainable leadership secures success over time.

Leadership succession is the last challenge of leadership (1). It is the challenge of letting go, moving on, and planning for one's own obsolescence. Sustainable improvements are not fleeting changes that disappear when their champions have left. Sustainable leadership is not achieved by charismatic leaders whose shoes are too big to fill. Instead, it spreads beyond individuals in chains of influence that connect the actions of leaders to their predecessors and successors.

 Leadership succession events are almost always emotionally charged with feelings of expectation, apprehension, abandonment, loss or relief (Hart 1993). Frequent and repeated successions aggravate these anxieties. Sustainable leadership therefore plans and prepares for succession, not as an afterthought, but from the first day of a leader's appointment. It also regulates the rate and frequency of successions so that a staff does not suffer from the cynicism that is brought on by succession fatigue (Fink & Brayman, in press).

Our Spencer study offered rare glimpses of thoughtful and effective succession management - both in more innovative schools. One school built on its ebullient and optimistic principal's success in forging a democratically developed school improvement plan and maintaining the school's long tradition of being student-centered and caring, by grooming his assistant principal to replace him when he retired. The founding principal of another innovative school, established as a learning organization, also persuaded the district that his assistant should be prepared to succeed him and further the school's distinctive mission.

In general, though, across three decades of leadership, our study showed that few things in education succeed less than leadership succession. Charismatic leaders are followed by lesser successors who cannot maintain the momentum of improvement. Leaders who turn around underperforming schools are prematurely transferred or promoted before their improvements have had a chance to stick.

Stewart Heights school had been drifting for years. Its long-serving staff were nostalgic for its days as a 'village school' and had never faced the challenge of its absorption by urban development and significantly increased cultural diversity. The school's principal in the early 1990s confessed that "one of the difficulties I found for my

personal approach to leadership was that I didn't have a particular direction or goal for my school". He just wanted to buffer his teachers from outside forces so they could concentrate on the classroom. This principal's retirement created an opportunity for discontinuity, not continuity. So the district appointed dynamic, experienced and somewhat abrasive Bill Matthews to replace him.

Matthews believed strongly that students came first and communicated a sense of clear expectation and relentless determination to provide "a service to kids and the community" so as to make students feel more included, and parents feel more welcome. By the end of Matthews' third year, after curriculum changes, school improvement planning, restructuring of the guidance process and the creation of a more welcoming physical environment in the school, levels of student and parent satisfaction with the school increased dramatically. Suddenly, though, Matthews was promoted to a district leadership role. With leadership shortages emerging everywhere across the district, his assistants were transferred as well.

Into this chaos, the district parachuted first-time principal, Jerry West. While West wanted to feel his way carefully, a newly mandated reform agenda was gathering pace. So West and his unprepared assistants concentrated on implementation more than improvement. Everything Matthews had achieved in school improvement was undone within months. Traditional power blocs such as the department heads' group that had dominated before Matthews' arrival reasserted their authority, because West needed their support to ensure compliance with the government's subject-based mandates. The School Climate Committee that, under Matthews, had started to change the school's practices to support students more, saw powerful senior teachers impose a regime of strict student behavior codes under West. Like a deer in the headlights, West's seeming lack of decisiveness in this new reform context led some teachers to regard him and his assistants as ineffectual. As one long serving teacher commented, "Nice people. Can't cope".

Within just three years, West was moved again. In a school that had now seen four principals in six years, staff had become very cynical. This revolving door principalship (MacMillan, 2000), or carousel of leadership succession (Hargreaves, Moore, Fink, Brayman and White, 2003) is becoming increasingly common in high-stakes, reform-driven climates that are coinciding with a demographically-induced loss of 'Boomer' generation leaders through retirement (Educational Research Service 1998; Association of California School Administrators, 2001).

Sustainable leadership demands that serious attention be paid to leadership succession. Successful succession is achieved by grooming successors where there is a need for continuity, by keeping successful leaders in schools longer when they are

making great strides in promoting learning, by resisting the temptation to search for irreplaceable charismatic heroes to be the saviors of our schools, by requiring all district and school improvement plans to include succession plans, and by slowing down the rate of repeated successions so that teachers do not cynically decide to 'wait out' all their leaders.

3. *Sustainable leadership sustains the leadership of others*.

One way for leaders to leave a lasting legacy is to ensure it is developed with and shared by others. Leadership succession therefore means more than grooming principals' successors. It means distributing leadership throughout the school's professional community - so it can carry the torch once the principal has gone, and soften the blow of principal succession (Spillane, Halverson and Drummond, 2001)

The founding principal of Durant alternative high school in a US 'rust -belt' city believed that if the school's original vision of fostering independent learning in a range of real-life settings was to survive in a climate of considerable public scrutiny, it had to be shared by teachers, students and the parent community. The principal emphasized dialogue and shared decision-making, and the staff came to appreciate that "we were all administrators and we all shared the administration". Long after his retirement, the teachers and community continue to resist the standardizing policies of the district and the state, holding fast to their founding vision by agitating for waivers for their distinctive program.

Durant's neighbor, Sheldon High School experienced the full effects of white flight to the suburbs and to magnet school competitors from the early 1980s. It saw its racial balance and intake of students with special needs shift dramatically as a result. Not only did the largely white teaching staff feel frustrated in the face of these changes, they also found themselves shut out of important school decisions by a succession of autocratic leaders.

As an outlet for their frustrations and leadership impulses, teachers turned increasingly to their union. The more fractious the union became, the more successive principals "dug in" - each one appointed with the idea they could "stand up" to it. The resulting standoff led to the school's almost complete inability to respond effectively to its changing student population, as teachers decried lack of disciplinary support from the principal's office, and refused to change their own traditional practices.

These two scenarios show that sustainable leadership is not just the responsibility of individuals. In a highly complex world, no one leader, institution or nation can control

everything without help (Fullan 2001). Sustainable leadership is a distributed necessity and a shared responsibility.

 4. Sustainable leadership addresses issues of social justice.

Sustainable leadership benefits all students and schools - not just a few at the expense of the rest. Sustainable leadership is sensitive to how lighthouse, magnet or charter schools and their leaders can leave others in the shadows, and how privileged communities can be tempted to skim the cream off the local leadership pool. Sustainable leadership is an interconnected process. It recognizes and takes responsibility for the fact that schools affect one another in webs of mutual influence (Baker and Foote, in press). In this respect, sustainability and succession are inextricably tied up with issues of social justice**.**

For instance, the school in our study that was established as a learning organization took great care not to raid all the best teachers, leaders and students from schools around it. In consultation with the school district and other high school principals, its principal operated a quota system so as not to draw disproportionately from any one school or age group of teachers in the district. By attending to the needs of other schools, the principal not only exercised responsibility for social justice, but also avoided inviting envy and resentment from neighboring schools.

 By comparison, the one magnet school in our study prospered at the expense of its neighbors. Developed in the late 80s to stem the tide of white flight out of the city by pursuing high standards and selecting appropriate students and teachers from other schools in the district, the school came to be described by U.S. News as one of the top 150 high schools in the United States. Some of the school's high achieving students were drawn from a neighboring school. Once called the 'Jewel of the District', this second school now described itself ironically as the 'Special Education Magnet' - with low attendance, high violence problems, and a standardized curriculum that robbed teachers of their social mission and professional discretion. By concentrating excellence in specialized pockets and trying to halt suburban flight, the district created nothing less than an apartheid of school improvement (Hargreaves 2003) - with high standards, authentic learning and flexible teaching for the more privileged magnet schools and their teachers, and soulless standardization for the rest.

Sustainable leadership is therefore not only about maintaining improvement in one's own school. It is about being responsible to the schools and students that one's own actions affect in the wider environment. It is about social justice.

5. *Sustainable leadership develops rather than depletes human and material resources*.

Sustainable leadership provides intrinsic rewards and extrinsic incentives that attract and retain the best and brightest of the leadership pool; and it provides time and opportunity for leaders to network, learn from and support each other, as well as coach and mentor their successors. Sustainable leadership is thrifty without being cheap. It carefully husbands its resources in developing the talents of all its educators rather than lavishing rewards on selecting and rotating a few already-proven stars.

In all the schools in our study, reform demands, resource depletion and a resulting rush to retirement have created rapid turnover in principals and assistants along with devastating reductions in the numbers of assistant principals and middle level leaders such as department heads. In addition, school district support from consultants, assistant superintendents and other officials has been dramatically downsized, leaving principals feeling overwhelmed and alone. Cultures of supervision and personal support for school leaders have been replaced by impersonal contracts of test-based accountability.

Janice Burnley was the new principal of Lord Byron high school. After a promising beginning, she was confronted with a reform environment that led to the school losing one of its two assistant principals, five of its nine department heads, two of its three guidance counselors, and half of its special education staff. Most worrying to Burnley was her inability to support the eleven new teachers in the school. "I feel responsible for the whole world", she exclaimed. By the end of her second year, her promising beginning had faded into an exhausting grind of management by memo, amid standardized reform demands that largely conflicted with her own values.

Sustainable leadership systems know how to take care of their leaders and how to get leaders to take care of themselves. Teachers and school leaders who are 'burned out' by excessive demands and diminishing resources have neither the physical energy nor the emotional capacity to develop professional learning communities (Byrne, 1994). The emotional health of leaders is a scarce environmental resource. Leadership that drains its leaders dry is not leadership that will last. Unless reformers and policy-makers care for leaders' personal and professional selves, they will engineer short-term gains only by mortgaging the entire future of leadership.

Even the most motivated and committed leaders can only sustain themselves for so long. Principal Watson had built the basis of a collaborative learning community at Talisman Park school but was suddenly transferred after barely three years to another, leaving her grieving for the work that had still to be done. She took the same

inspirational drive and commitment to community-building to her next school but the new reform context of resource reductions and unrealistic implementation timelines meant there was no more system support for collaboration. So Watson was now reduced to 'modeling optimism' (Blackmore, 1996). The emotional strain of trying to remain positive in depressing times eventually took its toll and after months of stress she retired early to seek fulfillment elsewhere in her life. Under this deluge of reform directives, other principals in our study hauled themselves up into district administration, escaped to the island of early retirement, were hospitalized when they drowned under the pressure, or narrowed their role from leadership to management so they could continue to cope. In the end, the only leadership that is sustainable is leadership that can sustain leaders' selves.

6. Sustainable leadership develops environmental diversity and capacity.

Promoters of sustainability cultivate and recreate an environment that has the capacity to stimulate continuous improvement on a broad front. They enable people to adapt to and prosper in their increasingly complex environment by learning from one another's diverse practices (Capra 1997).

Innovative schools create this diversity yet all three such schools in our study have regressed under the standardization agenda. For instance, the State Exams have obliged Durant Alternative School to standardize its teaching and student assessments, turning school-developed history courses that once engaged students of diverse backgrounds, into the abstract memory work of World History 1 and 2. Instead of building shared improvement, two principals in these innovative schools now found themselves having to force through implementation. When these once-loved leaders tried to 'talk up' the questionable change agendas, their teachers regarded them as having sold their schools and their souls to the district or state.

Standardization is the enemy of sustainability. Sustainable leadership recognizes and cultivates many kinds of excellence in learning, teaching and leading and provides the networks for these different kinds of excellence to be shared in cross-fertilizing processes of improvement (Giles and Hargreaves, in press; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001; Louis and Kruse, 1995). It does not impose standardized templates on everyone.

7. Sustainable leadership undertakes activist engagement with the environment.

In the face of standardized reform, all the traditional schools in our study have become exaggerated and less motivated versions of their former selves. Meanwhile, the innovative schools have lost a lot of their edge. But of all of them, Durant has proven the most resilient - not just because of its innovativeness or its strength as a learning community, but because it engages assertively with its environment. Durant is driven by activist leadership (Oakes, Quartz and Lipton, 2000). It influences the environment that influences it.

In the past few years, Durant's courageous new principal has activated his personal and professional networks and forged strategic alliances with the community in a tireless campaign to save the school. He has written articles for local and statewide newspapers, appeared on radio and television programs, and supported students and parents who symbolically protested in strait-jackets outside the district offices. He organized conferences on the adverse effects of high-stakes tests, and worked assiduously with his allies throughout the state to push for a request for group variance from the state tests, receiving a 'temporary' exclusion from state policy for his efforts. Durant's story shows that especially when the environment is unhelpful, sustainable leadership has to have an activist dimension.

<u>Conclusion</u>

In summary, leaders develop sustainability by how they approach, commit to and protect deep learning in their schools; by how they sustain themselves and others around them to promote and support that learning; by how they are able and encouraged to sustain themselves in doing so, so that they can persist with their vision and avoid burning out; by how they try to ensure the improvements they bring about last over time, especially after they have gone; by how they consider the impact of their leadership on schools around them; by how they promote and perpetuate ecological diversity rather than standardized prescription in teaching and learning within their schools; and by how they pursue activist engagements with their environments.

Most leaders want to do things that matter, to inspire others to do it with them and to leave a legacy once they have gone. Mainly, it is not leaders who let their schools down, but the systems in which they lead. Sustainable leadership certainly needs to become a commitment of all school leaders. If change is to matter, spread and last, sustainable leadership must also be a fundamental priority of the systems in which leaders do their work.

(1) We are grateful to Paul Chung for this insight.

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