Performing School Culture

The Role of Middle Leaders in a High Performing School Culture

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Given the countless number of responsibilities placed on school Principals today, there is a strong argument that the most important factor in creating a high performance culture centres on distributed leadership. Whilst Principals and leadership teams set the agenda and hopefully school culture, middle leaders are the ones who have the most contact with their staff and ability to influence the culture of the school on a daily basis. In fact, Weller asserts that middle leaders have the potential to be the most influential people in a school’s organisational structure.

It is suggested that because middle leaders have the power to dramatically influence the performance within their department or team, there is a strong argument that middle leaders have the potential to be the most influential people in a school’s organisational structure.

In recent educational history, the emphasis on Principals’ and Deputy Principals’ leadership development has become almost “obsessive”4. Despite this fact and a strong push towards ‘transformational’ leadership, it could be argued that the rhetoric surrounding this style of leadership and all that it entails has not really come to fruition and the “general structure of secondary schools has, on the whole, remained unchanged”5. Whilst much has been written in terms of leadership for those in senior positions, given the time constraints, resources available and responsibilities placed on those in these roles, the reality is that little time is spent in classrooms working with teachers. Couple this with the fact that Principals only count for “five to ten percent of the variance in student outcomes”6 and a pertinent question would be whether schools and systems have been allocating resources effectively by placing such great emphasis on leadership development for Principals.

In the context of current research, one could argue that the middle leaders are most influential in schools with a high performance culture. Busher and Harris’ defines a middle manager as “not being part of the senior management team who is responsible for the overall strategic development of a school, but someone responsible for the operational work of others, namely classroom teachers”. It is these classroom teachers that set the culture of school in their interaction and expectations of students on a daily basis.

What are the implications for middle leaders today?

There is enough evidence to suggest that leaders can be taught to learn and practise their skills. What then is the key for transforming administrators to leaders and creating middle leaders who will improve school culture? Weller points out that the scope of responsibilities for middle leaders are wide and vary from school to school. The starting point therefore, lies in the role description itself.

Most schools or systems have duty statements for those in positions of leadership. Commonly the role descriptions itemise a long list of administrative tasks to be completed. Thus, long serving middle leaders see themselves as administrators. The ‘new’ role description should include administrative tasks but it should also explicitly redefine what leadership means for a middle leader. It should specifically contain the following leadership descriptors:

(a) Providing leadership and support to staff to ensure quality teaching and learning within the Key Learning Area (KLA), by developing the strengths of staff whilst also working on challenges.

(b) Promoting the professional learning of members within the KLA, by providing learning opportunities, professional reading, modelling best practice in teaching and providing feedback for staff based on classroom observations.

(c) Creating a learning community in the KLA by the regular engagement of professional dialogue amongst the staff not just in regard to KLA matters but educational trends in general.

(d) Participating in the operations of the Curriculum Leadership Team.
and promoting its decisions. (e) Fostering the development of students through developing their KLA team. Once the role description is complete, there are four main areas that need to be fostered by the Senior Leadership Team to further develop leadership skills at the middle leader level. These include:

- Mentoring
- Professional Learning
- Accountability and Performance Review
- Empowerment

The monumental shift in what educational research has revealed over the past 20 years regarding the influence of classroom teachers on students (and thus school culture) has resulted in an avalanche of leadership training and focus on Principals and Deputy Principals in order for this research to be used for the benefit of students. All too often, this focus on the Principal and Deputy has resulted in these people being seen as the only real ‘leaders’ in schools. If schools are to take advantage of what we now know about education, the middle leaders must be provided with as much leadership training and development on educational issues, as the members of Executive Teams. It is both unrealistic and nigh impossible for Principals to spend enough time in classes to have a real impact on the development of their teachers. Instead, developing middle leaders to lead teams of four to ten staff is however, quite achievable.

To do this, schools need to adopt a distributed leadership model. Principals will need to empower, provide mentors to, make accountable and professionally develop their middle leaders in order to achieve this. Busher and Harris’ suggest “this middle management role, more than any other, is the real potential of organisational change and improvement. The challenge for schools then, is to fully utilise middle leadership positions”.

Principals and their middle leaders must recognise the importance of their leadership and potential to make a real difference to school culture.

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Brett is a highly experienced educational leader having held Deputy Principal positions in NSW, QLD and the ACT. Brett has worked in Government, Catholic and Independent schools and in both coeducational schools and single sex (boys and girls). Brett’s latest role before starting at CIRCLE was Director of Professional Learning & Pedagogy at Stella Maris College in NSW.

1. Currently, what role do the middle leaders in your school play?
2. What structures can be in place for your school to develop leadership in middle leaders?

7. H. Busher and A. Harris, p. 309
8. Weller, pp. 73-81

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