

## Chapter 1

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# Adaptive Challenges for School Leadership

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### Abstract

The challenges facing education today must be seen in the broader context of the challenges facing society.

The singular reality is that none of us has been here before. Educational leadership will require different behaviours from those we have practised and perfected.

For example, we will spend more time running experiments than solving problems, more time adapting than executing, more time surfacing difficult values choices and orchestrating those conflicts than resolving them, and more time inventing next practices than searching for best practices.

Educational leadership will require becoming expert at working through competing commitments such as autonomy and standardisation or fairness, or accountability and fairness.

To take advantage of these opportunities will require learning new ways and the courage to step out and take responsibility for the future, whatever your place in the system.

### Key words/phrases

Educational leadership; adaptive leadership; orchestrate conflict; competing commitments; experimentation; take care of yourself; hunker down; adaptive challenges versus technical problems.

## The times we are in

The challenges facing school leadership in the early years of the second decade of the 21st century are intimately entangled with the broader, deeper challenges facing the global community, reaching far beyond the distinctive qualities of education.

We are in a period that feels unique, at least in your life experience, and in ours. The question is whether we are in the midst of a bump in the road or a sea change. Is this an emergency, or a crisis? An emergency is when your house is on fire; a crisis is when it has burned to the ground. An emergency is when you break your leg; a crisis is when you lose it.

Let's look at the times we are in.

Foremost, of course, is the global economic turmoil. Ireland is painfully at the epicentre, still reeling from the bursting of the housing bubble and mourning the long-lost Celtic Tiger. But the world's financial problems are only one element of the strange new world we find ourselves in.

Look at the data.

We are looking at extraordinary environmental and climate challenges. The glaciers are melting. Long-standing patterns of planting and harvesting are changing. There are places on the globe where the shortage of fresh water is an immediate concern. Technology is evolving rapidly. Amazon now reports that they are selling more books for Kindle, their electronic reader, than in hardcover. Five hundred million people are on Facebook.

A by-product of both the technology explosion and the implications of 9/11 is the reality of our interconnectedness. Everything is connected to everything else. Any intervention into the system is going to have consequences, intended or not, in lots of other places.

The Baby Boomer generation is ageing. While the economic problems have slowed retirements, there is a generation and talent gap as those folks born between 1946 and 1965 begin to retire and pass on in large numbers. While they are still around, the sheer number of Baby Boomers will give them a huge influence in society's value choices, including, most pertinently to education, the allocation of public resources. The Millennials, the offspring of those Boomers, are emerging with a very different set of values around issues of privacy, loyalty, and whether work is the centre of life.

The global power structure is rebalancing. US and Western hegemony is giving way to the emergence of new potential superpowers such as China, India and Brazil. Wars are no longer between

countries. The challenge to stability comes more and more from loosely or not so loosely connected groups who do not carry a national flag.

In short, we are indisputably in a period of rapid and constant change, greater uncertainty about the future than we have ever experienced, and inadequate information on which to make important choices. This is the context in which the challenges facing education in Ireland exist and in which this book is being written.

In education, as elsewhere, we are living at a time when, as Charles Dickens described a different world in a different era in his opening line of *A Tale of Two Cities*, 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times'. The central question is whether everyone concerned with the education of our children can seize this crisis as a time for innovation and change, or will continue to hunker down, preserve what they can, and hope that they survive more or less intact whenever things return to 'normal'. The guess here, based on the data we just discussed, is that the new normal will not feel like normality at all, either in its content or its consistency.

So in one sense this is an extraordinary moment to be caring about education. The challenges have never been greater, the opportunities never more present, and the need for success never more critical. All the familiar norms are in play. The authority relationships among the government education agencies, the school administrators, the specialists, the teachers, the students, the parents, private education initiatives, the religious education establishment, and the broader community are all potentially in transition. The good news and the bad news is that there is a public sense of urgency about the global as well as local significance of how we educate our young people that is more palpable than at any time in our memories.

## Assumptions about school leadership

If we are going to talk about school leadership in these extraordinary times, let's begin with some assumptions about what we mean by leadership.

First, leadership is a complex but not a technical subject. There are no quick fixes, no easy answers, or, Stephen Covey notwithstanding, no seven quick behavioural changes which will enable you to exercise leadership more often or more effectively than you have in the past. We assume that everyone in the education sector is on the frontiers of leadership.

Second, leadership is an activity, not a person. Leadership is something some people do some of the time. It's a verb, not a noun. No one exercises leadership 24/7. And our assumption is that if everyone reading these words exercised leadership more often than they do, including you, the world in general, and the world of education in particular, would be a better place.

Third, the opportunities to exercise leadership come to each of us, every day, at the family dinner table, in the workplace, in our community and civic lives. And the opportunities come independent of position. Leadership is not the exclusive prerogative of people in positions of authority. Quite to the contrary, some of the most extraordinary leadership has come from people with no formal authority at all (see Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King, Jr) and people in positions of authority typically do not exercise leadership very much because doing so would put their authority and all the perquisites that go with it at risk. In the education sector, leadership can come from any of the interested factions: teachers, students, administrators, parents, government officials, businesspeople, or electeds.

Fourth, leadership can be learned. The only people we know who think that the capacity for leadership is inherited are those who think they have it. No, leadership is about courage and skill. And both the courage and the skills can be learned. As with young athletes, there may be some people who seem to start out with an advantage, based on how they look or the way they are wired emotionally. But the young athletic phenoms are often not the stars in later years because others have worked really hard to learn and perfect the skills which are necessary for athletic success. Similarly for leadership. Those God-given qualities may provide some people with a head start at developing leadership capacity, but others can easily surpass them by working hard to learn, practise and perfect their own leadership skill set.

### **What makes school leadership difficult?**

We assume that everyone reading these words cares about quality education. And that you would not be reading this book unless there was a gap between your aspirations for education and the current reality. And we also assume that you are looking here for solutions that would be easy to apply or at least steps you could take that would likely make progress without, as the old proverb goes, breaking too many eggs. But leadership in education, as in any other

sphere, is difficult work. That is one of the reasons why you – and we – do not exercise leadership more often.

In our view, too much time is spent on the inspirational aspects of leadership and too little time on the perspirational. Here's what makes school leadership so difficult: the most common cause of failure in leadership comes from treating what we call *adaptive challenges* as if they were *technical problems*. What's the difference?

While *technical problems* may be very complex and critically important (such as replacing a faulty heart valve during cardiac surgery), they have known solutions. They can be resolved through the application of authoritative expertise and through the organisation's current values and ways of doing things.

*Adaptive challenges* can only be addressed through changes in people's values, beliefs, habits and loyalties. Making progress on them requires going far beyond any authoritative expertise and in particular dealing with the resistance that stems from unwillingness to face the losses that will be involved. This resistance makes adaptive leadership dangerous, and therefore rare. Table 1.1 below lays out some differences between technical problems and adaptive challenges.

As Table 1.1 implies, problems do not always come neatly packaged as either 'Technical' or 'Adaptive'. When you take on a new challenge in your education work, whether in a classroom or as an administrator or policymaker, the challenge does not arrive with a big 'T' or 'A' stamped on it. Most problems come mixed, with the technical and adaptive elements intertwined.

**Table 1.1** Distinguishing between technical problems and adaptive challenges

Kind of challenge	Problem definition	Solution	Locus of work
Technical	Clear	Clear	Authority
Technical and adaptive	Clear	Requires learning	Authority and stakeholders
Adaptive	Requires learning	Requires learning	Stakeholders

Here's a homey example. At the time of writing, Marty's mother, Ruth, is in good health at age 96. Not a grey hair on her head (although she has dyed a highlight in her hair so that people will know that the black is natural). She lives alone and still drives, even at night. When Marty goes from his home in New York City up to Cambridge, MA to do his teaching at the Kennedy School at Harvard,

Ruth often drives from her apartment in a nearby suburb to have dinner with him.

Some time ago, Marty began noticing new scrapes on her car each time she arrived for their dinner date. Now, one way to look at the issue is that the car needs to be taken to a garage to be repaired. In that sense, this situation has a technical component: the scrapes can be solved by the application of the authoritative expertise found at the garage. But an adaptive challenge is also obviously lurking below the surface. Ruth is the only one of her contemporaries who still drives at all, never mind at night. Doing so is a source of enormous pride (and convenience) for her, as is living alone, not being in a retirement community, and still functioning more or less as an independent person. To stop driving, even just to stop driving at night, would require a huge adjustment from her, an adaptation. (She would have to rely on others, pay for cabs, ask friends to drive her places, use services for the elderly, and so forth.) It would also be a loss, a loss of an important part of the story she tells herself about who she is as a human being, namely, the only 96-year-old person she knows who still drives at night. It would rip out part of her heart, and take away a central element of her identity as an independent woman. Addressing the issue solely as a technical problem would fix the car (although only temporarily, since it is likely that the trips to the garage would come with increasing frequency), but it would not get at the underlying adaptive challenge.

In the corporate world, we have seen adaptive challenges with significant technical aspects arise when companies merge or make significant acquisitions. There are huge technical issues such as merging IT systems and offices. But it is the adaptive elements that threaten success. Each of the previously independent entities must give up some elements of their own cultural DNA, their dearly held habits and values, in order to create a single firm and enable the new arrangement to survive and thrive. We were once called in to help address that phenomenon in an international financial services firm where, several years after the merger, the remnants of each of the legacy companies are still doing business their own way, creating barriers to collaboration, global client servicing, and cost efficiencies. Whenever they get close to changing something important to reflect their one-firmness, the side that feels it is losing something precious in the bargain successfully resists. The implicit deal is pretty clear: you let us keep our entire DNA, and we will let you keep all of yours. They have been able to merge only some of the basic technology and communications systems, which made life easier for everyone without threatening any dearly held values or ways of doing business. In a similar client case, a large US engineering firm functions like a

franchise operation. Each of their offices, most of which were acquired, not home grown, goes its own way, although the firm's primary product line has become commoditised and the autonomy that has worked for these smaller offices in the past, and is very much at the heart of how they see themselves, will not enable them to compete on price for large contracts going forward.

We have seen the same commoditisation of previously highly profitable distinctive services also affecting segments of the professional services world such as law firms, where relationship-building has been a core strategy and value and where competing primarily on price is a gut-wrenching reworking of how they see themselves. Yet, as previously relationship-based professions are coping with the adaptive challenge of commoditisation of some of their work, the reverse process is simultaneously going on in many businesses that have been built on a product sales model and mentality.

In an increasingly flat, globalised 21st century world, where innovation occurs so quickly, just having the best product at any moment in time is not a sustainable plan. So, like one of our clients, a leading global technology products company, these companies are trying to adapt, struggling to move from a transaction-based environment, where products are sold, to a relationship-based environment where solutions are offered based on trust and mutual understanding.

The need for making this transformation is stressing many firms, from professional services to insurance to digital hardware. These companies have had great success with an evolving product line, talented salespeople, and brilliant marketing strategies. Now they are finding that the skills required are more interpersonal than technical, both in their relationship with each other within the organisation and in connecting with their customers. A workforce that has been trained and has succeeded in a sales framework is not prepared by experience or skill set to succeed when relationship-building and response is the primary lever for growth. Successful people in the middle third or latter half of their careers are being asked to move away from what they know how to do well and risk their incompetence as they try to respond adaptively to new demands from the client environment.

And in our experience, all of these dynamics are playing themselves out in the education sector as well. We have worked with school systems struggling to make difficult, value-laden choices about which services to children are going to survive and which are going to be sacrificed. We have worked with school principals who are trying to lead change that is experienced as threatening to the



professional identity and sense of personal competence of long-time teachers. We have seen small school systems fight to retain some of their identity as they merge with larger systems over the fervent opposition of many in their home communities. We have worked with state governments in the US, who are embarrassed by the test results and drop-out rates of their young people, but are struggling to lead stakeholders into agreeing on a comprehensive strategy for reform that will involve deep change for everyone at the table.

Like Marty and his mother, all human systems, organisations, families, communities, and, yes, educational bureaucracies and schools resist dealing with adaptive challenges because doing so requires changes that partly involve an experience of loss. Ruth is no different from the legacy elements of the newly merged company that do not want to give up what they each experience as their distinctiveness, or the teachers for whom being assessed based on student performance represents a threat to their sense of their own competence honed by decades of experience as valued professionals.

Sometimes, of course, the challenge is way beyond your capacity and you simply cannot do anything about it, hard as you might try. Vesuvius erupts. But even when you might have it within your capacity to respond successfully to the adaptive challenge, sometimes you squander the opportunity and let it slip away. For these cases, we suggest that the common factor generating adaptive failure is resistance to loss.

You know the adage 'People resist change.' It is not really true. People are not stupid. People love change when they know it is a good thing. No one gives back a winning lottery ticket! Everyone who gets married or has a child knows that those life events will bring profound change, but the change is welcomed because people believe those changes will improve their lives. What people resist is not change per se, but loss. When change involves real or potential loss, people hold on to what they have and resist the change. A key to leadership is the diagnostic capacity to find out the kinds of losses at stake in a changing situation, like wealth, status, relevance, community, loyalty, identity and competence. Adaptive leadership almost always puts you in the business of assessing, managing, distributing, and providing contexts for losses that move people through losses to a new place.

Nevertheless, adaptation is a process of conservation as well as loss. Though changes that involve losses are the hard part, most adaptive change is not about change. The question is not only, 'Of all that we care about, what must be given up to survive and thrive going forward?' but also, 'Of all that we care about, what elements



are essential and must be preserved into the future or we will lose our core competencies and lose who we are?' A successful adaptation enables an organisation or community to take the best from its traditions, identity and history into the future.

However you ask the questions about adaptive change and the losses they involve, answering them is difficult because it requires making choices and trade-offs, prioritising your values and commitments. That is hard work not because it is intellectually difficult, but because it challenges individuals' and organisations' investments in relationships, competence, and sense of who they are. It requires a modification of the stories they have been telling themselves and the rest of the world about what they believe in, stand for and represent.

Helping individuals, organisations and communities deal with those tough questions, distinguishing the DNA that is essential to conserve from the DNA that must be discarded, and then innovating to create the organisational adaptability to thrive in changing environments is the work of adaptive leadership. In the education arena, the questions about distinguishing what is essential from what is expendable are very much alive. And the losses people fear from adaptations that will meet both the current fiscal constraints and the challenge of providing first-rate educational experiences that best prepare young people for jobs that are needed and available, for rigorous higher education, and for productive lives as engaged citizens and family nurturers are very real. School leadership in the 21st century will not succeed unless people are helped through those difficult choices and the sense of loss.

### What are the adaptive challenges facing school leadership?

Education is rife with adaptive challenges, in Ireland and all over the globe. Some existed before the current economic turmoil, some were exacerbated by it, and some were generated – or at least first manifested – by it.

As we have noted above, we believe that adaptive challenges consist of unresolved competing commitments, values and loyalties that keep organisations (or companies, or schools, of families, or countries, for that matter) locked in place. Central to our understanding is the idea of loss. If those competing commitments were resolved, someone or some factions would experience a loss, some values would be left behind or at least subordinated to others.

Some competing commitments are within the education system itself. Some are with other sectors. None are resolvable with technical

fixes. So, let's take a look at just a few of the competing commitments that are alive and well in the education sector in Ireland and elsewhere.

Competing commitments 1: *Diminished public resources and multiple legitimate needs v. the imperative to prepare young people for work and citizenship.*

This one is obvious. Every euro spent on education is a euro that is either being taken out of the pockets of already hard-pressed taxpayers or is being taken from some other noble and necessary public purpose, such as safety or infrastructure. Choosing among and prioritising competing claims for public funds is difficult even in times of plenty; it is excruciating in times of scarcity.

Competing commitments 2: *Autonomy v. standardisation.*

Every rule, every regulation, every requirement helps to share best practices and establish objective accountability but undermines teacher and in some cases principal autonomy. Which value is more important to more fully preserve when they come into conflict?

Competing commitments 3: *Community identity v. efficient use of resources and quality education.*

People in Ireland, as in many countries, identify strongly with their communities and having their own school is an important symbol of their unique community. Yet, small schools and undersized classrooms do not give children the quality of education or the breadth of exposure to others' ideas that would occur if smaller schools and school systems were consolidated. Losing a local school is a real community loss, as well as often a significant inconvenience for pupils and parents.

Competing commitments 4: *Accountability v. fairness.*

How do you measure and compare teacher performance across a wide range of situations in a way that is fair; fair to those teachers who have been working in schools for decades and are now facing changes which will challenge their competence and tried and true ways of helping students learn, as well as fair to taxpayers and public officials who need to be better able to assess and measure performance in times of fiscal restraint? And how can we really assess the real impact of a teacher until long after the student leaves the classroom when, of course, so many other factors have contributed to that student's performance as an adult?

### Competing commitments 5: *Church-run education v. state responsibility for education.*

When times were good and there were plenty of jobs, no one worried much about whether Ireland was abdicating its responsibility to educate its young people by financing and delegating so much of that to the church-run schools. Church-based schools are a deeply entrenched element of the Irish education system. Just raising the issue of whether the current dual system is fair to all Irish children or is maximising the educational opportunities for everyone, whether or not the church-run schools are providing a superior or inferior experience is, well, political heresy.

### What would educational leadership look like in these times?

Given the economic turmoil, the uncertainty about the future, and the rapidity of change, what kinds of new behaviours should characterise educational leadership from wherever it comes: within the sector from government administrators, regulators, superintendents, principals, teachers, parents and students; or outside of the sector from interested citizens, elected and appointed policymakers, or business people?

What would new educational leadership look like in trying to address those unresolved competing commitments listed above or, for that matter, the many other adaptive challenges facing education that anyone reading this could probably add from experience and first-hand knowledge?

Here are some brief thoughts.

- (1) *Adapt, don't just execute.* Leadership will increasingly involve sorting through the essential and the expendable, rather than executing a plan. The question people exercising leadership will frequently have to ask is, 'Of all the elements that have got us here, that have helped us achieve what we have accomplished, which are so critical to who we are that they must be preserved, and which, of all that we have valued to date, must we leave behind in order to make progress?'

There is no such thing as a broken system. Any current reality is the product of the conscious and not so conscious decisions of the people in the system. So, when you are trying to change a current reality, you are always threatening a loss to those people and interests who are committed to the way things are.

- (2) *Run experiments, don't just solve problems.* In education, as in most sectors, no one has been where we are now. The implication is that no one knows what to do next, but lots of possible hypotheses are out there. Testing those hypotheses suggests leadership will be doing more running of experiments than solving problems. The language of experimentation is very useful. It suggests close monitoring and making mid-course corrections. Lack of success becomes a learning opportunity, not a failure. It also allows for progressive action without all parties having to give up or give in. Learning together is a great way to mobilise deeply divided people (see next item).
- (3) *Practise interdependence, not just autonomy.* Internally and externally, the education system needs to forge new relationships, working in a different way with factions that have been on the 'other side' or simply not involved. This might mean everything from more learning collaboration among students, and students teaching younger students, to closer relationships between education and the business community so that both the support for education is wider and deeper and the education system is responsive in its curriculum, training and skill emphasis to the anticipated employment needs of the economy.
- (4) *Orchestrate conflict, don't just resolve it.* People in positions of authority are rewarded for solving problems and making decisions. But in the times we are in, what is needed will more often involve orchestrating conflict rather than resolving it. Bringing to the surface difficult issues and then helping people do the work of sorting through those unresolved conflicts of values, creating the holding container for them, rather than always making the decision for them and executing it, will be more of what is required.
- (5) *Look for next practices, not just best practices.* Almost everyone in education has access to whatever best practices are out there; the internet has taken care of that. But we are in a period that none of us has experienced before. So while there is always a need for dissemination of best practices and sharing learning, people exercising leadership will have to take the responsibility – and risk – of inventing the future. We caution as well against assuming that something that worked in one locale will work elsewhere. The unique combination and chemistry of factors in your locale suggests 'best practices' are to be considered input at best. Merging inputs in a solution that responds to your situation we think of as creating 'next practices'.

- (6) *Take care of yourself, don't just sacrifice your body for the cause.* The education sector in Ireland and elsewhere is characterised by dedicated people who care deeply about their work. Often – too often in our observation – this commitment translates into sacrificing normal human needs. It sometimes feels noble to personally suffer in the interests of what you care so deeply about professionally.

But, from our perspective, leading adaptive change in the times we are in requires you to take care of yourself. Taking care of yourself is not self-indulgence. The world needs you to be at the top of your game. And you cannot be at the top of your game if you have not had a good night's sleep, eaten well, had some exercise and, yes, received the love and affection you need from family and friends to feel like a whole person.

No one else can do that work for you, and no one else will protect the time and space for you to do that work but you. If you care about education, you will care enough to operate at your peak performance level. You owe it to those children.