

“Be the change you want to see in this world”

– Mahatma Gandhi

School leadership is one of most discussed issues in education today. No debate on educational policy and practice is complete without a reference, good or bad, to the critical role leaders play in school education. I have read many compelling case studies written on leaders in both the government and private sectors who have overcome a number of systemic hurdles and transformed their school. Whether it is the story of Achla Kukreti who transformed the under-resourced New Delhi Municipal Corporation schools, or that of Abha Adams who created the famed Shri Ram school in more privileged settings in that city or for that matter the much-watched TED story of Babar Ali, the 16-year old boy from Murshidabad in West Bengal who became the country’s youngest headmaster; are all deeply inspiring tales. I also come across shocking stories of the poor

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leadership practices that threaten our schools, captured in the DISE 2006-07 data that reveals that more than half of the total elementary schools in India are yet to be provided with a regular headmaster, or stories in the media about the misuse of power by school heads in both private and government schools.

While stories and case studies of individual inspiring leaders are useful, I would like to use this opportunity to paint a picture of what effective school leadership may look like in practice, how best to act on it in the everyday context of schooling and what systemic support is needed to sustain it at scale. My understanding has been primarily shaped

by the on-the-ground action research that my organization iDiscover Education has conducted while improving the quality of over five hundred mainstream independent schools across the country, where we have had the opportunity to coach hundreds of school leaders in implementing an integrated curriculum, training and assessment. Global research on school leadership, although mostly done in the context of countries other than India, is beginning to converge as well on similar lines.

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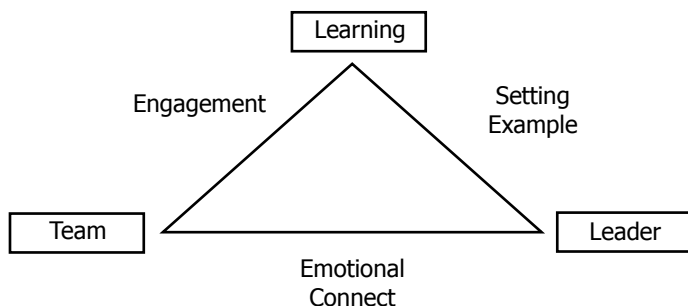
Harvard professor Richard Elmore writes: “The purpose of leadership is the improvement of instructional practice and performance... This is a deliberately de-romanticized, focused and instrumental definition.” Studies done by ASCD in America shows that “School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on learning. Top performing headmasters can make a 20 percentage point difference in student learning.”

Our on-the-ground experience in India validates these conclusions. The most significant improvements in our partner schools were achieved where the leaders invested uncommon attention to learning and teaching. What is perhaps more instructive is that many of these leaders are not by any means charismatic individuals or education experts. Their schools, located in small towns all over the map from Ajmer to Tirunelveli, are also not exempt from the constraints of teacher quality, infrastructural constraints, parental apathy and administrative problems. What sets them apart is that they put relentless focus on improving learning, to the exclusion of administrative trivia. They invested time outside the office and in the classroom, kept in touch with what students actually learnt, watched teachers inside the classroom, gave feedback and drove small changes in the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of teaching.



The second suggestion I have is to translate the theoretical definition of instructional leadership into a practical 'how-to' action plan for the school leader to implement at school. To that end, an actionable model that we have developed may provide a useful construct. Leadership is most needed when a change in the environment creates coping or adaptive challenges. The adaptive challenge for schools is how to demonstrate visible learning for every child in the classroom while coping with the constraints of differences in children's learning, variances in teacher quality and lack of quality instructional resources. There is no easy answer to this question. So the first priority of the school leader would be to make quality learning and teaching the single point agenda as to why her role exists in the school and to drive a disproportionate amount of time, energy and resources towards this end. Consequently, moving administrative gears, and dealing with bureaucracy and management may assume secondary importance.

Having set learning as her primary agenda what actions does the leader undertake? We conceptualize leadership as an act, or a verb. The school leader's role then is to act in a way in which she sets a personal **example** and creates a strong **emotional** bond of trust with her team in order to **engage** in the work of better learning. We have named this the '3E Model of Leadership.' It is an integrated conceptual framework that draws on the work of several researchers, notably educator David Hawkins, leadership experts Ronald Heifetz and Warren Bennis and organizational learning theorist Noel Tichy and is validated through our leadership work with over 10,000 leaders across education and organizational domains. While all of us may have varying quality of innate talent for leadership, we have seen that these practices can be learnt.



We recommend three practices ahead of others that can be practiced irrespective of school context.

- **Set a personal Example of being a role model teacher and learner.** There is no better way to do this than to be inside the classroom, teaching alongside teachers and learning alongside students. Mrs. Gunmeet Bindra, the principal of the Vidya Devi Jindal School, who worked with us to transform her 23-year-old institution said – “I would sit with my teachers and work with their lesson plans. Once a teacher was struggling with the resources she had to use. I told her, “Let’s go into the classroom and let me be your teaching assistant for a day”. Every week from then on, I would take two substitution periods and teach the classes myself. This has had such a tremendous impact on teaching-learning in the classroom.” Demonstrating effective teaching, observing and giving feedback to teachers inside the classroom, looking at children's work and most importantly being curious about learning – is the kind of example that our school leaders can set for others to follow.

- **Build Emotional resonance with their teacher and student community through empathy and appreciation.** Learning, and consequently teaching, happens best in an emotionally secure yet intellectually challenging environment. School leaders need to build a climate of trust and collaboration in their team. In building school cultures fostering learning, we have seen that leaders who institutionalize practices like giving specific appreciation, engaging in circle time conversations and soliciting feedback have been instrumental in building emotional resonance in their teams.

- **Keeping the teaching community engaged in the learning process by giving hope and optimism.** The act of learning is an act of engagement with a difficult task. Children learn by repeatedly trying, failing and trying again. So do teachers. Teaching, especially for real learning and not for rote, requires teachers to stay engaged with their children, the subject-matter and their own their own struggles of learning and unlearning; it is an inherently difficult task. Leaders need to provide a holding environment in which teachers feel the freedom to try alternatives to the norm and the constant reinforcement not to give up until they see visible improvement in children. This will also require re-constructing the role of teachers where they start taking personal responsibility for their own professional

development and are rewarded for making visible progress towards their goals.

My third and final recommendation is to bring in structural changes in classroom process, school organization and principal development so that instructional leadership practices can be effectively scaled beyond individual 'star practitioners'. While we have seen that effective school leadership is a necessary condition to school improvement, it is not sufficient. The available instructional process inside the classroom is weak even in the best of our schools – limited to a two-step 'tell and listen' model. What are also missing are tools and structures that can scaffold teachers at the last-mile inside the classroom. We have seen that good leadership practices can sustain, especially in under-resourced schools, when we create detailed teaching processes and practical tools that support curriculum and assessment.

We have also seen that schools that bifurcate administration and academic responsibilities tend to do better on both. In most of the schools we have worked with, we have successfully created an instructional leader cadre, drawn from senior teachers and academic coordinators who lead

instructional design and improvement while principals continue with their administrative responsibilities.

Finally, we have realized that one-off training, especially of the 'workshop' variety, has limited impact in preparing leaders and teachers. What our country needs is rigorous selection process to recruit the best candidates, a practicum-based preparatory college for aspiring principals, and an on-the-job coaching process that builds their skills inside the schooling system. We can look to Singapore, United States and many other countries that are pursuing this more deliberate route to preparing their school leaders.

India has one million schools and we need one million leaders. What we really need is for these leaders to invest their time and energy inside the classroom, leading by example, building an emotional connect and creating deep engagement for learning. For them to succeed we need to equip them with well-researched instructional tools, free them of administrative workload and reinforce their skills with ongoing learning. It will certainly be a large investment for our country, but will be well worth it, yielding a dramatic improvement in learning and teaching quality.

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