

## A dilemma for senior leaders: middle leadership

By Linda Bendickson, Director UACEL

Having had a considerable amount of my career as a principal, it is with that role that I usually identify. However, since being in this job as UACEL Director, and having made many observations in secondary schools in particular, I have great sympathy with the plight of the middle leader. In secondary schools these are the heads of departments or learning areas, and deans; and I have seen enough of their role to be concerned. I imagine also that middle leaders in primary schools (syndicate leaders) may well share some of the issues that are so clearly evident in secondary schools. In sum, this middle leadership role appears to me to be one of the most challenging leadership positions. Why?

- Middle leaders are often relatively **powerless** – they don't make the decisions that affect them most. Senior leaders usually decide on the goal focus, make the decisions about resources, and make the high level decisions about what professional learning to engage in as a school – the middle leaders, even if they are consulted, have to live with the effects of all those decisions.
- Middle leaders frequently have full class loads but are expected to be - and indeed need to be - 'leaders of learning'. The quality of results and teaching coming out of their syndicates, departments or faculties is their responsibility, which means they actively need to lead the quality of teaching and embed professional learning into their meetings. Yet **time** for all this is often given scant regard in timetabling. Middle leaders are inevitably bound up with teaching their own classes (which may suffer due to their workload), administrative duties relating to their department/syndicate, and school-wide responsibilities in sport, culture or pastoral care.
- To be effective middle leaders need to have high quality 'coaching' **conversations** with staff on an ongoing basis, but commonly we find they do not have the skills because they have never formally learnt how to have focused and effective conversations.
- Middle leaders rarely get an opportunity to formally **learn about leadership**. The result of this can be that young leaders develop problematic theories of leadership that guide their behaviour. For example, I recall a middle leader whose theory was that their job was to support and advocate for their 'team' (no matter what the problem), and gave no consideration to the goal orientation of the school or the differing perspective of senior leadership. Similarly, I

note that many people in these positions have never formally learnt some fundamental skills – such as running an effective meeting.

It is in these day-to-day operations where we display leadership, and, in my view, you cannot separate the management aspects (such as running a good meeting) from leadership. The distinction between these terms is often made in condescending ways (where management is the poor cousin to leadership) but, from my point of view, a good leader knows how to walk their talk – and that means how to make things happen that are aligned to your goal focus. I sometimes hear principals and senior leaders moan about the quality of their middle leaders and feel it is timely to remind us all that if we blame someone for something, we need to look to ourselves for the answer first: “What have I not done, or said, to address the perceived problem?”.

In our research we have found that senior leaders often do not know what is really worrying middle leaders; they think they know, but they may not. We have found, for instance, that senior leaders believe middle leaders may be most concerned with behavioural matters, when in fact they were most concerned about the expectations that teachers held for student outcomes. This is an important concern to know about. What we learnt from this is that senior and middle leaders are frequently not ‘on the same page’ and yet that is exactly what is required if they are to be effective. So, what can be done?

<b>Powerlessness</b>	Engage middle leaders in discussion about the goals, how to achieve them, what your part in this is - and what theirs is.
<b>Time to be a leader of learning</b>	Time is finite. How we use time is an indicator of our strategic thinking. Middle leaders need time in their schedules to observe teaching and provide feedback, and to lead team meetings regularly – about the learning goals.
<b>Conversation skills</b>	All leaders are entitled to the opportunity to learn some of these skills. Many of us only learnt leadership skills through many mistakes and through role models; both good and bad. These skills are not learnt in one or two days; they take a life-long effort. Fundamentals of these skills can be learnt, however, and then it is up to the leader to practise and reflect. Learning these skills is essential for any leader because it is through the day-to-day conversations that you lead.
<b>Leadership skills</b>	We all bring our own personalities and styles to

	<p>how we lead, but some fundamental aspects of leadership can be demystified and learnt: how to set effective goals, how to attack gnarly problems; how to resource strategically rather than by 'wish lists', and so on. Just knowing about some of the research on these topics can provide a leader with more confidence.</p>
<p>Effective schools have <b>effective leadership teams</b></p>	<p>Effective leadership teams are made up of both senior and middle leaders who behave in a cohesive, goal-oriented way. It is senior leaders' responsibility to include middle leaders more effectively in decisions that affect them, and middle leaders have a responsibility to learn to lead their teachers as effectively as they can. Only senior leaders can address the issues I have raised here – by listening to middle leaders, by engaging them in decision making that affects them, and by ensuring they do get training in conversations and leadership skills.</p>