

Inspiring leaders to  
improve children's lives



National College  
for School Leadership

---

Schools and academies

# Leading and managing: rethinking the relationship

## John West-Burnham

Opinion piece

**Resource**

# Leading and managing: rethinking the relationship

## John West-Burnham, Professor of Educational Leadership at St Mary's University College, Twickenham

1

The debate about the relationship between leadership and management seems to be as much about prevailing fashion as any other factor. Look in any bookshop and there are countless titles about leadership – most of them claiming that reading a book will actually make you a better leader. Twenty years ago most masters degrees in education were concerned with management with, perhaps, a module on leadership. Today it is doubtful if such a programme would recruit, such is the emphasis on leadership. In virtually every aspect of society leadership is presented as the panacea for all social ills. At the same time there is recognition that management has a significant part to play in organisational life. Management is projected as the foundation of successful organisational functioning – without management leadership is unlikely to make any impact. The question is asked about which is worse – a school with excellent management and weak leadership or a school with poor management and outstanding leadership? The answer, of course, is that they are both dysfunctional. However the impact of not getting the balance between managing and leading right is very clear:

Effective leadership of teaching is a feature of better schools, and Ofsted's new inspection framework prioritises that aspect of leadership. In schools that are not yet good, leadership focuses too much on organisational management and not enough on pedagogy and leadership of teaching.

Ofsted 2012:6

There is a proper and natural concern about what might be described as establishing the appropriate balance between leading and managing, but this assumes that it is possible or desirable to see them as a continuum. This relationship is perhaps best understood in Bennis' well-known dictum that leadership is about 'doing the right things' and management about 'doing things right'. In other words, the difference between the strategic and the operational, the principle and the practice, the idealistic and the realistic.

The very language used indicates the perceived tensions, which may be arbitrary and artificial, between the various types of activity of staff in schools – witness the shift in many schools from middle managers to middle leaders and from senior management team to senior leadership team. While the name may have changed the essential elements of both what is done and how it is done often remain unchanged. In many ways management remains the default model – it is how most some school leaders spend most of their working days. The issue is made worse with very effective management sometimes being described as 'leadership'.

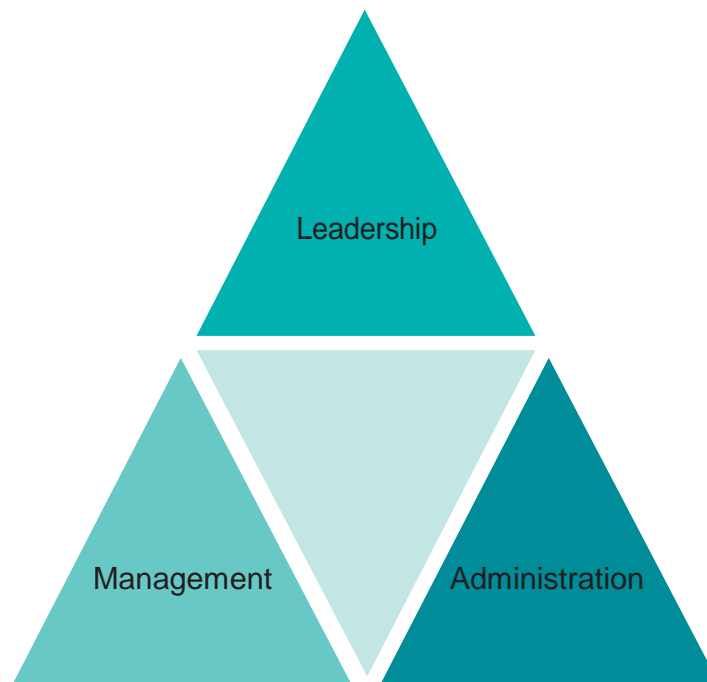
... in trying to understand what drives leadership, we have overemphasized bureaucratic, psychological and technical rational authority, seriously neglecting professional and moral authority. . . The result has been a leadership literature that borders on vacuity and a leadership practice that is not leadership at all.

Sergiovanni 1992: 3

I want to argue that while management is an essential element in any organisation's effective functioning, and vital in securing the delivery of key outcomes, it should not be seen as part of a continuum with leadership. Seeing leadership and management on some sort of sliding scale will inevitably compromise the integrity of the nature of leadership and, as Sergiovanni argues, result in an understanding of leadership that is 'not leadership at all'.

There are many ways of conceptualising the tension between the competing paradigms of management and leadership, the linear and non-linear, objective and subjective, rational and emotional. If these various elements are seen as stages on a continuum then there is a real danger of compromise, dilution or confusion. Where do the boundaries lie? In many circumstances management can drive out leadership. According to the consultants PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007:6): there is the danger of a 'mindset amongst some school leaders which is often more comfortable with an operational than a strategic role.'

Better perhaps to see the three classic components necessary to make any organisation work (leadership, management and administration) as related but quite distinct elements, as in the following diagram:



Each element is a necessary component but it is important to be very clear about their relative position within the triangle as a whole ie which occupies the greatest area and is therefore dominant. The ratio of the three component elements in the central space is where the culture of the school is decided – what is the ratio of the strategic (leadership) and the operational (management) and which determines how the school works?

McGilchrist (2009) has explored how the two hemispheres in our brains influence how we perceive and engage with the world. In simplified terms the left brain is perceived as the logical rational dimension (management) of our engagement with the world, the right brain (leadership) the social and emotional response to the world. This coincides with many definitions of the difference between management and leadership, in essence the difference between management focused on systems and structures and leadership on values and relationships.

The world of the left hemisphere, dependent on denonative language and abstraction, yields clarity and power to manipulate things that are known, fixed static, isolated, decontextualised, explicit, disembodied, general in nature but ultimately lifeless.

2009:174

This is very much the world of ‘doing things right’. The right hemisphere, working in a very different way:

... yields a world of individual, changing, evolving, interconnected, implicit, incarnate, living beings within the context of the lived world, but in the nature of things never fully graspable, always imperfectly known – and to this world it exists in a relationship of care.

2009:174

These elements capture the reality of life in organisations – they are messy, full of contradictions, emotions and ambiguities. This is the world that leaders need to inhabit, not an artificially neat, rational and controllable world. For Morrison:

It is no longer possible to rely on linear models of management. Linear models of management, which underpinned the simple linear causality of the command and control mentality of hierarchical, bureaucratic organizations, have to be replaced with networked, nonlinear, emergent, mutually informing groups.

Morrison 2002:16

What would happen if the left hemisphere became dominant in the world?

In fact more and more work would come to be overtaken by the meta-process of documenting or justifying what one was doing or supposed to be doing – at the expense of the real job in the real world.

2009:429

School leaders would probably echo this last point – how much time is diverted from doing ‘the real job in the real world’ by managerial, bureaucratic and routine tasks. The ‘real job’ is transforming educational opportunities for every young person and no education system was ever transformed by being well managed – transformation requires leadership.

Leadership currently contributes to Finnish high performance not by concentrating on measurable performance outcomes, but by paying attention to the conditions, processes and goals that produce high performance. These include a common mission; a broad but unobtrusive steering system; strong municipal leadership with lots of local investment in curriculum and educational development ...

Hargreaves et al 2008:93

One of the problems with seeing leadership as part of a continuum with management is that it has the potential to reinforce models of leadership that are inappropriate to education such as hierarchy and elites – by definition there are extremes in any continuum. Another issue is that the integrity of certain aspects of leadership might be diluted or compromised. It is in ‘conditions, processes and goals that leadership makes a difference’. Very simplistically, management can be quantitative and reductionist and leadership tends to be qualitative and aspirational.

Consider the following example: the parents of a child who is significantly physically disabled are very anxious that their child should be educated at your school so that they can be with their elder sibling and because they believe that their child has real academic potential. In making the application they cite the school’s commitment to equity and inclusion. A leadership response might be how do we keep our promise to educate young people irrespective of their personal circumstances. If a management approach is dominant then the tendency might be to accept the principle but from a managerial perspective – to point out the difficulties in practice – problems with access, provision of specialist support and the demands on teacher time and energy not to mention worries about the schools (quantitative) performance as opposed to its (qualitative) commitment to equity.

The same sorts of moral dilemma are found with issues around admissions policies, deployment of staff, decisions to exclude pupils and issues around staff performance. The challenge for educational leaders is ensuring their decisions are ethically based:

... is that it involves values, choices, dilemmas, grey areas and character. We are constantly challenged in life to make choices about the kinds of people we are going to be and the kinds of actions we will or will not take. Ethical decision-making requires a keen sensitivity to the implications and consequences of particular choices when the facts of the matter may be unclear, or even contradictory.

Duignan 2006:76

Leadership is messy – inclusion and equity cannot be diluted. It is not possible, logically, to be partially inclusive or to believe in conditional equity (although people do!). The same issues emerge with regard to other dimensions of leadership such as clarity of purpose, the nature of relationships and the commitment to change. All can be ambiguous and lack clarity. The issues of focus on core purpose is demonstrated in the quotation from the Ofsted annual report quoted in the introduction to this opinion piece – sometimes internal management processes can assume greater significance than the core purpose that they are supposed to facilitate.

In the same way, the high levels of trust that are fundamental to securing sustained improvement across the whole school, are unlikely to be enabled by procedures and routines – the sort of trust that builds relational capacity is based in personal and emotional relationships, as Fullan argues:

If you want to change any relationship you have to behave your way into it. Trust comes after good experiences.

Fullan 2010:97

It is perhaps in the area of change that the differences between leadership and management are most dramatically highlighted. Management tends to be organisationally conservative, concerned with the status quo and focused on incremental improvement – this is not a negative judgement, this is what management is supposed to do. Leadership has to see change as a fundamental component of the role; we need leaders because we need to change. The transition from good to outstanding cannot be managed; it has to be a process that is led.

A final issue to be considered in this discussion is the notion of the leader as model – the personification and embodiment of the values of the school or community. In many societies, one of the defining characteristics of leadership is the expectation that leaders will be the exemplification of what that society most values. This imposes an incredible burden on the individual and it may not be sustainable but in essence one of the justifications for having leaders is that they help us see how we should be. However, given the status and authority accorded to leaders, not least in schools, there does seem to be a justification for the expectation that the behaviour of leaders will model and exemplify the expectations of the community in the professional context if no other. In many respects this is why we have leaders. This is not to argue that every leader should be a paragon but rather that their actions should be seen to be ethically based, value driven and morally consistent.

This clearly calls for a model of leadership that is of a different order of significance to many models of effective management and successful headship or the limited definitions of leadership that only focus on improvement or instruction. We expect our doctors to understand the ethics underpinning their medical decisions. We expect our judges' decisions to be rooted in jurisprudence, not just the application of statute. We should therefore expect educational leaders to be firmly rooted in the ethics of education – this will be even more difficult if leadership is inhibited or compromised by pragmatic managerialism. The leader:

... needs to consider such questions as: What does it mean to be a lawyer/physician/ engineer/ educator at the present time? What are my rights, obligations and responsibilities? What does it mean to be a citizen of my community/ my region / the planet? What do I owe others, and especially those who – through the circumstances of birth or bad luck – are less fortunate than I am?

Gardner 2006:129

## References

- Duignan, P, 2006, Educational Leadership: Key Challenges and Ethical Tensions, Cambridge, CUP
- Fullan, M, 2010, All Systems Go, Thousand Oaks Ca, Corwin
- Gardner, H, 2006, Five Minds for the Future, Boston, Harvard Business School Press
- Hargreaves, A, Halasz, G and Pont, B, 2008, The Finnish approach to system leadership in Pont B et al, 2008
- McGilchrist, I, 2009, The Master and his Emissary, London, Yale University Press
- Morrison, K, 2002, School Leadership and Complexity Theory, London, RoutledgeFalmer
- Ofsted, 2012, HMCI Annual Report 2011/2012
- Pont, B, Nusche, D, Hopkins, D, 2008, Improving School Leadership Volume 2: Case Studies on System Leadership, Paris, OECD
- PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, 2007, Independent Study into School Leadership

The National College exists to develop and support great leaders of schools and children's centres- whatever their context or phase.

Enabling leaders to work together to lead improvement

Helping to identify and develop the next generation of leaders

Improving the quality of leadership so that every child has the best opportunity to succeed

Membership of the National College gives access to unrivalled development and networking opportunities, professional support and leadership resources.

©2013 National College for School Leadership – All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced without prior permission from the National College. To reuse this material, please contact the Membership Team at the National College or email [college.publications@nationalcollege.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:college.publications@nationalcollege.gsi.gov.uk).

Triumph Road  
Nottingham NG8 1DH  
T 0845 609 0009  
F 0115 872 2001  
E [college.enquiries@nationalcollege.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:college.enquiries@nationalcollege.gsi.gov.uk)  
[www.education.gov.uk/nationalcollege](http://www.education.gov.uk/nationalcollege)

An executive agency of the  
Department for Education

**We care about the environment**

We are always looking for ways to minimise our environmental impact. We only print where necessary, which is why you will find most of our materials online. When we do print we use environmentally friendly paper.