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Individual And Institutional Professional Leadership in Vocational Education and Training: Motives, Beliefs and Styles

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Abstract:

Vocational education and training (VET in Australia, PVET in Europe), as a unified endeavour, has to balance the comparative wealth of the peak universities with the needs of the community and young people for the employability that VET can provide. VET needs to promote its scope and strengths collectively and individually, and we analyse some of them. The subtext is that the paper highlights the features of leading institutions on which institutions can model their future development. There is no one unequivocal model of course, so this paper sensitises leaders to salient issues.

Keywords: Leadership, character, perennialism, teamwork, scholarship.

Introduction

Leadership within one's professional career comes from doing things in a manner that is exemplary. From going above and beyond the minimum that is required: undertaking your responsibilities, with a sense of pride, in a job well done. It is not about ticking boxes, but about creating an institutional culture that fosters growth, inspires, encourages and leads. "These qualities imbue your work with serenity, peace and cheerfulness no matter how frenetic and urgent the demands of the hour might be" [17].

It requires a commitment to lifelong learning with a purpose to nurture, guide and help foster a culture of growth for those in our care. "When we help ourselves, we find moments of happiness. When we help others, we find lasting fulfillment" [16].

Our motives, values and beliefs as a professional educator are always under scrutiny not so much from peers or students, but from within ourselves and the constant need to do better and deliver more. This scrutiny can help us excel as practical educators and be more deserving of the trust bestowed on us by both students, peers and the community.

Materials and Methods

The method is essentially a review of relevant literature supplemented with scrutinies of the websites of leading practitioners in the vocational and technical education sector.

Results and Discussion

According to research by Harvard [16]: "Leaders are mature, with a self-confidence born not out of pride but out of self-knowledge. They are consistent, which is not to say inflexible. In matters related to their mission, know when to give ground and when to stay firm". We would add that leadership is fundamentally about character. While educators can be given the resources to help facilitate leadership, these alone do not guarantee professional leadership.

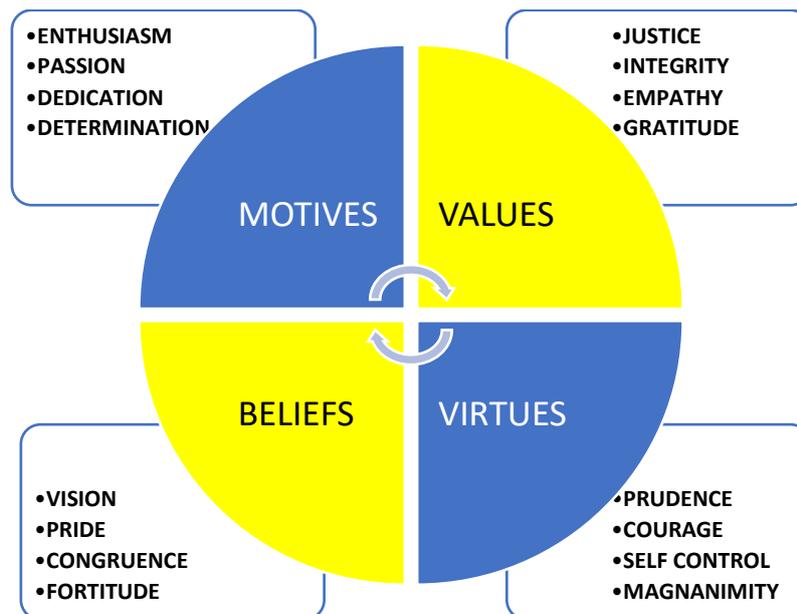
Character is what we control. The way we portray ourselves as educators is within our personal control and hence directly affects our leadership styles. Being magnanimous in character, as a leader we encourage magnanimity within our learners. We encourage them to challenge the *status quo*, to strive for greatness within their learning and development and to continually push themselves outside their comfort zone: "dream and your dreams will fall short"!



As an educational leader the first step is to clarify one's role, to truly understand what is expected. Student evaluation and institutional reviews can help us improve in awareness of our strengths and weaknesses [3]. Another key aspect is observing non-verbal cues, how do people react around me? Does a room go quiet when I walk into it? Do peers look at me in a conversation or does their gaze fall away? In research from Serafin [14]: "The key is to understand that you are collecting observable data," "Don't project, or be overly sensitive about what you may be seeing."

Related research

In research from Buchanan [5]: "Leadership is the lifting of a man's vision to higher sights, the raising of a man's performance to a higher standard, the building of a man's personality beyond its normal limitations".



In other research from Grogan and Fullan [8]: "Leadership is the process of persuasion or example by which an individual (or leadership team) induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers". Thus, self-awareness has been an essential part of our leadership journeys, regularly interacting with both peers and students to discuss and evaluate various aspects of their educational lifecycle.

In research from Riopel [13] according to Chuck Wolfe "If you understand your own feelings you get a really great handle on how you're going to interact and perform with others...So one of the first starting points is, 'what's going on inside of me?'" In this sense, listening has also been a skill we have needed to improve on and constantly work to improve. Good conversations are important, but to listen carefully to what is being said is critical.

Teamwork has also been integral to our journeys. While it is important to organise and drive our teams, it is equally important to work as part of a team. Determination and confidence to get the job done has been key to inspiring and motivating my team to believe in the overall vision. Building these skills is a work in progress as we ourselves evolve and grow our leadership instincts. Being sensitive to our personal strengths and weaknesses, as part of an ongoing self-reflection helps us grow and develop.

Critical reflections

An educational philosophy which aligns with our motives is perennialism. Perennialism is predominantly a content focused philosophy that we both apply, with an aim to teach our students rational thinking, while cultivating minds that are critical out-of-the-box thinkers. In research from McCaul [11]: "A perennialist classroom aims to be a closely organized and well-disciplined environment, which develops in students a lifelong quest for the truth. Perennialists believe that education should epitomize a prepared effort to make these ideas

available to students and to guide their thought processes toward the understanding and appreciation of the great works.

The old adage “the more things change, the more they stay the same” summarizes the perennialist perspective on education. In this philosophy skills are developed in a sequential manner. They are centred around fostering enthusiasm, passion and dedication amongst learners.

Being in a position of decision-making leadership within an educational institution will offer me the opportunity to reimagine the way the transfer of knowledge occurs from teacher to student. With an aim to applying critical design thinking processes to help reshape the educational landscape. Finding solutions to educational problems by prioritizing the needs of the learner above all else. Shifting the focus from number based desired outcomes, to achieving learner based tangible outcomes.

The challenge for the leader is actually to lead with conviction, purpose and authenticity. Thus, the perennial dilemma of turning graduates from VET into industry ready employees is a constant struggle within the VET system. As educators, we are afraid and scared to move away from the blanket of familiarity. We all talk about it; everyone involved knows it. We need to adapt and evolve to stay current. Change needs to filter through multiple levels of bureaucracy. It is the uncertainties and red-tape within the governing system that prevents educators from reaching their full potential and in turn does the learner a dis-service.

Scholarly activity which informs one’s teaching is essential: it increases our shared knowledge, it enlarges our world-view and can make out teaching inspirational even if the subject matter of our scholarly activity is not immediately related to the content of our lessons.

In research from Allen [1]: “The term bureaucracy, in the popular mind, has tended to become a pejorative term. It is equated with massive organizational structures through which faceless bureaucrats regulate the lives and control; the thought processes of an unwitting populace. Yet the same popular mind inclines to view this presumably hostile monster as an indispensable element in modern society, a necessary evil.

In research from Ashton-Sward [2]:

1. “Leadership is about people, not things”. As a leader I need to focus on the people doing the job. The quality of work produced in most instances is directly related to the moral of the team.
2. “A career is a marathon not a sprint”. Hard work, diligence and patience are an integral part of the journey. I have realised it helps me see things along the way that I would normally miss if rushing through. It has helped me gain a broad perspective on many occasions.
3. Listening is vital. I know, I do not have all the answers and sometimes they can come from the most unexpected sources.
4. “Never sacrifice personal ethics for work”. Though hard at times I have realised it is vital not to sacrifice my values and principles for short term work gains.
5. Failure is part of learning. We think of it as a stepping stone to success. The key though is to learn from our failures and try not to repeat them.

Concluding comments

In order to put these ideas into a coherent summary we considered material on the web from a variety of sources, both collective vocational training and educational industry associations and some individual vocational institutions, such as:

(A) UNESCO-UNEVOC, THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING OF UNESCO:

- Most member institutions engage in some relevant research and development, often with local industries.
- “Skills are the key element for Europe’s economic and productivity growth”! [9].

(B) THE EUROPEAN VOCATIONAL TRAINING ASSOCIATION – EVTA

- EVTA is a leading European network in the field of Vocational Education and Training comprising 800 institutes and 15 members from 7 European countries, representing thousands of national training providers and, in certain cases, national employment services.
- EVTA works to facilitate the relationship between stakeholders in the field of VET, in order to enable them to share knowledge and practices on how to shape the training for the future.

(C) PARTICULAR INSTITUTIONS:

- Fachhochschule des Berufsförderungsinstitut Wien (FH des BFI Wien);
- Hochschule für Technik Und Wirtschaft Berlin (HTW BERLIN);
- Hogeschool van Amsterdam (AUAS)
- Stokholms Tekniska Institut (Sti)Swiss Federal University for Vocational Education and Training (SFUVET)

(D) COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, TEACHERS COLLEGE, COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH CENTER: many VET R&D refereed articles;

From these, with the help of the later, and some of the previous, authors who are cited, we can construct a skills alignment skills matrix. From this we conclude with an attempt to summarise the characteristics of some of the best vocational institutions.

The points are arguable at an industry wide level and debatable within institutions which aspire to lead within the jurisdictions where they are located, and which produce graduates and cultivate staff who can claim to lead within their various disciplines in those jurisdictions and across jurisdictions. Furthermore, a useful by-product of the Covid pandemic has been to demonstrate that is easier than we previously thought to collaborate across countries and contribute to each other's healthy development within global tertiary education.

In summary then, some characteristics of the best VET institutions include

- Employability of graduates
- Entrepreneurship with courses
- Staff stability and satisfaction
- Regulatory compliance
- Continuing professional development of staff
- Communication within the institution
- Research and scholarly activity dealing with

- Teaching, Training, Learning within VET
- Integration of VET and the labour market
- New areas of research [3]
- Strategic Planning of VET.

Their inter-relationships are outlined in the following table.

TWENTY FIRST CENTURY COMPETENCIES & CAPABILITIES			
	Institutional	Individual	
EMPLOYABILITY	Initial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Twenty first century awareness ○ Economic competitiveness ○ Contemporary employability skills and dispositions • Active citizenship ○ understanding identity ○ Improved social cohesion, understanding and valuing genuine diversity ○ Respect ○ Listening skills ○ Personal growth ○ Personal goals and order <p>[10]</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volatility, ○ Uncertainty, ○ Complexity, and ○ Ambiguity • Learning and Innovation <p>Skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Creativity ○ Innovation ○ Critical Thinking ○ Problem Solving • Communication in own tongue ○ Collaboration ○ Group work ○ Teamwork <p>[4]</p>
	Continuing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • communication in foreign languages • mathematical capability and confidence • basic competences in science and technology • digital competency • learning to learn • social competencies ○ sense of initiative ○ entrepreneurship • civic competencies ○ cultural awareness ○ freedom of expression <p>[7]</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital Literacy Skills: ○ Information Literacy ○ Media awareness ○ Literacy ○ ICT Literacy • Career and Life Skills: ○ Flexibility and Adaptability ○ Initiative ○ Self-Direction • Social and Cross-Cultural <p>Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Productivity ○ Accountability ○ Leadership ○ Responsibility <p>[16]</p>

Data Availability (excluding Review articles) The data can be accessed by contacting farzanc@hotmail.com

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