

# Empowering leadership through proactive strategies

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**W**e all see how schools, as with other organisations, are becoming busier with reduced resourcing and funding. We are left with a need to contemplate how we find the energy and techniques to better engage our staff, develop professional practice and achieve improved student learning outcomes?

A leader's role is to ensure smooth facilitation of school requirements, be it regulatory needs, staff management or responding to student issues. For so many leaders across all school sectors, much of their time is spent problem solving with minimal information and reactively responding to crisis in class, staffrooms and community areas. A constant firefighting mentality sets us into a responsive leadership style, on occasions removing the opportunity to be solution focused through school improvement and reflection.

With the increase in administration and the tightening of resources there is a heightened need for effective utilisation of performance management and staff engagement programs. Often seen as negative,

performance planning should be an optimistic tool to assist staff on their career trajectory by way of measured opportunities for self-assessment, learning and application to achieve attainable outcomes from an individual, departmental and organisational perspective. Building a sense of understanding and purpose within staff, aligned to aspirations and individual capability, has been shown to increase staff engagement, self-confidence and so improved professional practice resulting in greater student learning and wellbeing outcomes.

In line with the education standards, we frequently assess learning outcomes or academic outcomes, professional practice and staff retention as well as community or parent engagement, however this is frequently in a manner conducive to immediacy. Successful organisations and schools create a culture able to interact with the liveliness of the modern school or workplace. Studies (*State of the Global Workplace Report*, Gallup, 2013) have demonstrated the need for leaders and staff to connect in a purposeful way to embrace change, working efficiently through natural talents and drivers



Motivational Maps ©

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whilst developing diversity of skills to support the dynamics of their role or function. In cultivating this environment, a common language to support the ethos or culture of school assists in ensuring alignment and common understanding. Evidence based positively framed assessments help staff to expand awareness and obtain greater clarity of themselves and others in a non-confrontational manner. In managing through these insights, we enable a platform for leading more effectively through depth of understanding of the current school capacity whilst structuring capability for the future.

Psychologists and emotional intelligence gurus concur that self-awareness is fundamental to developing productive and astute individuals. To build this social and emotional literacy we must start with the self and so support our staff and students in embracing this concept of understanding internal drivers as the cornerstone of continued growth. The goal of any interactions with staff development or student learning is to develop personal drive and so intrinsic motivation to support an atmosphere encouraging change and resilience through growth mindset and so a desire for continual learning. As such, a focus on motivations helps to guide a positive discussion around aspects impacting this energy or demotivating individuals in their daily activities.

### Valuing motivations in leadership

Working across all school systems, we have found undertaking conversations around motivations and strengths to be beneficial in creating whole school strategies for development, leadership behaviours and teacher training. To assist

individuals in accessing insights we utilise motivational mapping as a comprehensive resource, this equally benefits time poor leaders seeking to improve their interactions during their multitude of conversations. The report, or map, offers unique understandings into the individuals preferred motivations and commences a discussion around the utilisation of these impetuses in their daily life with the context of guidance from evidence based assessment into the persons core drivers. This not only shares valuable tips but also supports the leader in refining their questions and inquiry towards the areas in need and those of possibility. Without a tool to provide these insights, it can take multiple conversations, extensive time and allow potential for aggravation through lack of understanding.

Working in education in the United Kingdom, James Sale conducted research into motivations to assess how to improve staff engagement and connection to their roles. From his research, he found students equally benefited from a focus on their intrinsic motivators to support their through transition, social dynamics, academic tasks and other challenges faced. His work interfaces the learnings of Maslow, Career Anchors and The Enneagram in identifying three sources of a person's motivation.

**Relationship** – driven by the heart these motivators focus on people and past experiences in creating energy in actions

**Achievement** – seen as logical, thinking from the head, these motivators engage with the present moment, goals and actions to attain in the now

**Growth** – driven by what can be, the future

potential, these motivators are about reach and utilise a “gut instinct” in decision making

Remembering that motivations are organic and impacted by current circumstances, the analysis responds to immediate dynamics of a person. In our work, we have united with schools and their staff to respond to areas of challenge within relationships, commencing their career or moving schools, living away from family or having a young family to tend to. Staff have valued the opportunity to utilise their professional development in a holistic manner through quality information and knowledge on faculty dynamics, staff fractions, starting their professional career or taking on a leadership position. With recognition of their motivations they have been able to set foundations to breakdown needs and so source additional content or mentors to assist them.

### Impacts on staff energy and engagement

Some common themes we have identified as negatively impacting and so demotivating staff have been their need for or lack of:

**Security** and stability within their lives – This has become a challenge for school leaders managing an increase in temporary staffing contracts or those responsible for moving staff between stages or faculties.

**Clarity of purpose** and meaning – We have found many educators join the sector to improve the quality of children's lives, early in their career they are faced with conflicting demands including administration and regulations, diffusing the deeper sense of connection to what they do.

**Influence** or voice within their role – Aspiring leaders often face difficulty in obtaining times to create an impact or develop skills in persuasion. They can feel stifled by their leader or the aspects of leadership they are naive to in the early parts of their career.

**Relationships** of alignment – Families, faculties and stages come with their own combination of personalities and motivations, these relational aspects are a large consideration for most staff as are the associations they maintain with their students, often their key driver for their career.

**Recognition** of their value – Unique and purposeful praise is needed for staff to hold a sense of appreciation in their role and self, each individual seeks this recognition in their own way and so this can be complicated for schools to address as a whole.

### Effects on student motivation and engagement

Equally, when supporting students facing challenges through transition between school years, family dynamics, disconnect with school or teacher style, we see recurrent areas of importance. When these needs are not met we find students lack the drive to partake in school and/or social activities as they feel removed



from the environment or a disconnect to their core resolve. As a result, they may be acting out and so visually disengaged in their schooling or compliant in their disengagement, not working to their true potential.

Frequent areas disruption or desire with students include:

*Recognition* of achievements and a sense of purpose – when students are lacking a sense of achievement through outcomes or being recognised by those around them, at school and/or at home, they seem disillusioned with the need to continue.

*Solutions* – create tools for self-reward and reflection, such as journaling, or recognize an aligned or supplementary mentor assist these students in reconnecting with gaps in their lives and learning.

*Purpose* is another necessity students do not always see within themselves yet it can lead to them being disheartened by the curriculum or ridged structure of school life, meaning they find it difficult to make connections to life beyond school.

*Solutions* – in building an understanding of the passion for purpose, students are clearer on why they are doing what they are doing at school, home and within their lives. If school is not feeding their sense of meaning work with community and volunteer groups to enhance this area.

Sense of *belonging* is critical from developmental and motivational perspectives for many youths, as demonstrated through Maslow's hierarchy, Glasser's basic needs and a multitude of other research. Students choice of

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relationships and social frameworks enable or disable their sense of fulfilment and support at home and/or at school.

*Solutions* – Increasing personal awareness of the impact of their friendships on their greater world assists students in reflecting on who they are around and how to engage in meaningful relationships. Creating designated or specific relationships for different needs across their lives can guide students through a review of their peers.

### **The role of a leader**

Executive advisers are critical to success of a leadership structure ensuring others grow to work efficiently, respond to issues with optimism and continued conversations. Structured coaching or mentoring programs provide awareness of different skills, styles and personalities to benefit all staff in reaching their potential while supporting students facing difficulty. Executives have the benefit of upskilling and empowering others through influence. These skills of persuasion and influence are essential to leaders as it is their network that will provide resources as mentors, coaches, advisers or support on a short or long-term basis. Having depth of knowledge of the self and others ensures respect for colleague's expertise, capability and experience, supporting others in improving their capacity and

knowledge. Assessing and commencing some dialogue around key drivers assists in creating purposeful interactions towards a goal or outcome owned and actioned by the individual, be it staff or students.

Obtaining evidence-based insights into a person's motivational make up that takes into account their situation and personality assists leaders in proactively managing otherwise consuming situations with a positive framework embedded in growth theory providing tools for intrinsic motivation and self-discovery. Staff and students are seeing the alignment to their greater wellbeing and so the improvement to the quality of their interactions, behaviours and relationships. Leaders are positioned to focus on strategic initiatives within the school with context around staff's unique talents, motivations and skillset.

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