

Podcast series

Leadership in Focus

Episode 13 - Imperfect leadership and system leadership

Discussion guide

The School Leadership Institute's Leadership in Focus podcast series shines a spotlight on school leaders and explores the key issues and challenges they face. This episode explores the concepts of imperfect leadership and system leadership and their application to NSW public schools.

[SLI Leadership in Focus Podcast Series](#)

Speakers

Steve Munby: Leadership consultant and author.

Joanne Jarvis: SLI Director and host of the series.

Discussion points - Part 1 (Imperfect Leadership)

For individuals

1. Steve discusses having an imperfect leadership mindset as a positive leadership attribute – *"...if we understand that we all make mistakes, and that it is a good thing to ask for help, that helps us to be aware of our weaknesses as well as our strengths."*
 - a. Identify your leadership strengths and some areas you would like to strengthen.
 - b. How have you or another leader you have worked with modelled vulnerability and imperfect leadership? How did this impact your understanding and enactment of leadership?
2. *'Moral purpose gives us our 'why' as leaders, it allows us to do the 'hard' things that we don't want to do but know we need to do.'*
 - a. How do you articulate your moral purpose?
 - b. In what ways do your actions demonstrate your commitment to acting upon that moral purpose each day?
 - c. In what ways does your moral purpose sustain you through the more challenging parts of your role?
3. As a leader of a team or a school, being courageous whilst maintaining our curiosity enables us to surface own and others' beliefs and assumptions. Consider a situation where remaining open minded could have or did lead to a deeper understanding of the problem or issue being addressed. Was this a positive leadership moment for you and those you lead? Consider why or why not.
4. Steve discusses the power of journalling to understand his thoughts and to reflect over time on his own leadership. Consider journalling your own leadership reflections over the next few months using the questions Steve raised as prompts:
 - a. Have I shown too much love and not enough power over the past few months or too much power and not enough love?
 - b. How do I need to adjust my approach in the next few months if the organisation is to move forward with people onboard and positive?

For teams

1. In a socially just society, all children get a fair chance to learn and thrive. Brainstorm examples of what your school is doing to support all students to have a voice and thrive at school.
2. Steve points out that *'if you focus only on the individual school you won't achieve equity across the school.'* How has (or how might) deep collaboration with other schools enhance the pursuit of educational excellence in your school context? Identify barriers to equity that impact your school community and discuss how your team can shift mindsets to enable others to take on social responsibility for an equitable NSW public education system.
3. A strong moral purpose and a commitment to social justice are two key drivers for improvement. In what ways does your team create the conditions for a shared vision that places all students at the centre of all decisions to drive improvement in teaching and learning?
4. Steve describes perspective taking and a leader's level of comfort with ambiguity and *'truth seeking'* as critical for effective leadership. How, as a team do we create the conditions for the team to openly and safely share their beliefs and assumptions about the problem(s) we are trying to solve and possible actions?
5. What is the quality and/or structure of conversations in your team meetings that represent the balance between power and love?

Discussion points - Part 2 (System Leadership)

For individuals

1. Steve discusses system level collaboration as a key mechanism for improvement. In what ways do you or could you contribute to deep collaboration with your colleagues across schools or networks around a shared goal for school/system improvement?
2. Steve states: *'One of the key requirements of leaders who are acting as system leaders is that they have empathy and can think themselves into the context that their colleague is experiencing in their school, rather than coming in with ready-made answers that have worked for them in their own school.'* What leadership skills are necessary or would need to be developed to genuinely empathise with other school leaders and then work collaboratively to identify solutions?

For teams

3. Steve discusses the concept of lateral leadership as a way school leaders can help shape and inform policy more successfully. He goes on to say that lateral leadership bridges difficulties between top-down or bottom-up reform and reduces variability between schools. As a team, how are you already engaging with other schools to collectively 'wrestle with issues' and therefore foster more lateral leadership practices? How could you strengthen this commitment?
4. The podcast examines ways senior leadership can address variation in school performance through deep collaboration and knowledge sharing, stating 'leaders can remain as school leaders whilst helping to improve the system'. How can you strategically strengthen deep collaboration and knowledge sharing across schools?
5. Steve emphasises that the highest performing education systems don't leave leadership to chance but ensure that leaders at all stages of their career have access to high quality professional leadership learning.
 - a. How has professional leadership learning supported your leadership practice?
 - b. How has it changed or enhanced the work of your leadership teams?
 - c. Consider the next steps in your own leadership learning and where you may like to focus your commitment.

For your reference

Principal Leadership Learning Program

Steve has presented two sessions as part of the SLI's Principal Leadership Learning Program. In 2023 he presented on 'Imperfect Leadership in Action' while in 2024 his session covered system leadership.

These informative and engaging sessions are available on-demand for all NSW Education staff through the [SLI's Principal Leadership Hub](#). The session recordings include an accompanying discussion guide for leaders and their teams. All staff with an interest in leadership learning are encouraged to visit the hub and engage with the multiple, high-quality resources on offer.

Principal Leadership Learning Resource

DoE staff can also access the [SLI's Principal Leadership Learning Resource](#) which contains readings, podcasts, videos and reflection on the key drivers and core principles of leadership effectiveness, including system leadership, commitment to action, and moral purpose.

Books by Steve Munby

- Munby, S. (2021). *Imperfect Leadership: a book for leaders who know they don't know it all*. Crown House
- Munby, S., & Bretherton, M.C. (2022). *Imperfect Leadership in Action*. Crown House Publishing.