



Reflective Account

How can I better resource my leadership? My journey to a more authentic style of leading... so far.

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This account is about a head teacher's dawning realisation that the stresses and strains of managing a large secondary school can easily take a toll on the health and well-being of an individual, no matter how competent they are. Seeking people outside of the school provided a valuable resource, particularly because they could help the head see herself as a critical part of the larger system influencing behaviours and perceptions often in unintended ways.

What was my question all about?

Starting out

Imagine a vessel brim full – a source and resource that feeds not only the drinker but those who come to the person who drinks, who seek inspiration and ideas, moral courage and permission to be brave, to withstand and hold their places. It's a possible image for leadership.

Since I began teaching I felt the need to have not only inner resource but also a set of skills to equip me for whatever I might encounter. I thought it was my job to inspire young people. I gained energy from them too and grew to understand this as a circle of inspiration. Colleagues and friends were also a necessary part of this support and as I took on more responsibility and became more isolated in the community I served I relied on my partner, PA, acupuncturist, yoga teacher and sometimes my children for that support.

I have aimed through my practice of yoga to see all systems as 'whole'. That means my life (professional/personal), my physical, emotional and intellectual self, and to see myself as making whole the systems I work within like school.

I think I experienced a rush of energy in the first few years both of joining the school I am in now and when I was promoted to acting Head. Always over self-reliant, I had sufficient confidence that I could sustain myself on my leadership journey. This, however, had become for me a lonely task and I fell too easily into introspection to work out my challenges. I do not think I knew how lonely I had become until 2003 when the music I was listening to and my inner space told me I was unhappy and that I was carrying too much on behalf of my school.

I don't think I would have used the latter expression then because I simply thought of this as

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another test of leadership. It had been a difficult year in terms of budget cuts and staff and union reps had expressed some rage against me that I found difficult to comprehend. I had appointed and promoted many of these people, given them compassionate leave when they needed it and now I felt they had turned on me because the school had to make savings and there was the threat of redundancies. It was depicted, by the union representatives, as 'my fault'. Whilst the school moved on from this low point something in me did not forget and my sense of isolation from the staff I had nurtured remained.

Closing down part of myself to survive

Since the beginning of my headship I had been supported by a parent Governor, Jane James who recognized the need for supporting me in those early days and acted as my coach – though I did not call it that then. Here had been a person to talk to outside the school who could simply listen to what I was going through. As I learned to trust this relationship it also gave me the realization that I did not have to solve all my problems alone. I remember thinking of a line from T.S. Eliot at that time: 'Teach me to care and not to care, teach me to sit still.'

What this tells me now is that I was learning that I had to de-sensitize parts of myself to survive the challenge of leadership. I think I had learned to do this a long time before because secondary schools can be brutalizing environments and as a senior leader I had recognized and responded to the need to be 'tough'.

A memory of how I dealt with this closing off of self comes to me from when I had my children. At the time I was working in an inner city school and I returned to work after both maternity leaves in the space of three months. In order to cope with the difference between the extremely loving and caring situation at home with a small child and being a teacher who could be subject to abuse and for whom young people would not show routine compassion, I trained myself to switch off from thinking about my home life and children when at school. I think I unwittingly lost a piece of myself here. I was not stronger, even though I felt the need to be tough, I was more vulnerable. But I did not know that then.

Coaching gave me a brief insight into opening up the possibility of how I felt. That how I felt might have a place to occupy at school as well as at home was really a revelation. Especially as a leader I considered my role to be one of setting a standard and holding a team to account. This was called 'pace-setting' in the words of the NCSL LPSH course and was my dominant leadership style in the eyes of those who had given me feedback. This course was when I encountered coaching as practice and with a theoretical basis and really enjoyed it.

What did I try? Developing coaching support

I took part in an NCSL (National College of School Leadership) regional coaching scheme which began with a 360 degree analysis which then led to a formation of a group of school leaders who coached each other over time. I'm not sure I knew what I was doing when I tried this but it was very interesting and exciting. Most of all at this stage I did not see how coaching could make people better leaders or how, as the LPSH programme asserted, that a coaching style was one adopted by the best leaders.

At last I felt the need to break out of this style I had adopted. I could not but see the needs of my team and their shortcomings as a burden since I had locked all my own needs deep inside of myself and allowed them little or no space at work. How could I care for others or show compassion for them when my own needs were growing more clamorous?

Jane, the governor who had coached me encouraged me to try a different approach. One day she said 'I think you would get a lot from 'constellations'. I envisaged stars, patterns and some kind of game. I had no idea what she meant and it sounded very remote from the language of school. But in 2004 I followed my curiosity to London and attended an organisational constellations workshop run by the Nowhere Foundation as 'an issue holder'.

In a group of 20 or so people, after hearing others describing then watching their issues enacted before them, I was keen when my turn came. The nearest I had come to this kind of thing was experimental theatre. It was just that you stood and felt something and said what you felt. Like an improvisation. I spoke rapidly and described my team weighing heavily on the issues of gender (I was the only woman in my team) and age (only one person in the team was equal in age to me, the others were considerably older).

Each person in the leadership team was represented before me and strangely showed the very behaviours my team showed and spoke the same language they spoke. This was such a shock that I was moved by their collective plight and then, when I came into the constellation, I was overwhelmed by my own place in the team. I still have recall to that feeling of not wanting to occupy the space that I occupied in the team. All in turmoil and with some excitement I went home.

What have I learned and what insights have I got?

The next day, we had arranged a bespoke workshop, as a second part of the process. The facilitator, Judith Hemming who had led the open workshop, came to Bath to work directly with my team. She was not at all surprised by them because she felt she knew them already. They were quite apprehensive.

We were limited by the small space we were in but, amongst other things, we did some simple work around 'place' and hierarchies within the team. At the end of which we sat in an order and my deputy expressed his loyalty and admiration for me. He was sitting right next to me but I could not look at him. It was too much. I remember crying all the way back to the station when I gave Judith a lift home. It was as if something long-bottled had been uncorked. It was a permission to express all the things that I had kept under control for so long. It was a kind of coming of age.

How has my insight affected what I'm doing – and what difference is this making?

This experience prompted me, soon after to appoint my own coach Sue Abbotson, who was also trained in systemic practices, and start my journey of understanding myself as a leader which I had for so long postponed because of pride, fear, and actually 'being' a leader. In itself it has been such a rewarding journey – both personally and professionally. It has done so much to restore me as a leader and develop an approach which allows space for others to lead – or so I hope.

However, I now realize that it took a few years before I came to the knowledge that we could do something more with this method in the school. That it worked with restoring balance to families, that it could give insight to teachers working in their classrooms, and that it could enable teams to free themselves from the things that entangled them, and move forward collectively and creatively. From my place of renewed confidence we began to grow the idea for a project to use systemic principles to fundamentally change the culture of Ralph Allen – **'From Me to Us'**.

(Note to readers: Jane James has since become a programme director on the **nowhere**foundation's **ecl** initiative.)

