

# ISCA 2004

‘Building a culture that embraces  
change and inspires innovation’

*Paul Teys*

## General assumptions .....

- Change is necessary
- Change is vital
- Innovation is a derivative of a healthy school culture

What is the leaders role in creating a healthy school culture that embraces change and inspires innovation?

(Leader = Director, Head, Senior Management)

# Many things, but ...

- Encourage risk taking
- Seek creative solutions to problems
- Bring good ideas to realisation
- Enable the movers and shakers to be successful; say 'yes' often
- Breed innovation by being a reference and resource for people
- Solve problems; don't pose problems
- Say, 'How can I help', often..

# An indicator?

Do people seek your help to  
achieve their goals?

Healthy school (and workplace) cultures

Flight Centre, [Brisbane Lions](#), 3,  
Virgin Atlantic

## Healthy school cultures develop when ..

- Leaders at these schools have high expectations. Teachers come to see these higher standards as a sign of pride and community accomplishment.
- A focus on what is genuinely good for children dominates the conversation, children come first, and learning is the priority.
- The heads are available to talk, to listen and to think through a response rather than to respond too quickly. Time is generously given when needed
- The school has a history and culture of "open" communication, honest dialogue and a willingness on the part of the community to take up concerns appropriately with one or more senior leaders and the leaders respond (as appropriate)

## Healthy school cultures develop when ...

- There is a sense that people are valued in the school and this is demonstrated by the Board, senior leaders and staff, praise is ready and frequent
- Staff, students, and parents, carry a positive, cheerful and committed disposition – there is a lot of noise in the school, it buzzes. There is an atmosphere of excitement! A noisy common room!
- Heads at these schools know the teachers and their families and support them personally and professionally whenever needed and whenever possible. It is more than a 'business'
- Healthy school cultures are ones where recalcitrants are challenged
- Healthy school cultures are ones where the head is not regarded as a politician but, in reality, is a very adept one

# Healthy school cultures emanate from leadership practices and styles.

## Healthy School Cultures & Board performance

- What sort of Board do you have?
- Membership? Entrepreneurial skills?
- What is the Board's capacity to solve problems, not pose problems?
- Has anything been happening that is innovative?
- What is the place of strategic planning in your school?
- What is the Board's performance in creating opportunities from threats?
- How well are your business plans received?
- Does the Board get behind good ideas and assist achievement?

# A caution for Boards

An over-emphasis on the regulatory, legal and statutory requirements can breed a compliance culture that inhibits innovation and visionary decisions and direction.

Is Board/Leader behaviour suffocating innovation?

# The Head's personal philosophy about education

- Are you clear and unambiguous about what is really important (in education)?
- How do you share your personal education philosophy and with whom?
- Consistent, regular and subliminal articulation of philosophy
- How do you rationalise your decisions?

**What is really important?**

**Student learning comes first!**

School leaders must have a personal philosophy and shared mission that has at its core, student learning.

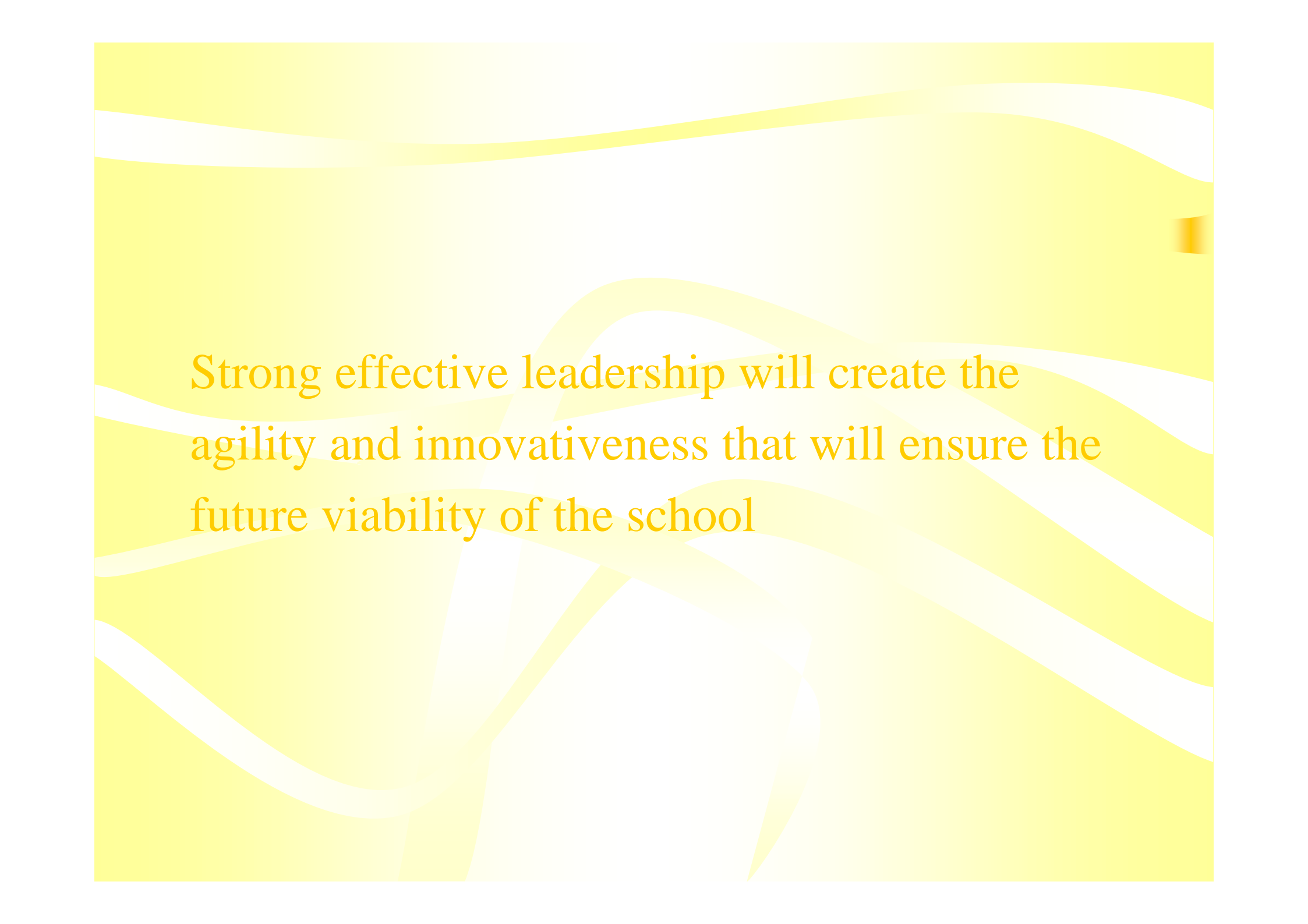
School leaders ought to be committed to providing high-quality learning for all students, initiating, implementing, and integrating programs that improve access to engaged teaching and therefore, quality learning for all students.

# Student learning

- Place student learning at the heart of your mission!
- A sound starting point for examining any change or reform ought to be “Will this be in the best interests of the students in our care?”
- If teachers in your school appreciate and understand that you have a personal commitment to student learning and at the same time sincere interest in the well being of your teachers you are more likely to draw support

# The Board and Head working together

Establishing a clear educational vision and a shared institutional mission is crucial to *learning and leading in a culture of innovation.*

The background is a solid yellow color with several thick, white, wavy lines that flow across the page, creating a sense of movement and fluidity. The lines vary in thickness and direction, some curving upwards and others downwards.

Strong effective leadership will create the  
agility and innovativeness that will ensure the  
future viability of the school

# The Board and Head ....

Together, establish leadership principles

# What are your leadership principles?

- Responding in good timely and thoughtful fashion
- Honesty and integrity, transparency
- Communicating early, reporting often
- Openness and inclusion
- Decisiveness and dependability

Clearly establish and articulate expectations - what can people expect of the Board/Principal?

The Board must act strategically at all times, maintaining a strategic master plan, an associated capital plan, and a long range financial plan (at least 5 years, preferably 10)

Board and Principal Annual Goals, shared view of what is important? And publish them (at least to senior management)

# A word about strategic planning

- A school should never postpone this important process in order to conserve its resources in economic downturns or when facing budgetary pressures.
- The strategic planning process assists schools in allocating and maximising its personnel and financial resources in order to meet its short-term (up to 4 years) needs and ultimately, fulfil its mission.
- However, before entering into this critical process, many schools make a major mistake. They fail to consider the culture and climate of their school.
- This can make the difference between developing a successful plan that lends new energy and direction to the school, versus one that results in the dilution of its mission and a loss of forward momentum or the risk of damaging school culture.

## Political Capital

A necessary and vital pre-requisite for building culture that embraces change is to first build 'political capital'.

- This is crucial to ensuring a positive school climate.
- "Political capital" means the reservoir of good will that a Board/Head has built up with the staff (and community) in the good times that can be drawn down upon safely in the difficult times.

# Political Capital ....

- Representing staff interests to the board, nurturing them, supporting them, fighting for their salary and conditions, recognising their talents, communicating with employees on a personal level frequently, and defending them against unreasonable parent demands and complaints can all add to that reservoir of political capital.
- Sincere valuing of staff – there is no place for a private and public view of 'teachers' – your body language will give you away
- Expenditure of political capital occurs when the head makes a mistake, fires someone, acts suddenly or unilaterally, proceeds too rapidly with some change area or in any other way disappoints, hurts or angers the staff.

# Risk Taking

- School leaders need to create a climate that promotes risk taking and eliminates the fear of failure.
- If done successfully, schools will be agile, responding readily to what needs to be done
- Do you encourage your people to 'have a go', 'try new ideas', 'take risks', and where will you be found if it doesn't work?
- It is important, as leaders, to promote acceptance of the change process and engaging innovation as a positive experience to be understood and embraced, rather than a negative experience to be feared and avoided. Systematic innovation requires a willingness to look on change as an opportunity.

# Build a loyal team

- School leaders should understand and cultivate their roles and the roles that others play within improvement initiatives.
- Seek out "paradigm shifters" and "ideas champions" who are interested in making substantial changes in practice in the name of improved student learning.
- School leaders should understand and cultivate their roles and the roles that others play within improvement initiatives.
- *Who are your champions?*

# Build a loyal team....

- Build a team around you, selected for the project in mind. It is important to have a team of confidantes, advisers, trusted members of staff (not at your immediate level of responsibility) who you can rally behind the cause.
- Replacing grumpy, unhappy, cynical teachers with ones who are more energetic or committed or loyal can dramatically improve a school's climate overnight.
- Conversely hiring the wrong teachers can be a career and school-threatening mistake that may not be easily remedied.
- Head's should not devolve the employment of full time and permanent staff (teaching and non-teaching) appointments to any other member of staff. Together with the recruitment of families, this is the most important responsibility that a Head has. This is building school culture!

# Know what you want to achieve?

- There is an adage that I use in our school, 'begin with the end in sight'. Know what you want to achieve in the long run and begin with that end in sight.
- The senior management team ought to have a clear understanding of the big-ticket items, at the end of the day, what is sought? If you seek to change a specific aspect of school operation, it is essential that you have a clearly established rationale, a planned process of consultation, and a well-articulated conception of the benefit to student learning outcomes.
- The Board needs to give their imprimatur
- The Strategic Plan has to be noisy about the area you have under consideration
- It is also important to understand what is negotiable and what is not. The basis for this has to be the school's strategic plan, goals and objectives, and mission. The sacrosanct values that a school holds dear. There will be decisions that can be taken by the staff that do not have to rest with senior management – release this responsibility.

# A word about teachers

- Teachers are not change averse, they're caregivers.
- Remember why they enter the profession (it is not for the money!) They look to leaders for direction and guidance
- In the main, most staff do not have a day-to-day view of the overall business issues of your school. Teaching is their focus, the day to day routines or "getting the job done".
- When changes are made, many employees lack the broader context or knowledge base of why the change is being made. Often, they do not share the same level of accountability as school leaders. They question, therefore, how the change will impact on them personally. "What will this change mean to me?"
- It is important that you spend the time having conversations with many people about where you are heading and how a planned 'change' fits.
- Allow the staff to have 'wins' (perceived or real). Build confidence and support by offering the staff the opportunity to make decisions

# In conclusion, six critical components of schooling

In my experience, leading successful change and improvement involves developing and managing six critical components of schooling:

- a clear, strong, and collectively held educational vision and institutional mission
- a strong, committed professional community within the school
- learning environments that promote high standards for student achievement
- sustained professional development to improve learning
- successful partnerships with parents, health and human service agencies businesses, universities, and other community organisations
- a systematic planning and implementation process for instituting needed changes

# Cultivate school culture – the elixir

[teysp@mbc.qld.edu.au](mailto:teysp@mbc.qld.edu.au)