



Leading with Heart in PDHPE



Amy Harriman explores some strategies for developing collegial and collaborative leadership both within a PDHPE faculty and at a whole school level . . .

As I write this, amidst the chaos of COVID-19, there is a persistent air of uncertainty in our homes and schools. I watch, as my colleagues navigate this period of unrest, in awe at the resilience and comradery that our profession has shown. I scroll through various social media platforms and take note of the very public acknowledgment from our wider community; resounding echoes of support and respect for teachers, branded ‘essential’ during this pandemic. It has catapulted us into a steep learning curve, richer for the professional learning. The online PDHPE networking space is flooded with professional learning ideas, reviews and messages of support. Led by some of our most ardent public educators, the collective message that ‘we are not alone’ is reassuring. The authentic leadership displayed is unquestionable.

No doubt, what has emerged from this time is not only a renewed trust and belief in our teachers, but the emergence of a new thinking around the definition of effective school leadership.

In many ways, some out of practical necessity, our teachers have stepped up as educational leaders. We have had to be resilient, agile and reflective. We have assessed each step, mindful of our decisions, and their wider impact. Our clear goal: to effectively support quality teaching and learning in an unpredictable time.

It is important we don’t lose sight of the invaluable learnings this period has provided us. We need to cultivate these insights, taking forward what has worked and can be applied to great effect in the future. What shifts in thinking and pedagogical practice have occurred? What can we learn from other teams’ success? Taking the time to reflect on our experiences should ensure we sustain the momentum we need to continue to make our profession stronger and more effective in driving improvement in our schools beyond 2020.

We are part of a system - *not a single faculty.*

The last few months have affirmed the importance of relationships and connectedness. We are stronger, better practitioners when we connect, share and learn. Effective schools are built on strong relationships within, and beyond, the school gates. This makes two-way communication and meaningful dialogue with your colleagues critically important. The best leaders encourage an open flow of ideas, throughout the school, to harness creativity in exploring and devising solutions and improving practice. Furthermore, such cross-faculty interaction creates a culture that assists in breaking down the walls that separate teachers from one another, freeing teachers from the silos we can see emerge.

Joining your PDHPE professional associations, such as Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER), and engaging meaningfully in what they offer, is a good start in establishing links with wider networks. This is just the foundation. Consider exploring opportunities for cross-faculty initiatives within your school and make genuine efforts to connect with schools, both within your network, and beyond, to develop reciprocal and sustainable relationships. Reaching out with a



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healthy curiosity can spark some of the most innovative, impactful initiatives and supports the notion of ‘working smarter, not harder’, by way of collective efficacy.

Connect the day to day to the big picture.

Take the time every day to acknowledge that what you do is part of something bigger. Schools are busy places, and with so many competing demands, it is easy to lose sight of our real purpose. Contextualising your teaching is essential if you want your work to connect with your students and the vision of the school.

As we approach the end of a second year of NSW PDHPE syllabus implementation, it is critical to establish time to reflect on, and thoroughly evaluate, the success of your programs with your team. As part of your evaluation, consider the practices you have embedded to support genuine connections with your students and with broader school priorities. Are your colleagues speaking the same language when promoting the PDHPE propositions that underpin our syllabus? Consider the extent to which you and your colleagues are engaging with goals set to improve literacy, numeracy or in promoting holistic wellbeing. How well do the central themes, scope and intentions of your programs align with wider school practices and priorities? What role does authentic student agency play in your decision making?

As a faculty leader, I need to ensure, before we undertake any new or revised initiative, that we know how we are going to measure our success. Student voice plays an integral part in this process. So knowing the questions we want to ask our students and knowing what we want to measure are key to ensuring our work is having impact and connecting with our students.

PDHPE teachers are well placed to meaningfully connect curriculum with broader school wellbeing programs and initiatives. Aligning wellbeing initiatives, such as your school’s wellbeing policy and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) targeted programs including Be You, with your work in the classroom is rewarding for everyone. It reinforces important messages, yielding greater impact and reminds students you are part of a team on the same page, collectively invested in improving their sense of connectedness and personal wellbeing.

Walk your talk

Modelling the behaviour you want to see is powerful in influencing positive change, practices and in building strong relationships. Effective school teams are built on trust, which is developed by nurturing honesty and demonstrating integrity in the classroom and in staff communication. Cultures with high trust can see comradery and staff wellbeing improve, even in the most challenging of times, due to relationships forged in adversity.

Belonging to a PDHPE faculty often means being heavily invested in whole school projects including sporting programs and other wellbeing initiatives that demand your time and energy, often leaving you feeling drained. This can leave us vulnerable to poor health and, potentially, burnout. Think about the initiatives in place to genuinely nurture staff wellbeing and promote a sense of team. My faculty currently



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lead a High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) session for our staff one afternoon each week. It is 45 minutes of weight training and cardio but the time spent together, and the relationships formed, have strengthened our sense of team and role modelled our commitment to staff wellbeing.

Essentially, the PDHPE syllabus aims to provide opportunities for students to “value and appreciate influences on personal health practices and demonstrate a commitment to lead and promote healthy, safe and active lives for themselves, others and communities” (NESA, 2018, p.13). We want to practise what we champion in our classrooms. For this reason, we need to prioritise self-care so we can maintain our health and wellbeing. So too, ‘walking your talk’ with your colleagues is critical in supporting and promoting healthy practices. If you insist on colleagues maintaining a work-life balance, exemplify this behaviour through your own actions – particularly after work hours.

Cultivate an intellectually humble mindset

‘We don’t know what we don’t know’. This often-repeated reassurance, offered to early career teachers as they navigate their first years of teaching, remains invaluable advice for all of us, regardless of our experience. Maintaining a healthy self-awareness of our cognitive limitations supports us to engage more constructively with our colleagues.

Resnick (2018) describes intellectual humility as “being actively curious about your blind spots”. Being responsive to reason, and remaining honest about our development opportunities, allows us to be open-minded and receptive to a multitude of possibilities.

Role-modelling a humble open-mindedness will set the tone for a safe learning space in our classrooms and our staffrooms. This is particularly the case when teaching sensitive content in PDHPE. These lessons rely on teachers creating safe, supportive spaces where students are comfortable sharing varying points of view, values and beliefs. By way of modelling a humble mindset, teachers set the tone in making these lessons a success.

Remember, people matter most.

Eleanor Roosevelt famously said, *“To handle yourself, use your head; to handle others, use your heart.”*

Our capacity to lead is dependent on the relationships we build around us. Getting to know people, their strengths, and what gives them purpose, is essential in becoming a leader people want to follow. What makes you an even more effective leader is both knowing how to leverage people’s strengths and providing guidance with a mindful heart. Listening to my team’s concerns through the COVID-19 period has been a window into more than the anxiety we have experienced in ensuring continuity for learning for our students. It has been an insightful revelation of the strengths we possess in adapting to an unpredictable series of changes and challenges. Although we have been physically distanced, ironically, by way of consistent communication and support, this period has brought us closer.



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Being part of a PDHPE team offers real opportunities to lead faculty, whole school and systemic initiatives. Synonymous with high energy, the PDHPE team is one of the more visible faculties in a school. We need to make sure that leadership is distributed among teachers, enabling opportunities to develop valuable skills. Where there is resistance, carefully consider how to better organise teams to allow teachers to lead in more fulfilling roles or tasks. Approach this from the position that everyone has a strength they can contribute. Validating the unique qualities and experiences teachers offer is powerful in making people feel valued and knowing that their contributions matter.

In times like these, we have the chance to seize the opportunity to grow as leaders and professionals. We have a once in a generation opportunity to reimagine the way we teach and lead. By taking time to learn from each other, self-reflect and grow, we have a chance to authentically lead, and build, stronger teams, classrooms and communities together. In the end, the degree to which you build, and inspire, your people to optimise personal growth is the best measure you have to judge your success as an authentic leader.

References:

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