

# Not So Simple: the Threats to Leadership Sustainability.

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## Introduction

This article begins by examining the possible meanings of 'sustainability', and argues that most meanings are prescriptive rather than descriptive in nature: they tend, either overtly or covertly, to recommend the particular end-states that writers desire. The article then looks at the threats to leadership sustainability, suggesting that a lack of sustainability is not only caused by excessive volume of work and lack of preparation for the role, but also by how different stakeholders view the role. Greater sustainability, it is proposed, comes from recognizing the 'wicked' rather than the 'tame' nature of the role, and of the need to apply solutions which reflect the 'wicked' nature of many leadership challenges. Finally, links are made between leadership sustainability and the sustainability of larger social, economic and environmental systems, suggesting that they have many similar causes and many similar remedies.

## Hidden Meanings of 'Sustainability'.

The term *sustainability* is similar in its use in both educational leadership and larger contexts, being used in both to focus upon preserving that which is valued - whether that be ensuring the survival of the Siberian tiger, the development of a more equal society, or educational leaders who equally encourage academic and affective excellence. Of course, one individual may hold these views, but others are perfectly entitled to disagree with such statements of desirable sustainability. They may not agree for example that humanity should always aim to create more equal societies, or that educational leadership should aim for an equality of academic and affective excellence. The important lesson from this is that there is no one meaning to the term, because it is not *descriptive*, but *prescriptive* - an overt or covert recommendation for what the speaker or writer wants to be sustainable. 'Sustainability', along with terms like 'excellence', 'quality' and 'efficiency', can then permit advocacy of particular issues to slip through the net of critical appraisal, and for actions to be accepted because such words have been attached to them. One must therefore be careful in adopting definitions of sustainability before the assumptions underpinning its usage

are fully examined. Educational leaders in particular should be very clear about whether they agree with the form of sustainability being advocated, and in terms of the sustainability of their own role, they need to be aware not only of the literature on leadership sustainability, but also of the proposed solutions, because these can be underpinned by different assumptions about the causes of unsustainability. It is to these issues that this paper turns.

## **Quantitative and Qualitative Threats to Leadership Sustainability**

Research on leadership sustainability tends to suggest that unsustainability occurs when individuals fail to apply for the role (leading to a shortfall in recruitment), when people in the position retire early, and also when individuals do not remain long in the principalship. The evidence on this is fairly constant, going back two decades at least (e.g. Fullan (1997) and Williams (2001) on the North American continent, Troman and Woods (2000) in the UK, Hodgen and Wylie (2005) in New Zealand). The same concerns are still being raised (e.g. Berliner 2011; Fuller 2012; *Times Educational Supplement*, 2013; Doyle and Locke, 2014; Reames, Kochan, and Zhu, 2014). Moreover, and as Fuller (2012) points out, threats to principal sustainability also produce wider sustainability threats, for the high turnover of principals correlates with the high turnover of teachers, which in turn correlates with poorer student attainment.

Governments tend to argue that threats to leadership sustainability are due to a lack of preparation for the role, as well as recognition of the sheer volume of work demanded from those currently in it. When these are perceived as major causes, resolutions follow logically: the provision of training before individuals take on the role, the identification and fast-tracking of individuals who show early aptitude, and movement away from the advocacy of heroic charismatic leader role models, and towards more participative, shared, and distributed models of leadership, in order to facilitate the devolution of responsibility to wider management teams.

Acknowledging and remediating the sheer volume of principals' work certainly addresses part of the problem. We live in an age of what Gronn (2003) calls 'greedy' organizations, and what Starr (2015, p. 130) describes as 'the intensification and 24/7 nature of educational work', where continual

"function creep" is seen in many organisations in many countries. Much of this extra work is hidden from public view in the additional hours at home, not just on weekday evenings, but also at weekends and on 'holiday'. If leaders don't do this, then the job begins to run away from them. So a Catch-22 situation can develop, where work requires unsustainable hours if individuals are to keep on top of it, but where the job becomes unsustainable if they don't. Either route is likely to lead to extra worry and stress, to the four-in-the-morning syndrome, and to less personal sustainability. Bottery et al. (2008) found that even in a relatively supportive educational culture like Hong Kong, principals nevertheless felt the same work pressures as their less supported UK counterparts due to the proliferation of governmental 'guidance' and legislation. Such imposition is also seen in the US, for as Young and Szachowicz (2014, p. 1), suggest:

*'Principals have always had mandates...But never have there been so many mandates being implemented simultaneously... [and] implementing [many] simultaneously can prove a mighty challenge for even the most seasoned principals. And doing all of this while managing previously existing mandates, from grants to accreditation, can seem overwhelming.'*

The stress caused by overwork is then a serious contributory factor to problems in the recruitment and retention of educational leaders. However, this may not be the only cause. Threats may also be produced if leaders feel that their governments do not agree with them on educational priorities, or if they feel they are not sufficiently trusted or respected, both of which can impact heavily on morale (Bottery, 2004). Finally, individuals may believe some courses of action are highly desirable, but feel there is neither the time nor the support to pursue these, because of the higher priority given to other areas by governments, or by other stakeholders. This is the kind of incommensurability of demands and values found in the UK by Hoyle and Wallace (2005), by Doyle and Locke (2014) in the US, and by Starr (2015) in Australia. Threats to sustainability may then be based as much on conflicting value positions as on issues of preparation and overwork.

Yet the situation may be even more challenging than this. Some writers suggest that the causes of many pressures on leadership sustainability lie beyond education. Levin (2003, 2010), for example, has argued that much of educational legislation internationally has been driven by market-based

rationales, which have produced low-trust cultures in educational and public sectors generally, with quantitative measures of student achievement acting as market information for 'service consumers', backed by the creation of punitive inspection regimes to ensure market values act as the principal drivers of policy. Yet as Levin (2010, p. 742) points out '...if there is one thing we have learned about educational policy, it is that ordering people to do better without engaging their hearts and minds cannot succeed'. And when hearts and minds are not engaged, sustainability is threatened.

### **Leadership, Complexity and Sustainability.**

'Sustainability' can then mean different things to different parties, and these meanings can conflict, and threats to leadership sustainability come from a variety of sources: from the quantity of the role; from a perceived lack of trust; from a lack of appreciation of the value conflicts generated by different stakeholder demands, and finally from governments importing values and practices from other sectors, which may be perceived as inappropriate to 'good' educational practice.

In such a situation, the role of the educational leader is likely to be challenging and complex one, and this complexity is also a major challenge to the sustainability of the role, particularly if the degree of complexity is not fully recognized. Indeed, as Bore and Wright (2009) point out, there are likely to be many who want to describe educational problems as comprised of neatly defined tasks, for which similarly neat solutions can be found. The desire to define many leadership problems as being of a 'tame' nature is in part explicable by what current policy climates also demand of politicians: the need for policies which fit into electoral timetables. This normally means a 4-5 year window for them to make their mark by doing something different from their predecessors in the role, to get practitioners to implement these new ideas, and to produce results in a form easily understood by electorates. Politicians can then be as much victims as professionals, even if it is likely that those policy implementers suffer the long-term consequences more, as most politicians move onto other roles, whilst professionals normally remain to manage newly imposed changes, unless they decide to leave a role which they see as increasingly unsustainable.

Indeed to fully appreciate the complex role of educational leaders, one

needs to distinguish between two or three different kinds of complexity that educational leaders face. A first kind derives from the fact that causations in both the human and natural environments work more in a systemic manner than in a neat linear one. *A* doesn't simply cause *B*, which simply causes *C*, which simply causes *D*; more likely is that *A* causes *B*, which causes *C*, *X* and *P*, which then affect *L*, *S* and *V*, before returning to affect *A* and *X* again. This means that many factors will be difficult for leaders to control and predict after the first couple of effects, and therefore are also increasingly less likely to be fully understood.

Yet even then this still assumes that one can get to know all the causal chains involved, and what a full web of such chains would look like. Yet, as Rumsfeld (2002) points out, in humanity's understanding of the world, there are not only 'known knowns'; there are also 'known unknowns', and even more problematic, there are also the 'unknown unknowns'. The latter two groups are almost certainly the largest, and many of them are likely to be the root of many complex problems. As the Jewish joke says, if you want to make God laugh, just tell him (or her) your plans. With so many known unknowns, and unknown unknowns, life really isn't that understandable or controllable, and neither is leadership.

However, there is a further kind of complexity, what Rittel and Weber (1973) called the area of 'tame' and 'wicked problems'. We have met 'tame' problems earlier: problems, it is believed, which can be neatly defined, and for which similarly neat solutions can be found. And there are many pressures in the modern world enticing us into the belief that this is the principal form that problems take. The 'fast' nature of many policies, the demand for quick and easily understood results, the need by the media to have sound-bite solutions to fit a 30-second slot on a news programme, are all contributory factors.

However, tame problems are not necessarily *simple* problems, even if they are sometimes confused with them. They are normally formulated in definitive and easily understood ways, so that if actions are performed in the prescribed manner, one can be certain that a problem will be solved. Putting the correct key in a lock and turning it the right way is an obvious example; but stripping down a motorboat engine, even if more complex, is still equally tame, for the objective will be accomplished simply by following the instructions. It will also be clear that there are only a limited number of

ways of understanding a tame problem and its solution, and both problem and solution will be standardized in form, so one can safely ignore the context within which the problem is located. Importantly, then, if a solution fails, the fault will not lie in the solution: it will almost necessarily lie with the person doing the implementing. If this is the case, then responsibility for failure lies with the implementer, and failure will only be eliminated by their better training, or by getting rid of them. In such a tame world, leaders who aren't coping very well, can't have read or understood the requirements of the policy properly, or, even worse, are individuals who haven't signed on to the policy agenda, and may be deliberately undermining it. Again, fault and blame lie squarely with the implementer. And for leaders who accept the view that their world and their role are largely composed of tame problems, guilt, and feelings of personal failure are probable consequences. And that way again leads to leadership unsustainability.

### **The Limitations of the Tame, the Embrace of the Wicked.**

Applying these ideas to management and leadership, Grint (2008, p. 12) has argued that tame problems are essentially *management* problems as they are '...akin to puzzles for which there is always an answer....' whilst *leadership* problems are very different because they are '...rooted in the distinction between certainty and uncertainty'. Yet many in leadership roles may see their job perceived as heavily determined by what they are asked or ordered to do, and if most of what is expected is composed essentially of tame problems, then some 'leaders' may well accept the reality of a world of the tame with all its blame and guilt; whilst others with more reflective ability and courage to interpret the complexity of their role will likely feel frustrated, their leadership skills under-used, and under-respected. In both ways is sustainability threatened.

Yet the world is not very tame. Much of life is messy, and many leadership problems don't have simple instructions permitting off-the-shelf solutions to be applied, but need sorting by individuals with unique combinations of characteristics, values, and skills. These problems then are Rittel and Webber's 'wicked' problems, further developed by writers like Rayner (2006), Bore and Wright (2009), Verweij and Thompson (2013), and Bottery (2016). Wicked problems have a number of characteristics:

First, they don't possess definitive sets of guidelines or procedures. There are no rulebooks for problems like enhancing creativity, raising morale, or boosting standards sustainably. There are so many variables involved in these problems, and they depend so much on personality and context, that anything like a 'tame' solution, will probably be as damaging as it is ineffective. Individual, even unique, solutions need to be sought.

Second, unlike tame approaches, wicked approaches recognise that problems aren't necessarily 'problems' in any objective sense: they are defined as such because of the prior value judgements individuals bring to the situation. Dandelions aren't problems in your garden if you don't mind a few wild plants; they *are* a problem if you believe in 'weeds' as opposed to 'flowers', which then clash with a personal aesthetic value of what a garden 'should' look like. Similarly, taking extra time over a person's concerns may be a problem for those concerned primarily with time management, but much less so for those more concerned with the well-being of that individual. And failure to achieve a particular target with initial framings of possible solutions, is not a problem (and certainly not something to blame an implementer for) if the target is not seen as a desirable objective. And it will also not be seen as a problem if it is recognised that the problem solving is required at a wicked level, as it is likely to involve some creative leaps into the dark, which of their nature cannot guarantee successful solutions. Indeed, the appreciation of a wicked world suggests that even when a solution seems to have resolved a particular problem, we may not actually know if this has really happened, or whether we have simply eliminated its current symptoms, with the problem reappearing in a different form later down the line.

Finally, and following from this, 'tame' terminology is underpinned by an objectivist understanding of external reality - that there are nothing but 'real' problems 'out there' to be solved - and that if sufficient time and information is gained, it is perfectly possible to provide definitive, universally agreed framings of these problems and their solutions. If this is possible, then others can be given full responsibility for successful implementation, and full blame if they don't manage this. Yet policy makers, leaders and managers may all fail to see that they, like every other human being, impose their own understandings and frames on this external world, and in doing so select from what is available to define an issue as a problem. As E.H. Carr (1982) said, selecting problems is like fishing: we choose what fish or problem we want to catch, we decide where the fish or the problem

exists, and we select the equipment or inspection methods by which to catch or solve it. Indeed, human beings have to impose such individual framings, because of what they are: sentient beings with limited sensory capacities, each with a brain, locked in darkness and silence, which has to picture a world to which it has no direct access. It is only through these individual framings, then, that we are able to make any sense of what is happening externally. But such activity, necessary as it is, cannot guarantee that any particular framing is the objectively 'right' one.

What 'wickedity' points to, then, is the need to embrace the complexity of the processes involved in much educational leadership. A failure to do so can lead to real surprises at unexpected outcomes, which can then generate more unexpected problems and threats. Indeed, much policy rhetoric may fail to see such complexity, and in consequence, many problems may arise precisely because thinking rests upon linear assumptions of causality. However, if many challenges need to be located within systems neither simple nor linear, but complex and non-linear, then the framing and definition of both problems and solutions need developing to mirror such complexity, even if one still has to accept that it may simply be impossible to prescribe solutions that completely resolve a problem. In a complex, non-linear world, best solutions may only be partially successful, and some problems may simply be insoluble. This is not what many policy makers, and indeed many educational leaders, may want to hear. The former may have policy agendas to 'deliver' before a forthcoming election; the latter will know that in low-trust cultures, failure to 'succeed' is highly likely to be seen as personal failure, rather than as their attempt to take into account the complex nature of a particular problem, which may make it a long-term challenge rather than a quick fix.

Many challenges that have occurred in leadership policy and practice over the last 20 or 30 years, then, like devolving leadership, developing trust, and leading across institutions, constitute complex endeavours, suffused with differing aims, claims and values, which may generate difficult and sometimes insoluble problems. A belief in control, linearity, and the assignation of blame to individuals and organizations when solutions do not conform to a particular timetable may then lead to yet more vigorous simplistic interventions from outside, which in their turn may lead to initiative overload, professional stress and guilt, early retirements, and a



disinclination to apply for the role. Yet again, down that road unsustainability rears its head.

## **The Role of the Educational Leader in a Wicked World**

Given such challenges, how should this affect the way in which the educational leadership role is viewed? A first way is in terms of what needs to be understood. This paper has suggested the need to appreciate a world and a role involving a much more complex reality and causality than normally understood. This not only requires a better appreciation of how people frame problems, and the need to recognize a more limited degree of predictability and control than is normally assumed. It also requires the recognition of a greater likelihood of some success being achieved with wicked problems by downplaying single, simple 'silver bullet' solutions, and by adopting broader, more complex, and more messy 'silver buckshot' solutions (see Rayner, 2006, Verweij et al. 2012, Bottery, 2016).

Second, it means that leaders need to understand their role differently. In a world of uncertainty, they need to be able to adopt a stronger degree of what the poet John Keats described as 'negative capability' - the ability to remain comfortable with uncertainty, to provide themselves and others with the time and space for reflection rather than jumping to too-quick solutions. More than that, they need to recognize that they do not begin problems with clean sheets, but are dealing with existing 'messy' problems in particular contexts, and therefore need to be what Grint (2008) described as 'bricoleur' leaders, who patch together the best solutions they can, with as many viewpoints as possible contributing to the solution, as the best solutions are likely to be the ones that build upon as strong a coalition of views as possible.

Finally, and because of the above, they need to see their role very differently from how it is normally conceived. Much more than is normally the case, it needs to be seen as a role of helping others to more genuinely participate in identifying problems and generating solutions. It is then, not primarily a role which primarily provides the visions, the answers to problems, and the charting of courses for others to follow. Leadership instead needs to be seen much more as a role creating the appropriate intellectual and social conditions which helps others to better deal with wicked problems, of leaders being the catalysts for wicked solutions rather

than of being the providers.

### **Final Thoughts: Linking global and leadership sustainability.**

This paper began by noting that the term 'sustainability' can be used in similar ways for discussions on educational sustainability and for larger socio-economic and environmental contexts. It concludes by suggesting that such connections are much larger than definitional ones, for as argued elsewhere (Bottery, 2016) one major connection between the sustainability of educational leadership and larger environmental, political, social and economic issues of sustainability lies in sharing similarly complex threats to their sustainability, particularly in terms of the over-use of resources in both, and in the damage to the contexts and environments within which they work or live. By examining such similarities, light can then be thrown on the nature and reasons for problems in both areas. Indeed, a further link can be made, for not only do such comparisons make clearer the nature of the threats to leadership sustainability, but, and despite differences in scale, they also share some surprisingly similar remedies. Such remedies point to the need for a greater degree of intellectual humility in how we treat this world and those living within it, and also for the need to practice a greater degree of sufficiency in the manner in which its 'resources' are utilized. The usual arrow of causation may then in part be reversed: understanding how to resolve problems of leadership sustainability may also point towards better resolutions for larger sustainability issues. By better understanding their own sustainability, educational leaders could then provide a more informed leadership in addressing larger issues of global sustainability.

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