

Principled Leadership in Challenging Times

Steve Munby

Many writers have tried to pin down the key elements of principled leadership.

In the UK, the seven principles of public life—known as the Nolan Principles—were set up in 1995 to apply to anyone holding public office.

- > Selflessness
- > Integrity
- > Objectivity (being impartial and fair)
- > Accountability
- > Openness (transparency)
- > Honesty
- > Leadership (behaving in a way that demonstrates these principles)

As general virtues, it is hard to argue with this list. But are there some principles that apply particularly to schools and to school leaders?

Professions such as law or medicine have their own code of conduct which is regulated by the profession itself. Should we have a similar code specifically for educators?

I personally think that the profession should take responsibility, as other professions do, for setting out guidance on matters of conduct.

But, for us as individual leaders, will a list of principles, however well defined, be sufficient to guide our behaviour? Maybe not.

They are a basis for reflection, but we need to grapple with the issues ourselves. Before I suggest ways we might do that, I want to explain why unexamined principles are not enough. For me, there are three pitfalls here.

It is possible to be principled ... but prejudiced

Many of the most appalling leaders of the last hundred years were of course highly principled. Think: Hitler in Germany; Pol Pot in Cambodia; and one of the world's more recent monsters, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-styled caliph of the Islamic State.

In a much milder way we can probably all think of leaders we know today who combine principle with prejudice.

Principles are fluid and are affected by culture and context

Surely, you might think, certain principles are set in stone—timeless. For example, isn't it always right to respect others and to treat all individuals equally? Well, at a general level these principles may well be timeless, but in terms of their application they change over time.

Two hundred and fifty years ago many so-called principled people found the slave trade acceptable.

One hundred years ago being sent to prison for practising homosexuality was generally accepted by the British public.

Sixty years ago children with some special educational needs were described as uneducable and 'retarded' and weren't even allowed to go to school.

What is right and what is wrong, what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, seems to change over time and according to context.

When I started teaching in the 1970s corporal punishment was legal and widely accepted, and indeed expected in schools. Now it is unthinkable that schools should beat children.

And of course once you start looking at principles and ethics in other countries your sense of what is 'right' can be even more challenged.

Looking back in 20 years' time, what will we see as the ethical shortcomings of today's educators? What do we currently tolerate or accept that in 20 years' time will be seen as abhorrent—just as we now see corporal punishment as abhorrent? I don't know. Will we be ashamed and embarrassed in 2037 that in 2017 we didn't take children's mental health and wellbeing as seriously as we took their physical health?

A clear set of principles and values is not enough: we need to be principled and effective

Ethical behaviour is an essential precondition for trust. But leaders must also be competent at doing the job. Some of the weakest school leaders I have ever come across have been principled; acting ethically but letting the staff and children down by failing in their core responsibility to make things better for those they serve.

You may have read about the recent study 'How to turn around a failing school' by the Centre for High Performance. The researchers tracked leadership styles and educational outcomes in 160 secondary academies in England. They asked two interesting questions: What do headteachers (principals) do to bring about rapid school improvement? And what happens in an improving school after the departure of the headteacher?

They called one group of headteachers 'the philosophers'. Teachers are very excited when the philosopher first arrives, as she or he tells them how important their work is and how much value they add to society. They start going on trips to observe other teachers and invite teachers to their school, to share ideas and approaches. But fundamentally, nothing changes. Students carry on misbehaving, parents are still not engaged,

and the school's outcomes stay the same. When asked why performance hasn't improved, the philosopher says, 'These things take time. Teaching is an art and it can't be transformed overnight'.

This is principled but ineffective leadership.

The researchers were also unimpressed by the work of specialist 'super heads'—they called them 'the surgeons'. The surgeons typically took tough action but did not stick around very long. They could be ruthless in the way that they dealt with staff and were keen on excluding students in order to maximise exam results. They were skilled at the quick fix. They focused not so much on the children and their learning but on what is needed to do well in the accountability system—whatever it takes. While they usually brought about an immediate improvement in results, these results were not sustained after their departure.

So here we have leadership that is not principled and, in the long run, isn't even effective.

The most successful approach came from a group of heads the researchers called 'the architects'. The architects took a more holistic view of what it takes to move a school in the right direction. They focused on teaching and leadership, by introducing coaching, mentoring and development programmes. But they did other things too: bringing in systems to improve student behaviour, and collaborating with other organisations to open up opportunities and to build sustainable solutions.

Interestingly, the surgeons—the super heads—were typically paid much more than the architects. The surgeons were also more likely to have received a government honour, such as a knighthood or damehood.

Shortly after the so-called surgeons left, the schools' results dropped by an average of 6 per cent. In contrast, the improvement continued in the schools led by the architects in the three years after their departure.

This is ethical and effective leadership, and it is sustainable. You are just not very likely to get a knighthood or a damehood for it!

The researchers asked two interesting questions: What do headteachers (principals) do to bring about rapid school improvement? And what happens in an improving school after the departure of the headteacher?

So leading with principles is desirable, but not as straightforward as it first seems. Not all principles are 'good'; principles are relative and change over time; and being principled on its own is not enough—we need to combine principles with the ability to lead and manage effectively.

I believe that we each have to make our own personal choices about values and principles in our leadership. This is very much a personal thing. I want to go a little further than the Nolan Principles and share a few of the overriding principles that I have tried to use to guide my decisions and behaviour over the years.

Keep the focus on moral purpose and social justice

One of the recurrent themes for me has been the centrality of moral purpose to great school leadership.

And perhaps the greatest moral imperative for educators is the need to fight against the corrosive impact of poverty. It is not just about economic poverty. It is also a question of helping children to escape from a poverty of ambition. And to escape from a poverty of experience in terms of life-enhancing opportunities in areas such as the arts and sport and travel. All my experience—nationally and internationally—tells me that this is fundamental to what we are trying to do.

There is a lot of talk just now in the UK about social mobility, particularly in the context of grammar schools. I have no problem with social mobility, but in terms of moral purpose the focus for me is too narrow.

Social mobility means increasing the extent to which clever poor children can get top jobs. That is a good thing, but the bigger prize is social justice. In a socially just society all children, whether they are poor or rich, whether or not they are gifted, whether or not their parents push them forward, get a fair chance to learn and to thrive.

And, in spite of much progress over the years, this is under threat at the moment. The more that we on the one hand give school leaders responsibility for leading the whole system, for sorting out admissions and for supporting school improvement in other schools as well as their

own—and on the other hand judge their whole career success on how their own individual school performs—the bigger the social equity challenge becomes.

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Who, under a school-led system, picks up responsibility for every child across that system? Who has the lead role for social equity?

If we are to address this issue properly in a school-led system, it will require a huge amount of selflessness, generosity and collective moral purpose across a group of schools. It will require principled leadership in challenging times.

Be constantly aware of leadership's power for good or ill

In the 1970s there were two leaders of resistance against unjust apartheid in their countries: Nelson Mandela and Robert Mugabe. Both were lauded by some as honourable men fighting for justice and were dismissed by others as terrorists. Both leaders later became presidents of their free, independent countries. They faced huge challenges but their countries had great potential to be successful. Both made decisions on how they were going to lead. One led in a selfless, principled way to unite the country, heal wounds and break down barriers. The other encouraged corruption, violence and hate, leading to economic disaster. Their stories demonstrate the power of leadership for good or for ill.

Looking back at my years as the leader of three different organisations, I know that I have wrestled with many ethical issues. Sometimes, perhaps, I have not wrestled hard enough. I am clear that there have been occasions when I have made mistakes; times when my judgement, in retrospect, was too narrow. I have not in every case navigated my way through the grey areas well, or, indeed, even identified what the grey areas were.

What I am saying is that we need to reflect upon and review our own personal principles. And that we need to be very aware of how our behaviour as leaders can have unintended consequences and have a negative impact on the culture.

We need to be very aware of how our behaviour as leaders can have unintended consequences

I remember many years ago when I worked in a local authority. One of my senior team was a very likeable person. Always seemed enthusiastic and professional. Seemed to be pretty good at his job. When one of my finance team said that they had some concerns something was not quite right about his budget, I was absolutely convinced that it would be nothing. Just a minor glitch in the system. But of course I said to go ahead and investigate.

It turned out that this polite, professional member of my senior team had been paying his own mortgage out of public funds. I was shocked.

Now, of course he ended up in prison, but I had to ask myself as a leader how come the operating systems under my leadership weren't strong enough to prevent that happening, or to at least allow us to spot it more quickly. And what was it about my style of leadership that made him think that he could possibly get away with it?

I was so focused on the outward-facing aspect of the role—school improvement—that I had neglected to do enough to incentivise good internal financial management. My behaviours had unintended consequences. I became much more robust in my approach to financial matters after that!

In the 1990s the management at Sears Roebuck gave car mechanics a big increase in dollars per hour if they completed more car repairs at a faster rate. The employees responded to the incentive by repairing things that weren't even broken. The management had helped to turn the workforce into liars and fraudsters.

When colleagues in our organisations behave in undesirable ways it is a good idea to ask ourselves as leaders whether our own behaviours or systems are actually encouraging them to do so.

I have had the privilege of visiting large numbers of schools all over England and seeing how different leaders operate. More recently, I've visited schools and education systems all over the world, too. I have seen at first hand the difference good, effective and principled leadership makes—and the impact of weak or poor leadership. I have had my own assumptions challenged by that

experience and have had to ask myself some hard questions about morality and principles. I have been shocked by what I have seen internationally in terms of corruption, abuse and complacency but I have also been moved to tears by the moral courage that I have observed from leaders in schools and across whole systems in different places around the world.

We should never, ever, ever underestimate the power we have as leaders to either do good or to do damage, and we should always be sensitive to unintended consequences of our leadership.

Foster trust as the basis for successful leadership

Unless we actively demonstrate that we are principled professionals, we will fail to win and retain the trust of parents, teachers and young people.

You don't need me to tell you that parental trust is gold dust. Think about a parent who, for whatever reason, does not trust you or does not trust the school. How much of your professional time is spent on this parent? How much harder is it to educate this child well?

Winning trust from teachers through principled leadership is also extremely important. People don't expect leaders to be their friends or to take their side in some unconditional way when things go wrong. But people will choose to follow your lead because you have earned their respect through your demonstrable competence and your integrity. In their well-known book *Why should anyone be led by you?*, Gareth Jones and Robert Goffee show that 'authenticity'—honesty and integrity—are the keys to effective leadership and the reason why people will want to follow you.

And it is also important that the children and young people in our care trust us and trust teachers. It is vital that we role-model the values that we promote, and that as leaders we create an environment where young people can grow up to develop their own set of principles and become good citizens and humane adults. This is at the heart of what schools should be about. Not just the curriculum taught but the curriculum lived. That is ultimately down to the culture that leaders create in their schools and is influenced by their own behaviour as leaders.

A particular challenge we face in the UK just now is how to establish trust between schools when accountability and resourcing pressures are conspiring to make us look inwards. I believe there is a simple way for principled leaders to catalyse a change here. Trust and reciprocity are integrally linked, so I would challenge any of you who are struggling to establish better partnerships, to make the first move. Commit an act of kindness.

I was told recently by a head about how the parents of an 11-year-old boy were desperate to get their son into the school next door to hers. But they lost their appeal and the boy came to her school instead. The boy was extremely bright and had strong parental support, so the chances of a whole string of A's was very high. However, the child had a stunning singing voice and the school's music department didn't cater for choral singing—though the school next door was very strong on that.

What did the head do? It was better for the school if the boy remained but probably better for the child if he went to the school next door. In this instance, the head wrote to the appeals panel and asked to get the boy admitted to the school next door. The head was modelling principled decision-making in the interests of the child, not putting her own school first. And the knock-on effect? The other heads she worked with began to behave in a more principled way themselves towards student exchange, managed moves and admissions.

Acts of kindness and principled leadership are not only good in themselves; they can have positive consequences for the system, too.

Be open and welcome challenge

Here is what Barack Obama said in his last ever speech as President of the United States, in January 2017:

For too many of us, it's become safer to retreat into our own bubbles, whether in our neighborhoods ... or our social media feeds, surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions ... And increasingly, we become so secure in our bubbles that we accept only

information, whether true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that's out there.

I think the Brexit referendum was a good example of this. Whole swathes of Remainers only had contact with other Remainers—either face to face or on social media—and the same was true for whole swathes of Leave voters. We increasingly live and work in atomised and divided groupings where we choose whose views we listen to and can, more easily than ever, cut ourselves off from those who disagree with us. If we don't like them or don't agree with them, we simply 'unfriend' them on Facebook or block them on Twitter

This is increasingly true in education too. The often vitriolic debate on social media between affirmed Traditionalists and Progressives provides a striking example. This drawing of battle lines and accusing each other of lying just cannot be right. Not because I shy away from robust discussion of the evidence, but because this polarisation and forming of cliques inevitably makes us less likely to consider all the available evidence rationally and objectively.

Are we prepared to change our minds and to openly admit it when we get things wrong?

Agatha Christie said that the secret to solving a crime is keeping an open mind as long as possible. The moment you make up your mind as to who committed the crime you only see the evidence that fits your thinking or, even worse, you make the evidence fit your assumptions.

I also think we should be slightly wary of 'groupthink'—those with a single closed mindset, who believe that there is only one way to see the world, that only certain beliefs are acceptable, and who don't genuinely open themselves up to the wider evidence base.

And it is important to welcome different perspectives within our own organisations. Are our colleagues encouraged to 'speak truth to power' or do they just say whatever they think it is we want to hear? Are we prepared to change our minds and to openly admit it when we get things wrong?

Today lots of organisations build into their culture an 'obligation to dissent'. This term comes from the management consulting firm McKinsey, but it is common across the worlds of both business and public services. When there is complete agreement on an important decision, for example,

this could be seen as a sign that more time is needed for debate. In any given meeting, the most senior manager should actively invite contrary opinions from others. To do this well, leaders must show humility and real trust in their colleagues.

And where this dissent is absent, problems quickly emerge. Malcom Gladwell in his book *Outliers* describes the Korean air disasters, where over-deference and the inability of inferior officers in the aircraft to challenge leadership decisions led to several air disasters. Mathew Syed's book *Black Box Thinking* tells how the inability of nurses to challenge consultants can lead to unnecessary patient deaths. Being open and welcoming challenge from others prevents mistakes being made and enables an inclusive, problem-solving and empowering culture to develop.

But, of course, when we do ask for feedback and open ourselves up to challenge, sometimes the response can be a little bit over the top. Here is a child's response to a request for feedback about her teacher.

Things my teacher can do better:

Not use collective punishment as it is not fair on the many people who did nothing wrong and under the Geneva Convention it is a war crime.

Once you have listened to others carefully, listen to your inner voice and exercise your ethical muscle

There is a real danger that the more successful we are the more likely we are not to ask others for advice, to fail to exercise our ethical muscle and to fail to listen to our own conscience.

A clinical study illustrates that when charisma overlaps with narcissism, leaders tend to abuse their power and take advantage of their followers. Leaders who have a lot of success can start to believe in themselves too much. They start to believe that the rules don't really apply to them. Instead of talking things through with others, they go ahead assuming that they are right. They

believe so much in their own judgement that they flout the procurement process, they give a job to a relative without due process, they take additional money for themselves that should go to their school, they exclude lots of children from their school but refuse to take any in from other schools because their school needs to be the best.

There are two things that can help to prevent this. The first is good, robust governance. And the second is a wise mentor. Instead, too often all charismatic leaders get is an echo chamber of their own views coming back at them.

But even if we are not charismatic leaders, many of us can start off full of moral purpose and determination to change the world but can get ground down, become overly pragmatic and lose that idealistic perspective and that passion. And we may not even realise that we are not the people we once were.

As George Eliot says in *Middlemarch*:

For in the multitude ... there is always a good number who once meant to shape their own deeds and alter the world a little. The story of their coming to be shapen after the average is hardly ever told even in their consciousness ... till one day their earlier self walked like a ghost in its old home.

Are we still trying to alter the world a little or does our earlier, more noble self walk like a ghost amongst us? Are we still as principled and as enthusiastic as we once were?

In the final analysis I think most of us possess a pretty good internal moral compass as a guide to our actions. But we must listen to it rather than ignore it. I like the way Marc Le Menestral suggests some quick tests to see if we are possibly stepping over that line:

1. The Sleeping Test. If I do this can I sleep at night?
2. The Newspaper Test. Would I still do this if it was published in a newspaper?
3. The Mirror Test. If I do this can I feel comfortable looking at myself in the mirror?
4. The Teenager test. Would I mind my children knowing about this?

It is worth exercising our ethical muscle by revisiting our organisation's statement of values. Not necessarily with an eye to changing them, but

really challenging ourselves to consider how we apply these values, how we live them day to day. Ask ourselves: *[set as bulleted list]*

- > What is the best recent example we have seen of our values in action?
- > Is there anything we have seen or done recently which contradicts our values?
- > What more could we do to use our values to promote better outcomes for all children?

I think that the four questions for any leader leaving the role to reflect upon are these:

1. Did I leave the organisation in better shape than when I started?
2. Having experienced my leadership, were colleagues more likely to want to be leaders themselves and more equipped to do so?
3. Did I make more of a positive than a negative difference to the lives of those I came into contact with? Are they better or worse people for having worked with me?
4. Have I shown authenticity and integrity in my leadership? Have I led with moral purpose?

A few months ago I was in Jordan where the Education Development Trust is working in schools where most of the children are Syrian refugees. Jordan is a poor country. It does not have oil like some of its neighbours. Around 2.7 million of Jordan's total population of 9.5 million are refugees. That is more than one in four. Queen Rania, who I met during my visit, is a passionate advocate for refugees and the same view came from all the everyday Jordanians that I spoke with. They said to me: 'These are our neighbours, how can we turn them away.' 'These are children, how can we not try to give them an education.'

Queen Rania said:

Does my husband order his soldiers to close the borders? How is he going to sleep at night? It was never a question of

yes or no, it was always a question of how are we going to make it work.

Principled leadership in challenging times.

You don't have to be an extraordinary person like Mother Theresa or Martin Luther King to show principled leadership or to be a hero. The policeman who walked into danger on Westminster Bridge in March 2017 and died protecting society from violence was not an extraordinary person, but he was a hero. When the bomb exploded inside the Manchester Arena in May of the same year, those who, instead of running away, ran inside to help and comfort the victims were ordinary people—and they are heroes. Every person can be a hero, by choosing the right thing over the wrong thing.

My strong view is that day after day and hour after hour school leaders are demonstrating principled leadership and moral courage—all over the country and, indeed, all over the world. They may not be the famous headteachers—though some of them are. They don't appear in the national media. They may never make it to a list on a minister's desk and they may not have multitudes of followers on Twitter. They are hidden heroes. Ordinary people doing extraordinary things. They are givers of love to the adults and children in their care throughout their careers.

So we need to see things from others' points of view and open up our beliefs to challenge. We need to exercise our ethical muscle through reflection and dialogue.

And then we need to remind ourselves of our power as leaders to do good, connect with our best selves, renew our sense of moral purpose and do the right things to the best of our ability.

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