

Steiner Education Australia

Leadership Development Program

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THE CHALLENGE

To implement a leadership development program of a high standard to meet the shortage of people sufficiently experienced and skilled to take on formal leadership roles in Steiner schools nationwide.

Recent research highlights the additional complexities of leading and managing a Steiner school which may not apply to other schooling systems. This includes a pedagogy underpinned by Steiner's spiritual view of child development and the enduring cultural impulse of non-hierarchy in organisational structure. At a time where Principals matter in the eyes of national education policy makers more than ever, there remains significant doubt and uncertainty about leadership in Steiner schools which constrains a dynamic education. Recognising the importance of leadership and the training and support that school leaders need to be successful has been a difficult culture change for some schools. There is subsequently a national shortage of people sufficiently experienced, trained, skilled and prepared to take on formal leadership roles in Steiner schools.

Steiner Education Australia recognised the urgent need for specific leadership development program which is of a high

and consistent standard and resonates in the Steiner context. We needed leaders to support the growth and health of schools and for building collective leadership capacity in the national Steiner movement.

THE APPROACH

I was drawn to the Leadership Circle® due to my own Leadership Circle Certification process where I saw the key alignments with Steiner ethos and philosophy.

In both the Steiner context and Leadership Circle ethos, leadership is understood as both an outer and an inner journey of change and growing self-awareness. Leaders need to continually develop and refine practical strategies, knowledge and skills and equip themselves for the inner journey of reflection, resilience, creativity and wisdom. The focus on inner growth and development towards a more conscious leadership resonates very well with the Steiner focus on growth towards ethical individuation - an evolved level of consciousness. A key idea in the Leadership Circle and in the Steiner context is that individual and organisational growth and evolution are interdependent. The organisational system cannot organise at a higher stage of development than the consciousness of its leadership.

Based on my own doctoral leadership research, my Leadership Circle certification, and in consultation with Leadership Circle who generously sponsored aspects of the program, an evidence informed approach emerged.

The approach focussed on individual development and collaborative critical reflection, creating space for leaders to develop trust, share vulnerabilities and within this intersubjective space, open possibility for new practices, new understandings and changes in professional identity to emerge – individually and collectively.

THE PROGRAM

Sixteen Principals (or equivalent position) participated in a 6-month program which involved:

1. Completing a 360 Leadership Circle Profile™ (over 2 months).

This included two 90-minute individual debriefing sessions to discuss the results of the Profile in the first conversation, and to set goals based on their 'One Big Thing' in the second session. This allowed the principals to reflect on the feedback they were given, and to ask themselves, with support from a coach ...

What is the one change you could make in the way you lead that would unlock your leadership and take it to the next level? How would attaining this One Big Thing materially change others' experience of you as a leader, and have a positive impact on your leadership effectiveness?

2. A professional learning day on leadership after Profiles were completed.

This consisted of two workshops, which as a result of the impact of COVID 19 were successfully delivered via Zoom given face-to-face was not possible.

The first workshop flowed from the 360 feedback and coaching work undertaken previously and focused on self-awareness within the context of the Steiner environment, the creative competencies and the reactive tendencies we all have.

The second workshop, focused on one of the

Steiner core principles and the importance of effective collective leadership: "Shared responsibility and collaboration provide the foundation for Governance and Leadership in our schools." This meshed with Bob Anderson's (Founder of Leadership Circle) statement:

Effective leaders create and maintain a culture where employees:

- *love to come to work,*
- *feel individually heard,*
- *feel empowered /enabled to develop their gifts*
- *and carry conscious responsibility.*

This in turn maximises the success of the organization.

3. Five 90-minute coaching/collaborative networking sessions in a small group focusing on a specific topic each session (one per month).

These were facilitated by a Leadership Circle trained and experienced SEA Consultant. They were structured to include: sharing on how participants experienced the focus area for the month, what they did, how it went; a deeper dive into the topic of focus e.g. difficult conversations; individuals sharing a real live issue for peer reflection and coaching.

4. Opportunity for participants to continue their ongoing development through The Leadership Circle Check-in (over a period of 3 months).

This was offered after the program had finished.

THE IMPACT

'The results gathered to form the Leadership Circle Profile™ have been a very valuable tool for self-reflection. This coupled with the connections made with other leaders and the mentor, create a wonderful framework for

personal and professional growth.'

'The Leadership Circle Course made me listen and pay attention to others. I was surprised by what the initial survey revealed, and it made me focus on changing my approach in two vital leadership areas. It was confronting. But the survey gave a true picture, and the group workshops supported me to change. I'm not transformed yet, but hopefully I'm on my way to becoming a better servant for my school.'

With the support from Leadership Circle Steiner devised clear measures of success by which we could evaluate the program. The data to support analysis of impact included a survey, focus group session and also the school leaders participating in Leadership Circle's Check-In platform which provided participants 3 months of ongoing self-evaluation of progress on the 'one big thing'. The LC Check-In involves evaluator feedback and provides key data on a leader's progress towards effective leadership since taking the LC Profile at the start of the program.

Overwhelmingly the leaders felt a greater sense of support, collaborative learning, and a forum to openly discuss issues within an ethos of trust. Even though the pressures on school principals was enormous due to COVID 19, it is testament to the rigour and relevance of the program that only 2 people discontinued the course.

From the survey we conducted there was:

- an average rating of 4.4 out of 5 for usefulness of the program overall.
- a 3.6 average rating to what extent participants have increased effectiveness as part of the program. The comments ranged from "leadership effectiveness increasing substantially through working hard on strengths and weaknesses" to "low mark because I don't know".
- a 3.7 average rating to what extent the program increased confidence in leadership role. Comments were similar in themes : "hearing other people's experiences, challenges and successes has supported my understanding and

confidence in the varying (and similar) experiences faced in leadership"; "I have been continuing to develop as a leader and can see the improvements I have made".

- an average rating of 4.0 to what extent has the program enabled participants to gain knowledge of strengths and challenges as a leader.

Many comments spoke to the value of the Leadership Circle Profile™ and the follow up coaching. In fact, in rating the components of the program in terms of impact on leadership development, the LC Profile and coaching sessions rated most highly. 80% of participants rated the LC Profile either 4 or 5 stars. 91% participants rated the coaching sessions either 4 or 5 stars. This is an indicator that the Leadership Circle is highly appropriate across contexts, including the education context.

To support ongoing development, Steiner offered additional collaborative coaching sessions for the participants, with many taking up this continuing peer networking facilitated by one of the Steiner based Leadership Circle certified coaches.

Following this first program, Leadership Circle again agreed to sponsor the Steiner Leadership Development Program. Based on feedback the program was modified to include an extra individual coaching session and a more coherent collaborative coaching program which focussed more on peer support in Principal's individual and collective transformations in focussing on the 'one big thing'. Steiner is also providing financial support for Steiner school leaders from newly established schools to participate.

An exciting outcome upon which to build, is that leadership is being addressed, being talked about and seen as crucial in the development of both the educational and social ideals of Steiner education.