

When problems surface and the stress level builds, it's time to call your mentor, says executive coach and team builder, Mike Hogan

Staying on top of things in a whitewater world



Mike Hogan looks to improve leaders' leadership skills

The new school year is well underway and most school leaders are now busy helping their staff to plan for another successful academic year. But if you want 2008 to be both successful and stress free, you need to sharpen your leadership skills and that means smart choices, effective delegation, empowering your executive team and identifying your own strengths and shortcomings, according to executive mentor and team builder, Mike Hogan.

Hogan, from Kingscliff in northern NSW, has worked in education for 40 years and his career includes 28 years as a Catholic school principal. He has worked in two government and two Catholic school systems, has visited schools and education offices across the globe including Holland, UK, Italy and the USA, worked as a visiting research fellow at the University of Lancaster in the UK and recently completed a second Masters degree with an emphasis on mentoring young professionals.

Today he works as a strategic planner and facilitator with education leaders and senior managers from a variety of professions Australia-wide. He says there is nothing mystical about good leadership – it's all about

finding innovative solutions to every day issues.

However, he has expressed great concern at the isolation, loneliness and vulnerability of all leaders but especially school principals.

In a recent national survey (*Sydney Morning Herald* 5/2/08) of 1097 high school principals in the Catholic, public and independent sectors it was revealed that one-third are suffering illnesses, including heart complaints, attributed to stress on the job.

The survey, ordered by the organisations representing principals from the sectors, also revealed that more than 20% of those surveyed were worried about using alcohol or prescribed medications to control stress.

Hogan feels that effective coaching and mentoring goes a long way towards alleviating much of this stress and its dangerous consequences.

'My role primarily is to work with highly experienced principals, first time principals and potential leaders as well as providing workshops for middle management,' he said.

'A lot of the vulnerability and isolation felt by principals, particularly young educators, can be reduced through executive coaching and mentoring.

'With experienced principals, I am their executive coach. Often I provide a fresh perspective when there is an issue, which needs to be resolved. With a fresh pair of eyes, I can help to identify what's not working in a situation. I listen and I question. The objective is to help rejuvenate their leadership style.

'Really it's all about addressing old problems in new ways to find smart solutions. Because I am not emotionally involved with the situation and not 'under the pump' like the principals on the job – I can think objectively and ask the appropriate questions to assist in developing solutions and keeping things in perspective.

'Additionally, I often work with the staff in a school or in an organisation to assist with executive team development, conflict resolution, communication skills and strategic planning.'

Hogan said his work takes all shapes, including helping teams to work together in more dynamic ways, developing the conciliation skills of leaders or developing communication skills such as active and effective listening, developing interview skills or assisting with strategies to deal with difficult people.

When performing a conflict resolution role, the aim is to be as objective as possible, examine all of the options, help people accommodate each other and to look at what needs to change.

'I don't tell people what to do but I help them to find the answers by seeking out new strategies and solutions and also to examine the ramifications of their own actions,' he said.

'They need to question what the outcome will be once a particular course of action is set.'

He remarks: 'The fact that the principals I work with know that I have made the same mistakes, dealt with the same challenges and have felt just as lonely and vulnerable does assist in developing empathy and a confidence in our coaching and mentoring relationship.'

Hogan has clients all over Australia from all sectors and deals regularly with a number of professionals via email and phone who he has never physically met.

The delivery of the coaching and mentoring is a mixture of face-to-face discussions, telephone and email. It is governed by the geographical position of the client, the nature of the agreed contract and, often, the



Executive team development is important for effective management

urgency of the issues being faced.

As a professional coach, Hogan also works with team leaders and middle management to help them clarify their goals and to re-examine their career objectives.

If you want to move forward, he says you have to take a step back and look at your own situation with some clarity.

The aim is to question what direction your career is heading and then formulate a clear plan that lets you take deliberate steps in the right direction.

'I coach school executive staff who want to prepare for promotions,' Hogan said.

'They may have been applying for deputy or principal positions but missing out and so I can help them to discover what skills they need to hone so they can step up the career ladder.

So what are the key ingredients that make a good leader?

Hogan says it's all about knowing your strengths and weaknesses and accepting that you cannot be all things to all people.

'A good leader knows how to empower staff, especially the executive team, take calculated risks and how to delegate effectively. Really, leadership in this turbulent world is all about enhancing the leadership skills of the other players in your team.

'Educators today are highly trained professionals and they know more about how kids learn than ever before.

'Of course there are more administrative duties, there is legislation and litigation. Good teachers turn information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom. Most teachers strive to be experts in their work. The good leaders are the ones who can fully support their teachers in this role.'

And it is not just schools benefiting from his expertise. Hogan also works with other organisations including businesses, licensed clubs, a winery and government departments and while the issues and challenges are different to those experienced in schools, many of the leaders of these sectors feel exactly the same vulnerability and stress as that felt by school principals.

So the big question now is: Are we facing a crisis in leadership in all areas of society?

Hogan feels that the key ingredients for an effective principal leader are:

- Understand your strengths and weaknesses – use your strengths for the good of the whole team and work on your weaknesses;
- Surround yourself with people who possess complementary skills;
- Know that the best leaders are both good communicators and effective listeners;

- Develop the strengths of your team members;
- Trust your staff and back them up whenever they need your support; and
- Know the difference between dumping and delegating.

'It is common practice in the commercial sector and in high levels of government to engage coaches and mentors and of course high level sporting champions and national teams such as Grant Hackett, David Beckham and the Australian Cricket Team all have coaches,' Hogan summarised.

'So really, why shouldn't school principals have mentors and coaches too? After all, they are engaged in the most important work of all and should be given every support possible.

Mike Hogan is a Level Two Accredited Executive Coach with the Australian Institute of Executive Coaching and an accredited Mediator and Concilio-Arbitrator with the Australian Commercial Disputes Centre. He can be contacted at hoganmnd@bigpond.net.au

Each month Michael Hogan & Associates send out a Leadership or Teamwork Development tip in the form of an email memo. If you would like to be included in this free service, send a request to the email address above.

The key to effective delegation

Strong, productive leaders delegate effectively in a player/leader or player/coach way. Good leaders never delegate accountability.

Always ask the question

Is this a load shifting exercise or a genuine attempt to share the load and at the same time provide experience, empowerment and professional development?

Remember that 'lucky' leaders have a good, supportive team usually because they have been carefully developed through excellent delegation.

As a leader/coach you need to

- Match talents with tasks;
- Provide a thorough background 'briefing' explaining exactly what is the specific goal and what is the expected outcome;
- Ensure that there are adequate resources;
- Establish a budget and levels of authority;
- Outline the accountability mechanisms;
- Provide genuine opportunities for the delegate to provide input;
- Set a realistic timeline and be specific about times for progress reports and deadlines;
- Be available for coaching, advice and guidance and talk through any problems and new directions;
- Create real trust and a genuine partnership;
- Share in the glory and the rewards; and
- Don't play favourites.