

# Educational Leadership for a New Era:

## The Uncommon Sense of



## Leadership

*Exceptional school leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic  
And why this may be just what we need for the future*

2020 was an extraordinary year for schools worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic forced shutdowns of schools on a scale never experienced before. Within a matter of days, the conventional approach to schooling children through a tightly structured timetable of lessons in classrooms was no longer an option. Teachers were asked to teach students virtually with very little time to adjust. Concepts like independent learning and student engagement were thrust into the limelight as never before. The vocabulary of pedagogy changed, and teachers were soon weighing up the pros and cons of synchronous versus asynchronous learning for their students.

For school leaders, 2020 was messy. Without any way to predict how the pandemic would unfold, or even what would happen in the following week, principals and head teachers were challenged by unprecedented, rapid, and continuous change. This meant leaders needed to respond to new issues more quickly than ever before, and deal with high levels of uncertainty and emotion from staff, students, and parents, ranging from fear and stress to anxiety and deep sadness.

So how did school leaders react?

Some, at least initially, chose to “wait and see.” They operated under the assumption that things would eventually “return to normal” and led in essentially the same way as usual. Others reverted to more defensive leadership behaviors that may have worked well enough through challenging times in the past – trying to control things, or “stay strong” so others could depend on them. In some cases, these tried and tested approaches will have meant that their staff were left to deal with their personal issues and concerns on their own.

By contrast, a number of leaders instead chose more proactive responses – and the results were often exceptional. These leaders kept sight of the wider purpose of education, showed deep care and compassion for both staff and students, and demonstrated enormous flexibility in their approaches. Traditional hierarchies broke down and changes that normally would have taken years happened in weeks. These leaders demonstrated the best of humanity, the best of team-working, and the best of leadership.

In this article, we will explore how leaders sought to adapt their leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, the kind of leadership that has thrived over this period, and how this challenges our conventional view of excellent school leadership. We will examine how this more agile and empathetic leadership may continue to be relevant in a new post-pandemic era, and set the challenge for school systems to review their approach to leadership development and talent development in the light of these insights.

We will draw on two major sets of research data. BTS is a global leadership consultancy and their 2020 research project interviewing the Chief Learning Officers from over 40 of the world's top organizations and subsequent white paper<sup>1</sup>, was the inspiration for *Messy Leadership*. BTS Spark is a global not-for-profit initiative dedicated to supporting and developing school leaders to do their best work. We have coached over 13,000 school leaders... and over 1000 of these were coached during 2020 in the heat of the COVID-19 outbreak. Anonymized data from these coaching conversations offers rich insights into the leadership challenges experienced by principals and senior education leaders in the face of the pandemic.

## How did education leaders seek to develop their leadership?

Throughout 2020, many principals and education leaders did their best to cope amidst the turbulence of the pandemic with little professional or personal support. Government departments and school district or network leaders provided some advice and direction, but often guidance was unclear, or too late and failed to address the priority concerns of teachers and school leaders. As one special school principal commented, “We were told to close our schools and teach virtually, but my students aren’t operating as independent learners. We were asked to enforce social distancing, but my students struggle to follow these rules.”

Over 1000 school leaders were enrolled in various coaching programmes with our leadership coaches and were able to draw on this very personalized support to adapt their leadership as they navigated the huge challenges that they and their schools faced.

We analyzed the coaching data from our largest cohorts in 2020 and found that some interesting patterns emerged. Figure 1 summarizes the key leadership mindset shifts that Principals and Superintendents identified with their coaches as their priority development needs. (Leadership shifts circled with a solid line were the most prevalent, those circled with a dashed line were common.)

Figure One:



It comes as no surprise that boosting personal resilience featured prominently in leaders' development needs, as they were facing so much change both at work and in their personal lives. The confidence of many was also deeply affected, as they struggled with the challenges of leading in uncertainty and, for some, high levels of self-doubt. (Even in more 'normal' times, many education leaders we coach are affected by a sense of 'Imposter Syndrome'.)

However, it was the *Relate* leadership shifts that truly came to the fore during 2020 – with education leaders variously seeking to improve their listening and empathy skills, engage key stakeholders, and hold stretching and, at times, difficult conversations with teachers around adapting their teaching to a virtual environment.

Many education leaders we coached also sought assistance from their coaches in embracing *Inspire* leadership shifts – honing their skills to lead in uncertainty, drawing inspiration from the core values that truly motivate them to make a difference to students' lives, and to rekindle that sense of purpose in their school communities.

As we unpack the *Messy Leadership* model, we will draw parallels between these leadership shifts self-identified by school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the type of *messy leadership* which appeared, through the wider BTS research, to be most successful in these uncertain times.

## So, what is *Messy Leadership*?

The goal of the *Messy Leadership* research undertaken by BTS was to understand the challenges organisations experienced, and establish the mindsets that successful leaders held during this time and would need to maintain for continued success. While the research was undertaken in 2020 during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the intent was also to look ahead to the next few years, which are likely to remain uncertain and unpredictable.

The research showed that across all sectors, many leaders struggled – and many seemed to be stuck in certain habits that may have served them well in the past, but simply do not work anymore. Leaders who cling to these approaches are no longer succeeding. By contrast, some leaders were thriving and succeeding in the messiness. Interestingly, these leaders, who were more apt to pivot and try a different approach, were often considered “misfits” during normal times. This is the *uncommon sense of messy leadership*. A leader who is willing to admit weakness makes others feel safer than one who pretends to be strong. A leader who plans, knowing they cannot predict the future, is more successful than a leader who has a point of view based solely on their experience and past performance.

These “misfit” leaders were the ones that organizations felt role modelled the mindsets leaders needed going forward. They offered a glimpse into what extraordinary leadership could look like in the turbulence of the next few years.

While conducting the research, it became very clear that there were five attributes separating extraordinary responses to challenging times from the ordinary and ineffective. These five attributes form “messy” leadership.

The MESSY acronym was selected intentionally. "Messy" describes the type of leader who does not try to control a fast-changing, chaotic environment, but finds a way of leading in it. This requires a different level of leadership maturity.

### How successful leaders responded

Advocating ecosystem interdependencies and societal impact.



Having the courage to talk about emotive of personal issues. Being open about bad news. Showing compassion.



Focusing on outcomes and being responsive in the moment. Being change ready.



Seeing multiple possible futures and running fast cycle experiments.



The power of not knowing. Vulnerability, voracious curiosity, humility and letting go of the leader centric view.



### Where leaders struggled

Siloed organisation and loosely connected ethical aspirations.

"We only talk about work here."

Leaders feel safe behind a professional veneer.

A focus on process, annual strategy and budgeting. Slow quarterly management.

Seeing the future as a continuation of the past.

The superhero syndrome. Being strong and holding onto your expertise.

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## Unpacking MESSY Leadership



### From

Siloed organization and loosely connected ethical aspirations.

### To

Advocating ecosystem interdependencies and societal impact

In many respects, schools are already closely woven into the interdependency of society. Schools provide an infrastructure that enables many wider social services including childcare, access to food, and healthcare, while also fulfilling their main mission to deliver high quality education.

When schools were required to close for all, or the majority of students, the impact of this decision was felt throughout the community. Workers with school-aged children who were unable to work from home, suddenly faced an impossible dilemma with the need both to continue to earn an income, and to supervise and support their children at home. Parents who were able to work at home were challenged to juggle this with home-schooling. Many families that rely on schools to provide their children with a hot meal, struggled to fill the gap, and the digital divide between those families without ready access to the internet, and those that were better equipped with the technology was brought into sharp relief. School leaders were suddenly faced with the monumental challenge of supporting teachers to move to a virtual learning environment *and* figuring out how to provide essential social services, including daily meals for those families experiencing food insecurity, as well as how to ensure that all their students could access their schoolwork.

As champions for their students, many school leaders collaborated with community organizations and volunteers to create pandemic-safe processes for such things as co-operative child-care or distributing food to student families. Some schools formed clusters with neighboring schools to share responsibility for teaching students of frontline workers. Many also partnered with corporations to provide internet and technology solutions to students, including through the creation of mobile hotspots, providing free internet access, and large-scale device lending programmes.

In societies with high-stakes testing, accountability and inspection regimes, many school leaders feel compelled to instil high compliance cultures that can quash innovation and lower staff engagement and morale. They find themselves complicit in a system that divides and creates competition between schools, rather than fostering collaboration.

With the level of disruption caused by the pandemic, school leaders could no longer rely on rigorous compliance to the usual norms and routines, and it was often those leaders that were confident in leading from a strong sense of moral purpose that stood out as the most effective in leading their school communities.



They were able to passionately advocate for the broader purpose of schooling, such as the need to tackle the core inequities that risked their most disadvantaged students falling significantly behind, and the need to privilege student and staff wellbeing. It was a time when actions spoke louder than words, and when, by thinking more broadly, leaders were able to respond rapidly without negative side effects. Collaboration was no longer confined to existing teams or single schools, but a natural outcome of leaders across the education sector seeing needs and deciding to solve them together, even when this brought them into direct opposition with less nimble government directives.



**From**

“We only talk about work here.”  
Leaders feel safe behind a professional veneer.

**To**

Having the courage to talk about emotive or personal issues. Being open about bad news. Showing compassion.

The very nature of schools is to be caring and emotionally connected. Parents trust their children to teachers every day. When schools closed, initially for a short period of time, thinking it was a temporary aberration, school leaders, teachers and parents adjusted quickly and without much complaint. However, the closing of schools immediately highlighted issues of equity and access like never before. It was impossible to ignore how privilege, race and economic disparity influenced a school's ability to continue to teach and support its students.

As the pandemic continued, and schools were going to be closed to all, or the majority of students, for an unknown timeframe, school leaders faced deep scrutiny over what appropriate remote teaching and care looked like and whose care should in fact be prioritized. They were thrust into emotional and highly sensitive conversations managing genuine fears from staff, students, and parents, such as “How do I teach virtually?”, “What impact will this have on my child's learning?”, and, where school staff were required still to teach students in person “How can I ensure my own safety and that of my family?” At the same time, school leaders were supporting colleagues and students dealing with illness and bereavement and lacking any clear answers for the future.

Extraordinary leaders leaned into these conversations. Whereas leaders who tried to “keep things professional” by avoiding sensitive subjects might have felt exposed, those that were willing to listen even when it was uncomfortable to hear, and who were willing to engage in conversations for which they could not control the outcome, reaped the benefits of building greater trust and connection with their colleagues. They found that compassion and courage are best achieved if a leader is agenda-less. In other words, techniques that revolve around how to motivate others to do a task need to be set aside to focus on better understanding and connecting with a human being.

A health crisis naturally meant that leaders who could make people feel cared for were able to have a very tangible impact. The context demanded leaders to learn to handle complex and emotional issues with compassion.

With schools closed, the challenges of leading remotely also shed a different light on connection. School leaders could no longer rely on 'seeing' someone in the staffroom or around campus, or checking in over a cup of coffee. They could not get a read on the pulse of the school day by walking around. Making connections that used to happen organically now had to happen intentionally, with time allowed to check in with one another, talk about family and boost wellbeing and a sense of belonging.

While there were many challenges to overcome and problems to solve, leaders who focused solely on solving those specific complex problems and neglected the emotional and trust building aspects of leadership struggled. In her book *Dare to Lead*, Brené Brown says "It turns out that trust is in fact earned in the smallest of moments. It is earned not through heroic deeds, or even highly visible actions, but through paying attention, listening, and gestures of genuine care and connection."

It was often those leaders who successfully defined reality clearly, even if this meant sharing bad news, and took the time to genuinely connect with their faculty, staff, and parent communities, who are in fact emerging from an incredibly difficult year in a stronger place than before the pandemic hit.



**From**

A focus on process. Episodic management. Attempts to 'manage' change.

**To**

Focusing on outcomes and being responsive in the moment  
Being change ready

One of the most common characteristics of school leaders who struggled during the crisis was an overreliance on process and on existing practices of teaching and learning. In times of uncertainty, established processes can be comforting and create the illusion of stability, but in times of rapid change, these can get in the way of meeting the new needs that have emerged. Leaders who thrived in 2020's highly unpredictable environment focused less on process or past ways of doing things and more on outcomes. In doing so, they created the space for teachers to meet the needs of their students and achieve amazing results in new and remarkable ways.

The willingness and ability to implement quickly, and pivot or adjust quickly, is critical when meeting the complex needs of a school community. Technology integration was a huge component in school adaptability during the pandemic and successful school leaders encouraged teachers to use systems and processes that were most comfortable to them.



Realizing that virtual learning would be required for much longer than a few weeks, many school leaders shifted swiftly and implemented learning management systems in a matter of weeks, where previously paper and spreadsheets had been used. The most successful school leaders also trusted their teachers to adopt new instructional practices, techniques, and tools when traditional ones failed to meet their remote digital needs, enabling them to focus on the desired learning outcomes for students, rather than on fulfilling the procedural requirements in place pre-pandemic.

Historically, change in school has been notoriously slow, relying on laborious processes that take years to accomplish. It has become a staple of leadership development to learn the 'change curve' and think about the leader's role in helping people to let go of the old and embrace the new. The 'old' view of change was that it has a beginning, a middle and an end, with the unstated assumption that there was a 'new normal' *after* the change. But illustrated so powerfully by COVID-19, increasingly leaders are experiencing a world in which change is constant. The most responsive leaders, therefore, expect this and rather than starting with a mindset of 'how do we get through this change' they start with an expectation that change is constant and that with change comes opportunity.



#### From

Looking for clues to the future in the past

#### To

Seeing multiple possible futures and running fast cycle experiments

As school leaders prepare to reopen schools, leaders find themselves somewhere along a spectrum: resume schooling as it has always been in the past or see the disruption to schooling and the insights and learning from the past year as an opportunity to reimagine our education systems and practices. Many will feel reassured by the idea of a 'return to normal'. This is unsurprising as the human brain is not naturally adept at holding multiple possible futures in mind and dancing with the paradoxes and dilemmas they present.

This frame of mind impacts the way leaders deal with the future. For example, school leaders who struggled in 2020 may well be those who are most comfortable adhering to traditional school improvement planning processes, outlining a set of priorities and actions for the next three years or so. But, when the future holds so many unknowns, as well as so many diverse opportunities, trying to predict what will be needed several years from now becomes less and less helpful. Successful messy school leaders will be those who, instead of looking at current trends, are able to imagine possible futures and look back. They will spend time imagining ways in which their school can evolve to shape alternative pathways and lead with these in mind, constantly adjusting their picture as new information emerges.

This future orientation will help successful school leaders to envision different ways of responding to the communities they serve. Perhaps students with low school attendance in the past, or those who were not able to attend due to family circumstances, can in future attend online, reducing absence and increasing student achievement. Exploring the role of parents as educators and providing support and resources could contribute to closing the achievement gap seen with students from economically disadvantaged communities or with students of color. With strengthened relationships in their wider communities, schools could explore new avenues of learning beyond the traditional classroom setting. And school leaders can seek out new types of educators with different and unique backgrounds who can be successful in this new context. School leaders who spend time grappling with complex trade-off discussions may lose innovation momentum and revert to the comfort of the known, while leaders who might now feel encouraged to adopt new ideas fast, allocate resources accordingly, and iterate continuously are more likely to equip their schools and their students for future success.

In this regard, schools can learn from industry how to embrace the true essence of agility – genuine fast cycle learning, based on a dynamic and constantly evolving view of future opportunities and dilemmas.



#### From

The superhero syndrome. Being strong and holding on to your expertise. Being the leader who makes the calls and decisions.

#### To

The power of not knowing. Vulnerability, voracious curiosity, humility and letting go of the leader centric view. Creating environment for others to author the new moves.

Closing, or limiting access to physical school buildings and campuses, and migrating to virtual distance learning happened at an unprecedented pace. Leaders who were widely respected in normal times found their people looking to them for guidance. This was a trap. In more stable times, the strong, “lead from the front” leaders had driven their teams to higher and higher performance. Now, leaders who tried to make decisions alone or lead from the front, were creating logjams and inhibiting creativity. It was an impossible task. The majority of schools are built on a hierarchical leadership model which absolves people from the responsibility of decision making. The by-product of this is that school leaders are often in their position because they have been successful, know their function, and appreciate sharing this expertise through mentorship. However, as the pace of change increases, this can get in the way and a more effective and agile approach is for leaders to hold their expertise lightly and become relentlessly curious. Through COVID-19, we have seen how such leaders have actively sought outside and different perspectives and encouraged others to explore and make necessary decisions for their particular and unique situations, while never losing sight of their primary mission.

During the pandemic, some of the most extraordinary school leaders said, “I don’t know” and had the inner self-confidence to be comfortable showing vulnerability and asking for help. They let go of any attachment to being the ultimate decision maker and trusted their teams to respond accordingly. Successful schools had teams who were empowered to take ownership and made change happen because they knew the right things to do for teachers, students, and parents. They could move quickly and were open to more innovative ways to solve problems.

School leaders who were not able to let go of the need to be the expert and master everything, typically worked longer and more unsustainable hours, putting themselves on the path to burnout. Extraordinary leaders opened themselves up to working differently and were able to find more space to look after themselves and focus on the things that really mattered.

This model of leadership has a lot to offer in the context of a decreasing pipeline of school leaders. If the model of leadership could evolve away from one based on perfectionism and singularity and towards greater adaptability, humility, and collaboration, this could create a much more appealing prospect for the next generation of school leaders.

## Fostering more Messy Leadership in our school systems

The *Messy Leadership* model reveals the traits of some of the most effective leaders during an exceptional period of turmoil. The old perspective of strong leadership, setting a clear direction, taking others with you, and managing through process were not right for a highly unpredictable and messy world.

We would also suggest that the *Messy* leadership capabilities are likely to serve education leaders well in the future. Life is not likely to return to ‘normal’ any time soon, and it is difficult to know what is around the corner. Some school principals in Australia are leading school communities that have been ravaged by drought, bushfires, floods and the pandemic within less than a year. None of this was in their school plans! The OECD’s recent report <sup>2</sup> outlines four possible scenarios for how schooling could radically change over the next two decades.

In light of this, school systems are starting to explore how they can ‘future-proof’ school leadership to become more resilient, more agile and more collaborative. School systems will need to rethink the way they identify talent, develop, reward and nurture leaders. Business as usual leadership development will not work. Reverting to past training, performance management and processes will produce past results. To maintain and nurture this extraordinary leadership, school systems will need to take a different approach.

School systems need to help their leaders let go of old beliefs that underpin unhelpful practices. Mindsets like “I need to be in control,” “I am responsible,” “I need to be professional” or “stoic,” and “I need to set out a clear plan for the future” are likely to be counterproductive.

Unfortunately, most school systems reinforce these beliefs in countless ways, from their focus on process (implying “I need to be in control”), to the way they talk about accountability (reinforcing “I am responsible”), and even the way they run their strategic planning processes (with the implicit belief that “I need to set out a clear plan for the future”).

New mindsets such as, “it is okay to be human,” “we are constantly learning more about the future,” “change is something I learn from,” and “I trust myself to see what is needed” carry deep implications, both for principals and superintendents and for the way we think about how we run our schools. This does not mean abandoning the processes, structures, and tools that make school systems effective, but it does mean leveraging them in a much more dynamic way.

The *Messy Leadership* model provokes a rethink of the way that school systems generally value leadership capabilities. The research highlights the most successful leadership behaviors during uncertain times, while our coaching data offers a glimpse into the reality of most education leaders navigating an ever-changing environment while trying to stay calm, effective and connected to their staff and school communities.

School systems that can bridge the gap between the current skillsets of their school leaders and the *Messy* attributes needed to lead schools into the future, will be able to look back and be rightly proud of having created extraordinary leaders capable of navigating extraordinary times.

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*If you are interested in exploring Messy Leadership with us further, follow BTS Spark on LinkedIn to join the discussion and get details on our free Messy Leadership webinars.*

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