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## Relationships: The Heart of Professional Growth

**As I took my seat in one of our mid-year staff workshops, run by two early career teachers, a colleague lent over and said quietly to me, "We'll both be working for these women, one day." I think she's right.**

The two teachers are engaged, high potential educators. They are people of character and drive. The session they were running was titled *Embracing Complexity* which could serve as an apt description of our recent work in professional learning.

Professional learning is complex because we are. Along with being charged with the responsibility for the care and education of our students, the responsibility of the nurture, guidance, growth and engagement of our staff in their learning and growth weighs heavily, for as we foster the professional growth of educators, we are encouraging development beyond technique and craft. We are nurturing the growth of the inner person. Our desire at Roseville College is for stewardship of each staff member in our employ, not as a finite resource, but as a person; known and worthy.

Today, global education consultant Charles Leadbetter says personalised learning is putting humanity back into the heart of schools; humanity and learning are "about empathy, creativity, collaboration, joint enterprise and moral purpose". He says the learner is central to the education system of which she is part; students belong at its heart, not its feet.

### Professional education based on relationship

While many of us survey staff wellbeing and engagement, it is difficult to measure what is fundamental for professional growth for our employees, the relationship between the workplace and the heart. The work of good education is the work of relationships. When we feel known and secure in a relationship of trust (still with the protections of a modern workplace) we are better positioned to learn so that, as Palmer (1998) so eloquently expresses, "more of us will be able to tell the truth about our own struggles and joys as teachers in ways that befriend the soul and give it room to grow."

Our strategic development process provides opportunity to do exactly that at Roseville College on an organisational level; a chance to find and tell the truth of the college's joys and struggles. While still establishing a shared vision and strategy the positive cultural impact of articulating our purpose and affirming the value and influence of the work of educators, administrative and operational staff has been lasting and profound. Honesty, at an organisational level, has led to personal openness. Similarly, our recent work on developing our Principles of Practice, articulating how we Live for Purpose and Learn for Purpose (two pillars of the Roseville College Strategic Direction, Realising Purpose), has led to a whole of staff conversation about who we are, why we exist and what really matters.

The what matters is easily answered in our context - you do.

Our response, then, is one of personalisation. To know and understand each member of staff with the aim to maximise his/her learning opportunities for authentic, lasting outcomes is stated clearly in our strategic direction. While we had created the position of Head of Personalised Learning for students, the role of Head of Professional Growth had a focus initially, on teacher accreditation. We now realise that this role is key to achieving the personalisation of learning for staff, leveraging the use of accreditation systems to affirm, spark or inspire learning.

Intentionally, without waiver, we have made a strategic shift from middle management to middle leadership. Role descriptions now reflect the responsibility of leaders in knowing and supporting each member of their team in professional learning and growth. This responsibility extends to the executive team in their guidance of middle leaders, and for me in the encouragement and challenge of the executive team. This has impacted recruitment practices as we now search for character capacity that will build relational trust: empathy, compassion, forgiveness and patience.

## Compliance and Learning

We also approach compliance training (WHS, Child Protection, Privacy etc) from a position of enhancing relationships. Simply, a safer workplace improves wellbeing, and trust. In a recent article from the Law Society of New South Wales our obligations in compliance training were explained. While the article referred specifically to training on privacy principles, there is a natural correlation to all mandatory training requirements: "The style must be interactive, to keep staff paying attention. The concepts must set a high enough bar that staff cannot simply cruise through; staff should be challenged, and stretched, by training" (Johnson 2019). In other words, what could be considered as 'tick the box' training should be quality learning. We take this seriously and our compliance learning is scoped, sequenced, taught, tested, reflected, recorded, reviewed, modified and updated, yet delivered in a way that is personable, engaging and honouring of the time of each participant.

## Evolution of existing structures

While our formal and anecdotal feedback indicates that there is still a regular call for, "more department time," professional learning (PL) days now come with a better articulation of purpose aligned with strategic direction. Along with conference days and whole school learning, middle leaders are responsible for organisation of a professional learning day with their departments; a well justified 'choose your own adventure'. They are trusted.

While now in their seventh year, and seventh iteration, our Professional Learning Groups (PLGs) still serve as a powerful hub for peer learning. More recently the PLGs have become a pathway for teacher participation in research and involvement in projects with potential for personal growth and service and impact well beyond the participants own classrooms. Interestingly, while pausing the staff scholarship to review the effectiveness of the program, the participation of staff from across the college in postgraduate study, at masters and doctoral level, has increased significantly. While this could be explained, in part, by generational change, our next phase of work is in defining how we best support those with the drive to learn, those energised, as explained by Pink in his book, *Drive* (2000) by autonomy, mastery and purpose. We all benefit from their presence in our school.

## Leadership ladders

The traditional school structure in Australia generally offers a ladder-like approach to leadership development. Author and expert, Fernandez-Aaroz (2014) provides some challenge: "Pushing your high potentials up a straight ladder won't accelerate their growthuncomfortable assignments will." We are in the process of formulating a more flexible approach to projects, enabling opportunity challenge and discomfort on specific projects driven by our strategic direction. Drawing on a model developed in the corporate world, "We want well-rounded, values-focused leaders who see the world through a wide-angle lens, and the right stretch assignments are what helps people get there" (HBR 2014).

We have launched a project this year which has been enabled through the generosity of time and wisdom of a former principal colleague. She and I meet each term for dinner with four aspiring principals, two from within Roseville College, two from other schools. Often as we leave the restaurant, we observe the four women continuing the broad and deep professional conversations started over dinner. There is a strategic intent in these dinners for sponsorship of aspirants and succession planning, particularly in girl's schools. However, I gain so much more from these dinners than I give. These women inspire me to action in support of their professional growth, and the growth of others.

While this is just a broad brushstroke of some of the work we are undertaking in professional learning, there is much more underway, particularly in the pursuit of personalised learning for operational and support staff and in pre-service teacher partnerships. My mind is filled with plans. Yet let's be clear, what we do in this area speaks to the true role of leadership: one life influencing another. Our impact can be profound and stands the chance of taking us, and others "toward the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need" (Palmer, 2000). This is outstandingly purposeful work.

*Citations and references withheld.*