

Leadership profile

Mike Gillatt: principal of Hutt Intermediate School

<http://www.huttintermediate.school.nz>



Hutt Intermediate is a decile 8 school with just over 600 students. Mike has led the school for the last 7 years and has a particular focus on developing Hutt Intermediate school as a learning organisation. Mike can be emailed at mikeg@his.school.nz if you want to explore any of these ideas / approaches further.

What big ideas cement your leadership approach together?

Mike spoke of 3 big ideas as critical to his leadership thinking:

1. The knowledge is in the room

While there are clear roles for senior, middle, and classroom leaders, there is a real emphasis on building the approach and consensus from the ground up. This means that Mike will take a facilitating role in these situations to lead process and ensure his role is not dominating.

2. Our internal context should drive our performance

No-one understands the school context like the students, staff and parents. As such, it is from these groups that direction should come. External inputs like PLD are factored in if they fit and are aligned with the school planning, but not only because they happen to be on offer.

3. Aim to provide the staff team with more satisfying work lives

The staff team should finish each term thinking “this is a great place to work where I am valued, listened to, treated with respect and am a part of something great / I helped shape.”

How do you translate this into action?

On taking up the leadership of Hutt Intermediate Mike looked for a philosophy that was the best fit with his thinking and would support improvement. For Mike this has been Peter Senge’s Learning Organisation approach. This approach has 5 disciplines

(http://www.thechangeforum.com/Learning_Disciplines.htm for a bit more on this) which provide the practical tools for the how:

- Shared vision
- Personal mastery
- Team learning
- Systems thinking
- Mental models

Mike has of course road-tested, adapted and adopted these in a way that works for his school, and 7 years on things are flying.

What have been some key learnings for you?

Slow is fast. The evidence is clear that real change takes time i.e. much of the literature points to 5 – 7 years to embed meaningful change. So, better to take the time to get it right rather than rush to some externally imposed timeframe.

Context drives performance. As already discussed, the locus of control for improvement needs to come from within rather than without.

Vision and strategic direction need to be intermeshed and driven from the ground up. On-going staff engagement is critical if this is to be real.

What have been some of the toughest things to change?

People's propensity to hierarchical conditioning i.e. there can be a tendency toward "just tell me what to do and I will do it" which can create dependency rather than learning.

Some staff attitudes toward their own learning. Almost a belief that learning is something that the kids do (rather than the adults), and teacher learning is historical i.e. something we did at teacher's college or I do on a course. It has taken time to move to the place where personal / team inquiries are valued and shared as a matter of course at planning meetings.

A couple of things I noticed:

In his role Mike has:

- developed an approach that is philosophy led. Mike is spending time as a leader doing the 'thinking work' required of leaders.
- a clear understanding of the differences between leadership and management, and when and where both approaches are appropriate.
- connected to 'thought-leaders' and mentors outside of his school. This helps him to keep his own thinking fresh and challenged.