



Leaders as gardeners

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describes how to drive organisational growth.

When I think of a language teaching organisation (LTO), I think of a garden – one in which all of its individual staff and members have been ‘planted’ carefully, and are being nurtured so that they can all reach their true potential, alongside the growth and success of the LTO. But why a garden? This metaphor might seem strange to many of you – especially when there are numerous conceptions of organisations already present in the literature, and many of these being quite useful. Nonetheless, I feel that many models within the literature fail to capture the essence of true educational leadership. They fail to highlight the role of leaders in the growth of the organisation and its members. I feel that conceptualising the LTO as a garden, and leaders as gardeners, really puts into focus this element of growth – and the idea that it is

not only those in formal positions in the LTO who have the power to be the leaders who can effect change.

Now, while it is *not* a perfect metaphor, I think it allows us to draw a number of parallels between gardening and leadership within language education. Effective leaders, like gardeners, follow a set of principles; in this article, I will expand on eight principles of effective gardening – that is, effective leadership.

Principle 1: Provide the right nutrients

Without the right nutrients, plants wither and die. In essence, staff are very similar; albeit instead of dying, they leave the organisation and the LTO suffers from issues with staff retention. If teachers are not provided with the right basic ‘nutrients’, they are likely to

find it difficult to want to engage fully with the organisation’s mission, and feel less inclined to demonstrate citizenship behaviours (Robbins *et al.*, 2014). Basic needs for teachers include things like: fair pay; having their time valued; and working in a space where they feel safe. However, we need to remember that LTOs do not only include teachers – we have support staff, receptionists, middle and senior management. All of these people need to have their basic needs met. They need to be provided with the right nutrients. Effective leaders, then, are those that create the conditions in which this occurs – or fight for this to occur in situations in which this does not occur.

Principle 2: Weeding is important

Every gardener knows that for their garden to be healthy, they need to weed periodically. It is the same within



LTOs. LTOs are composed of numerous academic and managerial systems; as they grow and move through different life cycles, so do their systems (White *et al.*, 2008). However, systems often reach a point where they, or parts of them, have, in effect, run their course – effective leaders are adept at recognising these redundancies and inefficiencies. More importantly, effective leaders are the ones who ask critically evaluative questions about the system, and fight to improve the system in order to improve the LTO. Some examples that come to mind include processes teachers go through with paperwork, or perhaps even identifying how diagnostic test systems can be changed to better provide useful data for teachers.

Principle 3: Plant appropriately

A great garden is one in which all plants coexist peacefully. We know that some plants just do not grow well together. Effective leaders within LTOs are able to recognise teachers' strengths and weaknesses, and place them in positions in which these strengths are utilised. They place teachers in positions where they feel comfortable while also feeling the urge to develop. I'll draw on an example from management, although this is certainly not limited to management. Leaders in positions of power (e.g. director of studies) should be looking for management potential within their teaching staff, and

then supporting those teachers in their growth as potential managers (Fletcher & Williams, 2007). This is for two reasons. One, by doing this, teachers with management potential can benefit from a supported move into management. Two, by identifying management potential, and supporting this growth, when leaders leave there is not a leadership vacuum. In effect, the teacher has grown, and has been replanted to better impact the organisation as well as their own professional growth.

Principle 4: Provide individual guidance

Teachers, like plants, need individual guidance if they are to reach their full potential. In our profession, this guidance frequently takes the form of formalised professional development. However, the approach that is often taken is a one-size-fits-all affair, something which we know to be ineffective (Ellman & Lucantoni, 2021). Effective leaders, then, provide guidance at both the group and individual level (Harvard Business Review, 2017). Furthermore, they aim to provide both formal and informal guidance. Formal guidance might be that provided in formalised professional development such as workshops, coaching sessions and observations, for example. Informal guidance might take the form of: emotional support and care; last minute classroom ideas; or simply being a sounding board when teachers have come across a personal or professional problem.

Principle 5: Repot your plants

Plants in pots reach a point where they are too big for their pot. If they are to continue growing, they need to be repotted in bigger pots. Within ELT, there is often a stigma related to leaving an organisation, with teachers being afraid to express their plans to move on, and it is clear why: precarious contracts and poor management reactions as they do not wish to lose skilled staff. However, in my mind, leaders within our profession should aim to support teachers in this move rather than stigmatise the process. There are two reasons why this should occur. Firstly, by supporting teachers, leaders can help ensure that the teacher's experience within ELT remains positive and professional (here, I am assuming the experience has already been positive). Secondly, by assisting teachers in this career move, leaders from one organisation are likely to be in contact with leaders from other organisations, and from here potentially beneficial organisational relationships can be formed. Repotting your plants positively impacts both the teacher and the organisation.

Principle 6: Recognise that climate impacts everything

Organisational culture has numerous definitions (Robbins & Judge, 2014); however, I like to think of it as the climate of the organisation. And, just like in a garden, the climate – culture – of an organisation impacts everything, including:

how teachers interact; how teachers and management interact; and even how teachers and learners interact. Climate permeates everything. Leaders, however, are key players in influencing and responding to changes in culture (Murray, 2009). They are the ones who can help shift the culture of an organisation so that it becomes what we might call 'positive'. To simplify things, we can think of a positive culture within an LTO as one that is: inclusive; forward thinking; socially 'safe'; and developmentally focused. Culture is not something that is implemented top down; rather it is something that is crafted and influenced by key players within the organisations – our gardeners.

Principle 7: Get your hands dirty

'Lead by example.' 'Lead from the front.' These are two management mantras that are often *stated*, but not *lived*. This is a true shame, as effective leaders are those who get their hands dirty. Effective leaders are those teachers who continue their development outside the LTO: those staff members who ask critical questions and those managers who continue to teach and work with teachers. This principle – when lived – has the power to create not only trust between the leader and their peers, but also validity (Hill & Lineback, 2011). Leaders are often those in positions that require them to give advice to teachers, evaluate their teaching and provide feedback. It is very hard for teachers to take on this advice openly when they feel the leader does not have the same lived experience as they do – when they have not demonstrated they understand what it means to operate within the same working environment.

Principle 8: Learn from other gardeners

Teachers are great at learning from each other. Whether it be by attending conferences or simply engaging in staff room chats, there seems to be a great deal of collegial sharing and learning. However, when leaders find their ways into positions of power, there seems to be a drop in peer learning. Many managers may want to leave their mark, so to speak, and there is nothing inherently wrong with this. However, just as the novice gardener would do, managers need to continue seeking

ideas, feedback and critique from their leadership peers. That is, they need to learn from those who have gone before, and those who are currently operating in similar positions. Management, especially senior management, can be quite lonely in the sense that within the same organisation there are likely to be few others with whom they can engage in these critical conversations. For this reason, it is important that managers and leaders seek these conversations and connections outside of their organisation (Hill & Lineback, 2011). Much can be learnt from different gardeners from around the world.

Effective leaders within LTOs are able to recognise teachers' strengths and weaknesses, and place them in positions in which these strengths are utilised.

Who are leaders?

Throughout this article, I've often used the word 'leader'. I've also used the word 'manager'. Are they the same? When people think of educational leadership, they normally think of those in educational management positions, and this holds some truth; we would hope that those in management positions are indeed good leaders. However, I believe we should take a broader view of what leaders are. Leaders are any members within an organisation who operate in such a way that they help the organisation and its members to grow and be successful. As Anderson (2009:113) said, '[it] is important to remember that leadership is not about a position. It is about your attitude and desire that can help move your organisation or programme forward in accomplishing its goals'.

Moving forward

As mentioned, this metaphor is by no means perfect, and there are many other principles that could be included. However, I hope to have conveyed a number of key principles – dare I say responsibilities – that leaders, or those who hope to be leaders, should have in mind. I implore you all to evaluate your actions as leaders, and identify how you are utilising your resources, skills and positions (for those in formal positions) to positively impact not only the organisation as a whole, but also its individual members. In effect, I implore you to be the gardeners your organisations need.

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