

Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership
Impact Case Study



Open-to-Learning™ Leadership

System leadership: building trust through open communication



Participant:

Judi Benney

Principal, William Ruthven Secondary College

Participating in Bastow's Open-to-Learning™ (OTL™) Leadership course and learning how to approach and resolve difficult conversations provided Judi Benney with the missing link in achieving genuine and ongoing school improvement, as well as the opportunity to empower others as an OTL™ Accredited Trainer.

The essence of OTL™ is the value of openness: being open to learning about both the quality of your thinking and the quality of information you use when making judgments about other people and situations. For principals, this ability is critical to maintaining relationships and for creating an environment that values learning and encourages others to grow as leaders.

'I reflect back to when I was first a principal compared to what I do now ... it's so different, because I'm much more considered,' says Judi. 'This whole notion of actively thinking to understand and clarify assumptions ... has considerably changed the way I lead.'

Judi became interested in OTL™ after reading the work of Viviane Robinson, Distinguished Professor at the University of Auckland. Viviane developed OTL™ as a way to help educators build trust through conversations that are deeply respectful, but that also address and resolve tough issues.

'I found her work really interesting because I think it's an area where we often lack skills,' says Judi. 'When the

opportunity came up at Bastow to learn more about it, I put my hand up immediately.'

In a relatively short time, Judi has altered the way she communicates with students, staff and parents on a daily basis. Leading by example has meant that the teachers at her school are now also more willing to take the time to listen, understand other peoples' point of view and to challenge their own assumptions. This shared approach is assisting her to make real progress with organisational change and to resolve performance issues.

'You know that you are dealing with good people, you've just got to bring it back to the essence and then be able to have a respectful understanding of another person's view of what they're trying to achieve, and then work together to come up with an outcome,' says Judi.

Paul Johnson, Assistant Principal at William Ruthven Secondary College, has worked closely with Judi over the past eight months and also believes that the power of knowing how to approach difficult conversations cannot be underestimated.

'Situations or conversations can be resolved or minimised where they could otherwise explode, and everyone can walk away feeling like there has been a good outcome,' says Paul.

By constantly challenging her assumptions about teachers and the complexities of their day-to-day work, Judi has considerably enhanced everyone's capacity to work together towards a common goal.

A fundamental part of this approach is making sure she creates the time and space to have conversations,

including regular one-to-one meetings with every member of the leadership team, in an environment where everyone feels comfortable to be honest and open.

Judi strongly believes that taking this time to investigate and understand what drives another person or what their circumstances are is absolutely worthwhile in the long run.

'The whole thing about finding out and seeking that clarity is really powerful,' she explains. 'The many times I've found myself caught out when there is a difference between my assumption and the reality, has made me realise that I have to do things differently.'

'I reflect back to when I was first a principal compared to what I do now... it's so different, because I'm much more considered.'



System leadership

Paul believes that Judi's approach to conversations works because she is prepared, considered, respectful and open to developing a shared solution.

'I've seen Judi in situations where she's offered the other person the opportunity to give their side of the story, and rather than skirt around an issue or shift the person away from a problem, she tells them what she has observed and confronts the situation, but in a reasonable way, and then is open to what can be done to fix the problem.'

Judi also values the OTL™ approach because it doesn't ask her to move away from her intentions or compromise her integrity.

'It just asks you to look at things in another way and offers a more informed place of moving forward with somebody else. Beforehand I was too impetuous, because I often went in to discussions already knowing what I wanted to get out of them.'

Paul is convinced that the way Judi involves people in processes and negotiates in a respectful way allows others to 'own' decisions and feel like they've got equal power and influence, which also has a 'massive flow-on effect on students'.

'This shared leadership is very important to Judi, and she models and shares this approach on a daily basis – staff and students are valued and she uses her skills to have positive conversations about sensitive issues with successful outcomes.'

To make sure the impact of her learning at Bastow has the power to extend well beyond her school community and for many years to come, Judi is now an OTL™ Accredited Trainer and is facilitating two day workshops on behalf of Bastow.

'I think this is what we owe the system – to leave it better than we found it. We do this by empowering the people who are going to be taking over from us when we're not here. I see my job very much as building another group of leaders to come through the system, and you do that in your experiences every day at school. You want to encourage every single person that has aspirations.'

A learning journey

Central to OTL™ is the idea that emotional intelligence and the ability to build relational trust can be learnt. Although Judi agrees with this, she also firmly believes that it requires continuous work.

'Once you're made aware of the processes and skills involved in OTL™, it's very hard to ignore because they are so powerful,' says Judi. 'Of course, you have to constantly work at it, but I see this as a great way for us to show our ongoing commitment to learning. It's definitely not something where I think: well, I've done that now, and move on.'

And for Judi, this is where the real value of OTL™ lies. She believes it is not like most other professional development in that you can't 'pass or fail or pack it up or wrap it up'. It's a journey, something you need to constantly revisit, and the harder you work the more you get out of it, and the more you learn about yourself.


'It's probably one of the most empowering and, at the same time, frustrating things I have done,' says Judi. 'I often thought: why on earth am I doing this? It involves building a skill in yourself where you have to fight years and years of entrenched behaviour. It actually changes your core instincts ... and I find that I have to constantly go back and challenge myself and rethink everything I do. It's a life changing experience.'

Even for those who are naturally good communicators, the clear strategies and processes of OTL™ can be highly beneficial.

'There might be times when your guard is down or you're not ready for something, and it's good to have a structure to fall back on, and that is something you can learn,' Judi says.

As well as gaining new skills, Judi also thinks the course is a valuable opportunity for people to reflect on the way they engage with others, particularly with issues they may have previously ignored or 'pushed through' with their own view.

'It has made me mindful of 'checking in' with others before making assumptions about my concerns, and it continues to be a powerful learning journey.'



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Pictured: Judi and Paul

Listening to the student voice

Judi uses the same open approach when interacting with students, including involving them in processes and decision making, respecting their viewpoints and valuing their opinions.

‘Having open communication brings people on the journey with you. Rather than just giving lip service, I feel it helps empower them around the changes that affect them.’

As well as regular sessions with student leaders, Judi has introduced a formal teaching and learning questionnaire for students to provide feedback.

‘This fits with her whole view on valuing the student voice by giving them power and listening to them,’ explains Paul Johnson, the College’s Assistant Principal. ‘It encourages teachers to seek feedback from the students about a particular piece of work and their teaching, including what they learnt, what they liked or didn’t like and how it could be improved.’

Judi strongly believes that open conversations with students are an effective way of sharing her plans for change and discovering what is important to them.

‘The whole notion of being honest and open around the things that matter in order to make a difference to students can be really powerful in shifting their mindset,’ says Judi. ‘Discussing change creates a sense of security for people, and certainty.’

Adopting an OTL™ approach has made her more able to

see teaching and learning from the students’ viewpoint and this, according to Paul, has enhanced her already good grasp of what works.

‘I’ve seen Judi one-on-one with a number of students, carefully listening to their perspective and making it clear that she understands them, which is very effective when students are worked up – she respects their point of view and that has a calming effect.’

Listening deeply, especially when views differ from your own, and sharing control of situations and conversations are fundamental components of OTL™. These skills have also made Judi feel calmer and much more able to deal with situations, even those where people have to be held accountable for their actions.

‘I’m much more perceptive about what’s going on ... I now know that I can deal with difficult situations in a way that still takes others’ opinion into account and that can really help to get them on side.’

Positive interactions with parents

Having a clear model for preparing for and having difficult conversations has also changed the way Judi handles challenging situations with parents.

Judi admits that she now ‘doesn’t walk away from these things’, but rather uses the skills she learnt at Bastow to make sure the other person feels valued and involved.

‘When you really listen, people feel secure in knowing that they’ve been heard. You can get that uptake really well

if you communicate in a respectful way and really value another person’s opinion.’

Paul also believes this approach is very effective when dealing with parents, which is not always easy or straight forward.

‘I’ve seen Judi deal with some pretty tricky and potentially explosive situations with parents where they could have been very reactive, but afterwards walked away feeling really positive,’ says Paul.

It has become much clearer to Judi that interactions with parents can also be more successful when the child’s needs are the priority.

‘I recently had to deal with a parent that was really frustrated with the system. The first thing I did was to take the time to see things from her perspective and what was happening for her in the situation ... instead of worrying about what ‘he said, she said’, we got down to the essence of putting the child first, and all the parent’s angst went away. I saw the bigger picture, and we walked out having a plan instead of an argument.’

This is the beauty of OTL™ for Judi – the fact that when you really listen to another person and hear their side, it’s much easier to come to an agreement around an issue and work out a way forward that actually doesn’t involve ‘giving in’ to everything.



Pictured: Judi and Paul



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