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School Leaders' Retreat

18th -22nd July, 2018
The Kingdom of Bhutan



Centre of Escalation of Peace organized a year-long Asia-Pacific Schools Initiative (APSI) in 2017. The educational programme brought together students and teachers from 10 countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Our endeavour was to create a network of future leaders, developing and nurturing in each one of them the capacity to exercise “Leadership through Serene Strength”.

We continue to build on that foundation and network and extended the programme to School Leaders. The School Leaders’ Retreat aimed to bring together principals of schools that were part of the Asia Pacific Schools Initiative in 2017, and also extended the network to other principals in the Asia-Pacific Region.

About the Retreat

Leadership is more action than a position. Creating buy in, driving optimism, genuinely connecting with team members, and having authentic conversations to “lead” a group is very different from simply “managing” one. This applies to educational institutions as much as it does to corporate groups.

The programme addressed the unique challenges of a school leader in the complex and fast-changing world of learning. Designed specifically for school heads, the programme equipped participants with ideas, skills and practices to create and lead collaborative result-oriented teams. Sessions and learning items focused on distinguishing technical and adaptive challenges in running a school, creating alignment and commitment among team members, and nurturing a win-win mindset.

Using the experiential learning approach, sessions included engaging activities, reflection, sharing and discussions to co-create insights and learning.

Activity 1

This first activity was an icebreaker. It involved people associating their names with an adjective. The session was of paramount importance because it helped everyone to loosen up and get to know one another. Interestingly, the activity contributed to building a bond that lasted not only throughout the retreat but post the event as well. The self-attributed adjectives, such as Romantic Rinchen, Pretty Poonam and Reliable Rekha often were frequently brought up in good humour throughout the retreat, even to the extent that people remembered the adjectives more than the names.

Participants were asked to share what their expectations were with respect to the group for the next three days. Some of the points mentioned were the sharing of experiences; forming lasting connections with people; cross pollination of ideas that are contextually relevant; discussing challenges in the education sector; sharing of best practices; working toward escalation of peace; building a trusting relationship with each other; a need for a vocabulary around education; having conversations that help students become future proof in this volatile world; reflecting on what they are actually doing in the school; conversations about qualitative decision-making; understanding different leadership styles; and generally have a fun discussion.

It helped everyone loosen up and get to know one another

Activity 2

The second activity was more interactive. Participants were divided into two groups and blind folded, and were asked to form a square out of a rope. The activity was followed by a discussion. Participants had varying levels of satisfaction - reasons for a high level of satisfaction included greater participation, planning, cooperation, relinquishing control and some people naturally taking on a leadership role, and focusing on the process rather than the results. The reasons for medium satisfaction included chaos because participants didn't select a leader, poor communication, very high expectations, plunging into ambiguity without discussion, too many people saying too many things, and not listening enough.

Discussions that followed this were more nuanced. Participants shared their feelings about being a leader or being a follower, the importance of the process versus the result, and dealing with failure. Participants also shared their views



Activity 1: The icebreaker session



Activity 2: The Blindfold Square Rope activity

on what they would have done differently – using the benefit of hindsight. Many people said they would have changed their approach. The activity showed how leadership is not about entitlement but more about listening and inclusion. As a solution, it was suggested that the next time participants find themselves in such a scenario, they spend five minutes on discussing and trying to establish roles and strategies within the group. The major problem was the lack of listening. Listening is not a process that should end with the end of the speaker’s speech but with the end of the silence after it. We live in a VUCA world: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous – the rope activity was reflective of the larger world and interactions people experience on a daily basis. Perhaps the only difference was that in life people aren’t blind folded – but this too is questionable as sometimes we’re blinded by our own beliefs.

The activity showed how leadership is not about entitlement but more about listening and inclusion

Activity 3

Within two groups of participants, each person was given a 1-2ft long pipe (cut in half). The activity involved transferring marbles through the pipes into a cup kept at the end of the room. The activity had many rules including a rule that marbles cannot be rolled back, no use of hands and pipe having no contact. Interestingly, one group seemed to disregard the rules (process) to secure the most number of marbles in the cup (end result), while the other group put emphasis on the process, and seemed to be achieving results as well towards the latter half of the activity.

Participants were asked to reflect on the last two activities. Reflection was mainly related to the concept of leadership. The following statements are the thoughts

shared: Leadership is not an adjective but a verb. Anybody can be a leader, but situations matter. A good leader makes other people lead too. Leaders too are often faced with many challenges for which they may not immediately have solutions. A leader shouldn't undermine his/her colleagues. Leaders need to deal with adaptive challenges. A leader needs to show vulnerability. Individuals should know when to lead and when to manage, depending on whether the task at hand is an adaptive challenge (effectiveness) or a technical challenge (efficiency). Leadership is not a "noun", it's actually a "verb" for action.

A leader needs to show vulnerability

Participants engaged in a discussion that looked at how leaders should behave in various situations, and related adaptive and technical challenges, mostly related to the school environment.

Activity 4

A short story followed by a question (the fake Rs. 20 note story): A woman goes to a shopkeeper to purchase a pair of slippers that cost Rs. 12. The woman hands the shopkeeper a Rs. 20 note. The shopkeeper doesn't have change. He borrows change for the Rs.20 from his neighbour and gives the slippers, and Rs. 8 balance to the woman. Later that evening the neighbour comes running and tells the shopkeeper that the Rs. 20 note was fake. The shopkeeper then gives the neighbour Rs. 20 and takes back the fake rupee note. Participants were asked a simple question - what was the loss (financial) incurred by the shopkeeper assuming cost price of the slipper was Rs. 12? The participants were not allowed interaction to arrive at an answer.

Individuals came up with many different answers. Groups were made based



Activity 3: The Marble Pipe activity

on different answers. Then 15 minutes were given for the groups to arrive at a common answer. The outcome was to test the resolve in one's own belief, and to question why other people were coming to different conclusions despite having the same information. The answer, which was not revealed until later was Rs. 20. How can the loss caused by a Rs.20 fake note be more than Rs. 20? Participants were finally relieved – it was also interesting to see group dynamics at play because individuals who had initially given Rs. 20 as the result had changed their answers during the group discussion. In situations that are time bound, it is easy for preconceptions, seemingly logical narratives and dominant voices, to dominate the situation leading to false conclusions. The discussion that followed looked at the importance of understanding the reasons behind our beliefs while being cognizant of the opinions of others.

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Activity 5

This activity too used a story to bring attention to issues of leadership and bias. The story began with a girl being shipwrecked on an island with two strangers, an old man and a sailor. Her fiancé and his friend were on another island. The girl asked the sailor if he could take her via the boat to the other island. The sailor asked her to sleep with him in return. She was shocked – the old man only asked her to follow her heart. The next day, the sailor took the girl to the other island; the old man was on the boat too. Upon reaching her destination when the girl shared the sailor's demand and her complicity with her fiancé, he was angry and called off the wedding. However, the friend offered to marry the girl and she accepted. The participants were asked to rank these five characters.

The story provoked different views on technical and moral issues. No instruction was given on what the ranking should be based on. The initial discussion was of a moral nature – who amongst the characters were the best? The problems raised here were: What are the scales to rate them with respect to what? Is it one's own value system? What is the value in letting people with different value systems vote on the values associated with the characters in the story? The discussions then moved on to the role of bias and subjective value systems in meetings and interactions. Organizations should have a separate set of values; facts should be presented upfront along with setting common objectives. This, they felt, was a good way to deal with conflict because often subjective value systems, morals and ethics lead to interpersonal conflict. The main types of leadership that participants were made aware of related to participatory, autocratic, consultative and delegative



Activity 6: The Blindfold Square Rope activity

roles – it is important to understand that there is no gold standard; all leadership styles are effective in certain situations and ineffective in others.

Activity 6

Participants were divided into small groups and asked to talk about some challenges and best practices that they faced in their respective schools. All groups were a combination of Indian and Bhutanese participants. Some best practices discussed were:

- Mentor/mentee system – roadmap with reference to Five Areas of Development
- PLC system – Professional Learning Committee – children are divided by different subjects – there is an element of cooperation and understanding
- Strong school and community relationship – education isn't limited to teachers, but parents and the community are important too. Teachers and parents maintain contact almost on a daily basis (For example, has the child reached on time?)
- Community participation – engage with the farming community, for example, at the Royal Academy – documenting community history, buying local produce, rediscovering community games and recipes
- Report session – previous day's teacher on duty would give a report
- Children engage in DEAR – Drop Everything and Read
- Teachers report 15 min before school starts – Principal connects with teachers
- All students get a two-week internship (Grade 11 students)– arranged by the schools and matched with a parent body. Almost an employment-like process
- Morning meeting is important. All levels of staff need to report. Start off with a good thought – quick sharing (4-5min). It's great for teachers because there is no hierarchy
- Student council - voting begins at a very young age

- Encouraging physical activity and art programmes across age groups. More contact between seniors and juniors reduces the distance that often results in hostility
- Competitive processes at the national level. Scouts/ leadership is focused on – the students and teachers form a peace unit– safety of the school is taken care of – bullying, substance abuse, for example, are addressed
- Save the environment programme – help the environment in whatever way you can. For example – children say no to plastic cups. Helping children own their environment
- Buddy system – for the students who don't perform or don't feel the motivation to perform – they are paired with students doing academically well
- Make each student present in front of the assembly at least once a year – building a lot of confidence
- Start a day with “contemplation” for 20 minutes
- Students pick chits to select with exam, no monitoring of exam halls, individualized papers
- Peer and professional counselling in cases of bullying

Challenges:

- Retention of students is a problem
- Building a middle leadership – since the school is young, this is a big challenge. Difficult to have 95 people reporting to you directly
- High poverty rate – teachers become second parents. Teachers aren't just limited to teaching
- Not able to practice what we preach. We teach ‘don't say lies’, but often they see the world where blatant lies are told and gotten away with. Challenge is making lessons relevant to the real world
- Bullying at all levels
- Managing the school and needs of the student given financial constraints

Later, participants shared what their personal and professional takeaways were. The most important takeaways were related to practices at the Royal Academy, leadership styles, escalation for positive outcomes, the importance of listening, the bullying challenges and ways around it, buddy systems, encouraging student initiatives, and the importance of inter-class cohesion. The hope is that the best practices across India and Bhutan will find real world resonance, and common challenges will be met.

Activity 7

Participants were asked to open a blank page in a diary and wooden blocks were distributed. Each participant was to be given a set of 15 blocks to make a tower of individual blocks. Also one turn could end with one fall or voluntary stopping. The



Activity 7: The Wooden Block Tower activity

participants were asked to write down how high their tower would be. How many single blocks could they arrange vertically in a single tower?

The thought exercise continued after participants wrote down their answers. Participants were asked how high their tower would be with the non-dominant hand while blind folded. Rules involved no time constraint. Scoring was like this: Up to 5 blocks you don't score any points, 6-7 blocks you score 5 points, 8-10 blocks you score 10 points, and 11th block is 15 points. And that 12th block will result in 20 points. Now participants were asked to write down how many points they would score. Given that all 22 participants would get a turn, participants were asked to look around and write down how much the entire group would score, and tell the group how they had arrived at this number. The average score of groups like this tends to be 235. People could revise their number based on the additional information provided. Group average expectation ranged from 110 to 440. They were asked to discuss an average number acceptable to all participants, a heated discussion followed and the final agreed number was 300. The results of the activity were surprising – almost everyone did exceptionally well.

Outcomes of the activity were related to self-confidence. Here are what participants felt when asked to share what they felt could be improved given such an activity next time:

- Aiming higher
- Believing in oneself
- Have greater self confidence - stop underestimating one's own ability
- Using the confidence given by the group
- Not to underestimate others
- Having a positive approach to what is under one's own control
- Most assumptions are based on bias and presumptions
- When there is no concrete data, it makes sense to make positive assumptions than negative assumptions – this is the power of self-fulfilling prophecy

Participants were asked to estimate targets for the previous exercises with the following attributes: realistic target, conservative target, stretch target, achievable target, and optimistic target. There was no considerable difference on an average between the targets, and the same numbers would be found in all five categories. The estimates seemed to come down to gut feeling.

Great leaders focus on direct control and they have a positive outlook to what is in their control. They don't worry about things that are beyond their control. Average people on the other hand will focus on things that are beyond control because their mind is set on failure and negativity. We need to move from a limiting mindset where negative attributes (fear of failure) are focused on. This leads to being defeatist, cautious, safe and nervous. A growth mindset is better where there is a desire to succeed and focus on positive attributes. This leads to being confident, proactive, ambitious and a risk-taker. Participants were asked to remember that emotion, rather than logic, drives out decision-making. Positive thinking leads to positive outcomes.

Ladder of inference: cycle of bias action

- Event/observations
- Some selective data
- Cultural and past experience
- Assumption
- Conclusion
- Belief and action

This is the cycle of biased action. People should be aware of this and constantly try to overcome this. Our current reality is a tug of war between baggage, powerlessness, worthlessness on one side, and our vision on the other. And when there's too much stress we inevitably pull back on our vision, whereas we should do the opposite.

Activity 8

Participants were divided into four groups. Rules were given to each team to read and discuss. In the red and black card game, each team handed over a color (black or red) to the facilitator. A combination of the four colors either resulted in a profit or loss. Objective for each team was to win as much money as it could. The number of rounds was not known.

Different groups adopted different strategies and interpreted the rules in their own way. In the end all of them lost money. An engaging discussion followed on what participants felt winning meant.

Winning as a relative concept:

- Winning means coming out on top
- Better than others
- Defeating another
- Being superior
- Competing with another

Winning as an absolute concept:

- Achieving goals/succeeding at task
- Gaining what you set out to achieve
- Bettering myself
- Competing with self

Absolute is much better. The card game served as a metaphor for one's relationship with peers, colleagues and friends. Betrayal and disappointment were the main emotions of the activity; we can see this carrying over in real life too. Winning is not always important, but how you win is important. Trust is built on two parts: character and competency. Competency relates to past results and capability; and character relates to integrity and intent.

Activity 9

Participants were asked to think about what keeps a team together:

- Faith in the system
- Lead from the front (by example)
- Owning responsibility
- Family support, team support
- Planned/intended
- Sense of pride

Usually, the ineffectiveness of a team results from the following in a sequential order:

- Absence of trust
- Fear of conflict
- Lack of commitment
- Avoidance of accountability
- Inattention to result

To build trust, we need to show vulnerability and be human. We need to build a robust system where dissent is handled effectively. People should be able to handle criticism.



Saroj Thapa giving a presentation on the Asia Pacific Schools Initiative.

Following this activity, Saroj Thapa gave a presentation on the Asia Pacific Schools Initiative. She discussed Leadership through Serene Strength, the learning framework, assessment, learning methodology and future plans.

Activity 10

Participants were asked to think of leaders they really looked up to. What did the leader do that made the participant think he/she is a good leader? The answers were grouped into three categories namely – example, engagement and emotion. These are three qualities of a good leader.

Example:

- Coach
- Accords everyone with a sense of value
- Walks the talk
- Asks for solutions from team
- Forgiving
- Empathetic
- Establishes personal connect
- Stresses the importance of reading

Engagement:

- Has a vision
- Creates a plan
- Has clear expectations
- Completes tasks

- Stands by his/her team
- Takes responsibility for problems
- Hand holding
- Resourceful
- Gives space and does not micro-manage
- Open to feedback
- Freedom of choice
- Takes tough decisions
- Rolls up sleeves in crisis
- Makes others aware of their abilities
- Provides opportunities for success
- Encouraging
- Patient

Emotion:

- Approachable
- Respectful
- Trusting
- Appreciative
- Good communication skills

We must not alienate children from where they come from. They should never feel ashamed of their background. Schooling is not an end in itself. Growing up is about becoming a person of substance. Participants were asked a question - who is a person of substance?

- Somebody who is comfortable in their own self
- Is able to look out and looks out
- Respects and accepts others
- Keeps the child alive
- Understands oneself
- Someone who is selfless and not selfish
- Strength, courage and confidence to see things through
- Consistent in his/her values
- Courage to stand up against what she/he sees as wrong
- Someone who is a critical thinker
- Skills and knowledge along with self realization – for himself and his immediate community
- Socially responsible
- Someone who can face the world with a good moral character
- Someone who is free of the five poisons – desire, anger, ego, jealousy and indecisiveness
- Complete in themselves
- Someone who has respect for nature

- Someone who lives by values and virtues at all time
- Accepting of diversity around him/her
- Someone who has a sense of humour
- Person who is intellectually, academically, socially and culturally sound
- Attitude to challenge himself/herself
- Someone who has a holistic hygiene
- Someone with a strong character
- Someone who is able to ignore things depending on the situation
- Someone who is able to live his/her life through moments



Group Photo