

## Positive System Framework To Support

# PRINCIPAL WELLBEING & EFFECTIVENESS

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Dr Phil Riley's (2011-2017) Principal Occupational Health and Wellbeing Survey (PHWS) continues to paint a bleak picture of the demands facing school leaders. With increased levels of stress and burnout, excessive work demands and higher than average levels of adult-to-adult bullying and abuse, too many school principals are languishing. Unfortunately and all too often, the rhetoric around improving health and wellbeing outcomes for principals is to arm them with coping strategies such as counselling, mindfulness, health checks and exercise. While I have previously argued that all principals should receive mandatory wellbeing training at the commencement of their first contract (see, Positive Psychology, A Pathway to Principal Resilience), simply teaching school leaders how to cope under the demands of the role is only part of the solution.

Education systems and their leaders need to understand the critical role that they can play in preventing the stress and burn-out related illnesses that are plaguing school principals.



Figure 1:  
Positive Systems Framework,  
Wicher (2017)

Seligman's PERMA wellbeing theory (2011), Ryff's psychological wellbeing model (1995), Deci & Ryan's self-determination theory (2000) and Fredrickson's Broaden and Build theory (2004) have helped us to understand that wellbeing is complex; it is a multi-dimensional construct that comprises relationships, positive emotions, autonomy, meaning, accomplishment, mastery and engagement. While these theories are often associated with improving individual wellbeing, education systems can also use this knowledge (and theory) to better understand the structural and organisational role that they play in improving the collective health and wellbeing of school principals. Drawing on the work of the previously mentioned theories, the Positive Systems Framework (figure 1) highlights the dimensions that support individual and system wellbeing priorities.

Within this framework, the importance of managing individual wellbeing is retained with an understanding that a thriving school leader is balanced; is physically active and has a healthy diet (liquid and solid!); understands where autonomy (or agency) can be gained and promoted within a system structure; is committed to personal growth and development; is connected and develops social capital and; is aware of their emotions and recognises individual and collective achievements. While the outer ring of the framework can also be used to inform approaches to improving individual wellbeing, they have been included as part of a broader strategy to encourage system organisational reflection and change.

### A Strengths Based Approach

For a number of years, schools have embraced a strengths based approach to shift away from deficit models of individual and collective improvement. The work of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) and Huta and Hawley (2008) have helped us to understand that the development of strengths such as hope (optimism), gratitude and humour can provide an effective buffer against the cognitive vulnerabilities associated with stress, depression and anxiety. Education systems can also embrace this approach as a way of engaging more effectively with school principals and the broader community. If school and system leaders have the collective belief that they are failing, not meeting targets, not progressing up global academic tables or that their job is to improve or fix what is not working, then that system is broken and wellbeing will be compromised. If on the other hand, the system is unrelenting in its identification and amplification of strengths, wellbeing and high performance is more likely to follow. Ken Robinson, author of The Element (2009) stated that, "It's a fundamental human truth that people perform better when they're in touch with the things that inspire them". How can education systems inspire and engage their leaders through strengths to achieve high performance? How would we redesign performance and development processes so that the development component of 'performance and development' is in bold and underlined? What would school reviews look like? How would recruitment practices change?

Highly successful school systems are aware of their strengths. Riley (2017) identifies Finland's education system strengths as being, "collaboration, creativity, trust-based responsibility, professionalism and equity" (p.10). What would we want the world to say about our education systems in Australia? What would we want them to say are our strengths?

### Values and Virtues

Cameron, Bright and Caza's (2004) research identified specific virtues associated with organisational high performance; forgiveness, trust, integrity, optimism and compassion. While it is important for an organisation to have a core set of values, by understanding the impact that organisational virtues can have on wellbeing and performance, we are able to better understand the positive qualities that truly enable school systems to function at their moral, human and social best (Cameron et. al., 2004). Cameron's research holds particular relevance for school systems. If education systems are low in optimism, forgiveness and compassion, how will schools play their role in breaking cycles of disadvantage, inspiring leaders of tomorrow, providing pathways for young people to achieve their dreams? How will schools thrive if their education systems don't trust them enough to be consultative when making critical decisions around key issues such as staff selection, pedagogy and strategy? Without trust, learner agency (student, teacher, principal) will not thrive and once again, wellbeing will be compromised.

### Positive System Support

Recommendations from Riley's PHWS (2017) identified that the work demands associated with being a school principal are a major cause of principal stress and burnout. School systems need to better support their most significant leaders to ensure that more of their time is prioritised on improving student learning and wellbeing outcomes. Most principals are doing an incredible job in leading their schools but too many are routinely working in excess of 50 hours per week and feel under constant pressure to meet the increasingly complex needs of students, staff, parents and their respective education departments. If we acknowledge that workload and adult-to-adult abuse is a significant contributor to principal stress and burnout, how would a high performing system support schools in managing competing work demands such as OHS, staff misconduct and parent complaints? Positive system design not only supports principal wellbeing, it prioritises leader time to where it has the greatest impact; improving school culture and climate for learning, wellbeing and high performance.

### Promotion of Networks and Social Capital

The findings from the PHWS (2017) are clear, those principals that have positive levels of social capital within their schools are more likely to be thriving or experiencing improved mental health outcomes. In a job that can be lonely and isolating, school systems can do a great deal to promote the importance of relationships and professional networks. In recent times, the Victorian Department of Education has sought to improve school practice and student outcomes through the promotion of 'communities of practice' whereby schools and school leaders work together to improve or develop specific approaches to teaching and learning. While this model was established to improve student outcomes, it also serves as a vehicle to connect leaders and improve social capital. What additional structures can school systems put in place to promote social capital? For leaders

in small rural schools, can this be effectively facilitated through coaching and via video conference? What role can performance and development play in building social capital whereby leaders are encouraged to work collaboratively as they pursue meaningful goals?

Wellbeing is complex and it should be clear that there

is no one solution that will shift the pendulum for principals from languishing to flourishing. It will take a multi-dimensional approach that is both focussed on individual coping strategies and system-wide organisational change. Thriving positive education systems define themselves and their relationships with school leaders through their strengths; they develop and enact strategy to reduce work demands; they actively promote the importance of respecting the work of educators and principals and provide opportunities to create meaningful connections that build wellbeing.

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