

Steve Munby and Marie-Claire Bretherton

Imperfect Leadership In Action

A practical book for school leaders
who know they don't know it all



Foreword by Andy Hargreaves



Crown House Publishing Limited
www.crownhouse.co.uk

First published by

Crown House Publishing Ltd
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK
www.crownhouse.co.uk

and

Crown House Publishing Company LLC
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495, USA
www.crownhousepublishing.com

© Steve Munby and Marie-Claire Bretherton, 2022

The rights of Steve Munby and Marie-Claire Bretherton to be identified as the authors of this work have been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published 2022.

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under current legislation no part of this work may be photocopied, stored in a retrieval system, published, performed in public, adapted, broadcast, transmitted, recorded or reproduced in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of the copyright owners. Enquiries should be addressed to Crown House Publishing Limited.

Page 70: Murphy, D. (2020) 'What Improv, Ubuntu, and Covid-19 have taught me about leadership', Presidential address to the British Psychological Society Conference [online], September. Available at: <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-33/september-2020/what-improv-ubuntu-and-covid-19-have-taught-me-about-leadership>. Used with kind permission.

Page 139: The relationship between core values and beliefs and practices, 'From values and beliefs about learning to principles and practice', p. 4. Available at: <http://www.learning-by-design.com/papers/From Values & Beliefs to Prin & Prac.pdf> © Julia Atkin, 1996. Used with kind permission.

Page 141: Teaching to the North-East © Russell Bishop (2019) *Teaching to the North-East: Relationship-Based Learning in Practice*. Wellington: NZCER Press. Abraham, M. (2020) 'From founding documents to guiding frameworks: innovation at HPSS (Part 2)', Principal Possum (31 January). Available at: http://principalpossum.blogspot.com/2020/01/from-founding-documents-to-guiding_31.html. Used with kind permission.

Page 144: sunflower image © #CHANNELM2 – stock.adobe.com.

Page 168: 'Come to the edge', from *Selected Poems* by Christopher Logue (1969) © Christopher Logue.

Page 222: Phases of recovery from disaster © Zunin and Myers adapted as cited in DeWolfe, D. J. (2000) *Training Manual for Mental Health and Human Service Workers in Major Disasters*, 2nd edn. Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, p. 5. Used with kind permission.

Page 232: Extract from 'Looking for the Castle, Second Time Around' © William Ayot: From *E-Mail from the Soul: New & Selected Leadership Poems*. Glastonbury: PS Avalon. Used with permission from the author.

British Library of Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-178583601-5

Mobi ISBN 978-178583614-5

ePub ISBN 978-178583615-2

ePDF ISBN 978-178583616-9

LCCN 2021950840

Printed and bound in the UK by
Charlesworth Press, Wakefield, West Yorkshire

Foreword by Andy Hargreaves

It is pointless to strive to be imperfect. And it is impossible to achieve the opposite of imperfection for long in anything that truly matters. In most areas of life, perfection is a futile goal. Zero tolerance policies, elimination of achievement gaps, the insistence that failure is not an option and impeccable leadership – for most things, in most circumstances, these ends are all unattainable. Not only are they unattainable, they are not even desirable. The cosmetically altered wrinkle-free face, the orthodontically perfect row of teeth, the flawlessly scripted speech – don't all of these lose a vital part of what makes us human, distinct and interesting? As the late Leonard Cohen pointed out, 'There is crack in everything.' And that, he added, is 'where the light gets in.'

Striving for excellence is admirable. Pursuing perfection is a trap. In *Overcoming Perfectionism*, Ann W. Smith (2013, p. 8) argues that 'the desire to be superhuman becomes a problem when we begin to believe that perfection is actually possible and even necessary for self-esteem, success, peace of mind, and acceptance by others.' Relentless perfectionism, she writes, ultimately leads to obsessiveness, depression, addictive behaviour and burnout.

The truth is that we are all imperfect. Whether we are parents, colleagues, performers or leaders, imperfection is something we can never escape. It is part of the human condition. In 'Imperfections', Celine Dion sings about how she has her 'own imperfections', her 'own set of scars to hide'. We need to remember that this applies to children too, sometimes. As every parent knows, it is unrealistic to expect young people to be perfectly behaved all the time.

Being an imperfect leader is not something we can deliberately accomplish, like being a transformational, inspirational or servant leader, for example. Imperfection will happen to us anyway. We cannot avoid it. Imperfect leadership, rather, is about how we handle our imperfections and make the most of them, while eliminating or at least mitigating their harmful effects on others. Imperfect leadership is about acknowledging our own and each other's flaws, learning from them and even loving each other for them a bit – like the brilliant but absent-minded professor, the efficient manager who can get a bit too uptight on occasion, or the passionate yet vulnerable leader whose heart on their sleeve may sometimes beat too loudly for other people's comfort.

The issue that Steve Munby and Marie-Claire Bretherton address in this excellent book is not how to become an imperfect leader on purpose. Trying to come across as a mere mortal when you truly believe you are a hero or a god will only be a source of irritation as well as ineffectiveness. False humility, staged self-deprecation and insincere apologies are as unconvincing as the forced grins that people try to pass off as genuine smiles. They are as excruciating in real life as they are in Ricky Gervais' fictional leadership portrayals in the TV sitcom, *The Office*.

There is a depth of authenticity and honesty, rather than just a level of skill or sophistication, which marks out the imperfect leader as someone we can trust, admire and follow. Imperfect leadership is about who we are and how we are with others, which is manifested in what we do and seek to accomplish with those around us, together. It is not a toolbox or a rule book for leadership that has no connection to the development of our inner selves.

At the same time, imperfect leadership is no excuse for hapless or incompetent leadership. And while public disclosures by sport stars and celebrities about their struggles with mental health have made it easier for everyone to stop covering up their flaws, expressing weakness or vulnerability can be overdone if it degenerates into emotional indulgence. Indeed, in a paper critiquing the rise of psychological interest in well-being as a way of dealing with unresolved issues of social inequality, for example, University of Birmingham professor Kathryn Ecclestone (2011, p. 99) has pointed to how the concept of vulnerability has expanded beyond 'those with mental illness or disability, and those unable to protect themselves from harm and exploitation to anyone receiving any health treatment, therapy or palliative care'. Other categories like post-traumatic stress and depression have also expanded to become more all-encompassing over recent years.

To sum up: imperfection is not a get-out clause for poor performance; vulnerability must not descend into self-obsession; and apologies for mistakes are no substitute for redemption and restitution concerning those we have wronged.

Clearly, when we look at the idea of imperfection, and at the nature of imperfect leadership, there is more to them than meets the eye. In this excellent sequel to *Imperfect Leadership*, Steve Munby – a proven leader of school districts, of an iconic national organisation for educational leadership and of a global education charity – joins forces with Marie-Claire Bretherton – a highly experienced school leader and one of the education system's best collaborators and school improvers – to look more closely at imperfect leadership in action.

Their book identifies some key attributes and actions that characterise imperfect leaders. Some of these, such as the importance of trust, building relationships, admitting mistakes and empowering teams, are already very familiar in the literature of leadership, although it is good to read about them once more from a practical and not just a theoretical standpoint. Other attributes are more novel and may, momentarily, take the reader aback. Making public promises that could come back to haunt you, doing the right thing even when your career prospects are put at risk, narrating compelling stories as well as sharing important data and, my favourite, finding the right balance and relationship between power and love in interactions with others – these are all explained clearly and also illustrated practically from both the authors' own extensive leadership experiences and from inspiring case examples of imperfect school leadership all around the world. There are engaging tools for personal reflection and practical guides for how to manage processes more effectively as a self-avowed imperfect leader. The cases ring true. No blushes are spared. The authentic nature of struggle, setbacks and overcoming adversity leaps off almost every page.

I have known Steve Munby for forty years. When he was a friend and colleague early on in our careers, he always struck me as someone who was simultaneously courageous and terrified all at the same time. He always wanted to make a positive difference, he was sometimes terrified by what he had taken on, and yet, with lots of help and advice, including a bit of my own, he always found a way through in the end. In later years, in some of my most challenging leadership moments, my own dark nights of the soul, I have sought Steve's advice in turn, and benefitted from the moral support, strategic insight and ultimate optimism of his coaching support.

And now we are colleagues together, leading an international organisation that we have created with a small team of associates, which serves seven ministers of education, their senior civil servants and their professional leaders, so we can advance humanitarian goals, policies and strategies in education globally. Through this work, we have been able to help system leaders to be imperfect leaders, too, in how they strive for genuine improvement, work collaboratively with others and admit it when they have taken a wrong turn or feel stuck.

To be an imperfect leader is human. To live imperfect leadership with others can sometimes attain an almost transcendent quality that reaches far beyond the individual ego to encompass something greater than oneself.

Imperfect Leadership in Action

This book will change your thinking. If you are worn out with trying to be perfect, it may change your life. Best of all, if you take its lessons seriously, it may help to change the lives of everyone else that you care about as an educator.

Acknowledgements

Both

Together we'd like to thank our trusted friends and colleagues who kindly gave us detailed and helpful feedback on this book in its earliest form. To Maggie Farrar, Geoff Southworth, Peter Batty and Helen Barker – thank you! Your wisdom and insights really helped shape our thinking and our articulation of the imperfect leadership mindset.

We also want to say a heartfelt and huge thank you to our case study writers – we are so grateful that you were willing to open up your leadership to our readers and share your experiences and learning. It's been a privilege to learn from you.

Thanks also to Crown House Publishing who were enthusiastic about the idea of this book from the start and have provided excellent support along the way.

Steve

I made a full list of acknowledgements in my last book so I will be brief in this one. Since I wrote *Imperfect Leadership*, Vanni Treves (formerly chair of the National College for School Leadership) has, sadly, passed away and I would want to acknowledge again what a hugely positive influence he had on my leadership. I would also like to thank Andy Hargreaves not only for his excellent foreword to this book but also for his friendship and unwavering professional support over a 40-year period. Most of all, I want to thank my wife, Jacqui. She was a highly effective (but imperfect) head teacher herself and is now making an equally positive impact as an executive coach of school leaders. She has had more of a positive influence on my leadership than anyone else; providing me with ideas, support and challenge and helping me to believe that I still have something to say on leadership.

Finally, a big thank you to Marie-Claire. Writing with someone else is very different from working solo, and I wasn't sure how it would go. It has been a delight.

Marie-Claire

I am so very grateful for the support, encouragement and kindness of my husband Roger, and my two boys, Leo and Tom, who have graciously allowed me many hours at weekends and in the holidays to read and write. They, along with my dearest friends Joy, Paul, Jude and Jo, have continually championed me and supported me – not just in writing this book, but through many many years of trying to become a better leader, and someone who can make a positive difference to children and young people.

My parents have had a profoundly positive influence on me as a person and as a leader. Both educators, fuelled by a passion to make a difference and to bring people together, and to challenge the status quo in Northern Ireland – they have both been an inspiration to me. I'm so proud of them! I'd like to thank them for giving up hours of their time to proofread an early draft of this book and for the feedback and support throughout.

I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues in Anthem School Trust and in KYRA, some of whom I have known and worked with since I was a new head teacher at Mount Street Academy just finding my feet. I'm so deeply grateful for the support of the community of colleagues around me who help shape me, challenge me, and keep me learning as a leader.

Finally, I want to thank Steve for the opportunity to write this book with him. Spending time talking and thinking about imperfect leadership, and putting our ideas and experiences together on paper, has been hugely rewarding. I'm grateful to him for the concept of imperfect leadership, and the opportunity to share with others the freedom that comes from knowing that no one has all the answers, and no one is a perfect leader.

Contents

<i>Foreword by Andy Hargreaves</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
Introduction	1
Marie-Claire	1
Steve	2
What is imperfect leadership?	2
How to get the most out of this book	3
Key themes	5
Chapter 1: Self-Awareness and Tuning into Context	7
360° feedback can be a very powerful way of developing self-awareness	10
Marie-Claire	14
What was I trying to do?	14
What actually happened?	14
Why were there differences?	14
What can you learn from this?	15
Imperfect leaders tune into their context and adapt their leadership accordingly	16
Case study: <i>Marc Belli, executive head teacher, The Bishop of Llandaff Church in Wales School/Caldicot School Partnership, Wales</i>	17
How do we stay tuned into our context, even after a number of years in the same organisation?	20
Case study: <i>Alex Smith, head teacher, Gaer Primary and Maesglas Primary, Newport, Wales</i>	22
Playing to my strengths – demonstrating unfailing optimism	23
Defaulting to others where I knew myself well enough to know that someone else would make a better job of it	24
Things for leaders to consider	25
Summary	26
Chapter 2: Developing and Empowering Teams	29
Case study: <i>Maureen Nugent, head teacher, St Brendan's Primary School, Glasgow, Scotland</i>	36

Building trusting teams	38
Why is trust so important for developing and empowering teams?	41
Imperfect leaders develop and empower their team without losing sight of the impact on the front line	44
Case study: <i>Rabiathul Bazriya, principal, Evergreen Primary School, Singapore</i>	47
Building the individual and the team	48
What did I learn as a leader?	49
Summary	50
Chapter 3: Asking for Help	53
Case study: <i>Helen Rowland, CEO, Focus-Trust, Oldham, England</i>	56
Invitational leadership	62
Invitational leadership works across networks and whole systems, not just in schools	63
Case study: <i>Mary Hutchison, principal, Roslyn Primary School, Victoria, Australia</i>	65
Imperfect leaders create a help-seeking culture	67
Summary	71
Chapter 4: Managing Ego and Acknowledging Mistakes	73
Developing self-efficacy	77
Case study: <i>Liz Robinson, co-director, Big Education</i>	77
When leaders forget they are imperfect	81
Case study: <i>Stef Edwards, trust leader, Learn Academies Trust, Leicestershire, England</i>	84
Practical ways to help you develop a healthy ego	87
Imperfect leaders admit their mistakes	88
Taking responsibility for the mistakes of your team	91
Summary	94
Chapter 5: Making Public Promises	97
What do we mean by public promises?	97
Why make public promises?	98
Case study: <i>Rachel Kitley, principal, Cowes Enterprise College, Isle of Wight, England</i>	99
What are good promises?	107
Imperfect leaders elicit public promises from others	108
Summary	111

Contents

Chapter 6: Being a Restless Learner	113
Developing openness to learn	114
Avoiding the plateau	120
Grown-up and restless leadership	122
Case study: <i>Sir Peter Wanless, CEO, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children</i>	124
Imperfect leaders are curious about others	127
Summary	129
Chapter 7: Power and Love	131
The importance of power in leadership	132
The dangers of power without love in leadership	133
The dangers of love without power in leadership	136
Case study: <i>Claire Amos, tumuaki/principal, Albany Senior High School, Auckland, New Zealand</i>	136
Observing teachers in their habitat	137
Identifying the problem – are we walking the walk?	138
Sharing ownership and co-designing the solution	138
Being prepared for staff feeling challenged and braving the learning pit	139
Being a warm and demanding change leader and leading to the North-East	140
The importance of love in leadership	141
Power and love in organisations	144
Power and love in school improvement	146
Power and love in the wider education system	147
Case study: <i>Gillian Hamilton, strategic director, Education Scotland</i>	148
Summary	151
Chapter 8: Developing Future Leaders	155
Developing future leaders takes time and intentionality	155
A tap on the shoulder	157
Case study: <i>Sue Belton, head teacher, St Helena's Church of England Primary School, East Lindsey, England</i>	158
Leadership development	161
Delegation	164
Gate-keeper or gate-blocker	166
Leadership diversity	168
Not all leaders are the same	169

Next-generation catalyst	172
Summary	173
Chapter 9: Authenticity and Doing the Right Thing	175
Imperfect leaders cultivate self-awareness – specifically about their thoughts, feelings, motives and values – as well as their preferences and ways of operating	176
Imperfect leaders show the best version of themselves	178
Imperfect leaders try to do the right thing	180
Case study: <i>Carolyn Roberts, head teacher, Thomas Tallis School, London, England</i> ...	186
Flexing our ethical muscles	190
Case study: <i>Rhian Jones, head teacher, Ysgol Y Faenol, Denbighshire, Wales</i>	190
Case study: <i>Evelyn Forde, MBE, head teacher, Cophall School, London, England, and vice-president, Association of School and College Leaders</i>	194
Summary	198
Chapter 10: Showing Up with Hope and Pragmatism	201
Show up	203
Walk into the wind	205
Case study: <i>Susan Douglas, CEO, Eden Academy Trust, and senior schools adviser, British Council</i>	206
Get comfortable with what you can control and what you cannot	210
Deal with the urgent but build in some space for the strategic and for the future ...	210
Ask for help	213
Case study: <i>Matt Hood, founder and principal, Oak National Academy, England</i> ...	213
Team of experts	214
Generous relationships	215
Deliberate culture	216
Lead with pragmatic optimism	218
Lead with hope	219
Be a storyteller	221
Summary	224
Chapter 11: The Imperfect Leadership Mindset	227
Final Thoughts	231
Bibliography	233



Introduction

Marie-Claire

Over a bowl of olives and a glass of wine in a busy London tapas bar, I confessed to my mentor that I had read his book, but that it had disturbed me. As usual, Steve just smiled and said, ‘Tell me more.’

Imperfect leadership, as a concept, had blown my mind and turned my view of good leadership on its head. I recall saying something which now seems rather obvious: ‘I can be a good leader and still experience failure?’ I admitted that my deepest desire to make a difference as a leader, to achieve and be successful, had been built on the notion that to be good at my job, I needed to eradicate or disguise the imperfections in myself and become the perfect leader. That perfect leadership would lead to greater success.

At the time I was facing several big challenges in my leadership and not everything was going well. I was subconsciously telling myself that clearly every success had been a fluke and that now the flaws in my leadership were appearing, like skeletons jumping out of a cupboard I had tried to keep shut.

But there is something powerful and liberating about owning your imperfections as a leader. Being an imperfect leader creates space for learning and growth; it opens up opportunities for others to contribute when we humbly ask for help. It means we can acknowledge mistakes and failures without writing ourselves off. In short, being imperfect as a leader has huge advantages (and the truth is that there is no perfect leader anyway!).

Steve

In *Imperfect Leadership: A Book for Leaders Who Know They Don't Know It All* (Munby, 2019), I outlined my leadership journey over twelve years (from 2005 to 2017) whilst I was CEO of two quite large education organisations: England's National College for School Leadership and the UK-based not-for-profit Education Development Trust. I didn't start off with the title of the book in my mind, but the more I wrote about my leadership, the more I came to understand that 'imperfect' was the best term to describe it. And this is not something I am embarrassed about. I am proud to be an imperfect leader, and I have a problem with the notion of perfect leadership. If we think that we need to be perfect as leaders, we may make ourselves physically or mentally ill. If we think that we need to be perfect as leaders, we won't delegate and distribute leadership to others. If we think that we need to be perfect as leaders, we won't encourage others to step up into leadership because they would need to be seen as being perfect too.

The response to the book was much more positive than I had expected, but I promised myself that I would not write another one, as I had nothing else left to write about. However, I gradually began to think that perhaps the principles of imperfect leadership could be discussed in a way that might be helpful and of practical use to school leaders and aspirant school leaders. But such a book could only work if I could find someone to co-author it with me who understood deeply the principles of imperfect leadership. This person would also need to have a highly successful track record as a head teacher, as well as having experienced ups and downs in leadership and be very close to the real challenges facing school leaders. Marie-Claire was the obvious choice, and it has been a delight to work with her on this book.

What is imperfect leadership?

The book is about imperfect leadership in action. But this is not a book about enacting leadership competencies. We are not asking readers to go through each chapter and tick off whether they meet the criteria. Far from it. We do not want to give the impression that you must strive to be a 'perfect imperfect leader'.

Being an imperfect leader is not a skill set, it is a mindset.

Those with an imperfect leadership mindset understand that self-awareness is the starting point for leadership. They know that it is important to be aware of their strengths and their areas for improvement. They understand that without self-awareness they are unlikely to lead others well, and they won't know how to improve their own leadership.

Those with an imperfect leadership mindset know that they don't know it all, which is why they need a good team around them and why they value the expertise that others bring. It is also why they see it as a wise and positive thing to ask for help rather than something to be ashamed of. Their self-awareness helps them to manage their ego – not too low and not too high – because they know their strengths and their weaknesses. And it is because they are aware of their weaknesses, that they sometimes use public promises to help keep them on track to do the things they know they really ought to do. They never regard themselves as the finished product, so they are always in learning mode.

They understand that they will never be a perfect leader. Instead, they try to be a better version of themselves tomorrow than they were today. And if they have days when that doesn't happen (and there will probably be many of them), they try to be kind to themselves, because they know that perfection is not attainable and if they tried to achieve it, they may damage their health and their sense of self-worth. They don't expect their colleagues who are aspirant leaders to be perfect either. Rather than putting barriers in the way, leaders with an imperfect leadership mindset encourage others to step up into leadership and help to build their confidence. Finally, imperfect leaders are authentic. They know themselves and they see it as important to be honest about who they are.

How to get the most out of this book

This book is built upon, and draws upon, the experience of imperfect leaders. Each chapter is peppered with real examples from leaders around the world who have graciously opened up their own imperfect leadership as case studies to be examined. Every context is different and there is no formula for leadership. Some successful leadership is simply down to luck and to being in the right place at the right time. But the message of this book is that we can all learn to be better leaders if we invest in self-reflection and become skilled at asking for help. The authors of these case studies have done that, with considerable success, even though they may have had some angst along the way. We

hope that you will find their stories helpful and inspiring. And where they challenge you, or make you feel uncomfortable, consider what the case study is provoking in you, and take some time to reflect and respond.

Each chapter covers one of the main principles of imperfect leadership outlined in Steve's previous book. Although each principle is discrete, the common theme throughout is that knowing we are imperfect as leaders can be a positive mindset and this can help us to be better and more effective at what we do. Given the unprecedented challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, in Chapter 10 we consider how, as imperfect leaders, we need to show up with hope and pragmatism, particularly in periods of crisis and uncertainty.

Imperfect leaders know themselves well and they are also committed to their own development. So, in each chapter, we have also included some questions for reflection and self-review, and some exercises and activities for you to try out, either on your own or with a trusted colleague or peer. It can be incredibly powerful to have a shared dialogue with others about your leadership learning and reflections. You can make the time to do these exercises and reflect as you progress through each chapter, or revisit them as a way of reviewing and crystallising your thinking.

Embracing the fact that we are imperfect leaders doesn't make us settle for poor performance or mediocrity. In fact, the reverse is the case. Knowing that we are not the finished product makes us keen to learn more, to make better decisions and to improve our leadership. It drives us on, whilst helping us to recognise that some self-doubt can be a good thing. It makes us more ready and willing to ask for help, and it reminds us that we need to lead with love as well as with power. Most of all, it helps us to be authentic and to try, day by day, month by month and year by year, to be a better version of ourselves as leaders. And because we know that we are imperfect, it helps us to still love ourselves when we get it wrong. As the famous poem 'Anyway' ends: 'Give the world the best you have and it may never be enough; Give the world the best you have anyway.'

Key themes

There are a number of key themes in this book, as illustrated below. The imperfect leadership mindset is about being a lifelong student of leadership, working on the internal foundations as well as the external manifestation of our leadership.





Chapter 1

Self-Awareness and Tuning into Context

Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.

Anon.

Imperfect leaders are self-aware – they know their strengths but they are also aware of their weaknesses.

We believe that a deep self-awareness is one of the most important aspects of effective leadership. If leadership is about moving a group of people forwards towards an agreed goal, then the ability of the leaders in the organisation, at every level, to be aware of themselves and their contribution is vital. Self-awareness can help leaders to be more effective by giving them insights into how they might need to reshape actions, reframe conversations and adjust approaches, so they have a better impact. It helps leaders to bring the best of themselves and mitigate for the worst of themselves.

But self-awareness is complex and can be a lifetime's work. There are many things that influence how we behave as leaders: our skills and knowledge, our self-image, our traits, our motives and, of course, external factors and the context in which we are currently. If we want to improve our self-awareness as leaders, we need to ask ourselves a range of questions:

1. What *knowledge, experience* and *skills* do I have that make me an effective leader within my current context? What does my context need from me? What are the gaps?

2. What do I think *others* want and expect from me as a leader? How do I know? Am I happy with that? Is my self-image as a leader overly influenced by the expectations of others?
3. How do my *traits* work for or against me as a leader? What are my default modes? When and why do I sometimes end up behaving in a way that I regret afterwards? What am I like when I am tired or stressed? Can I detect the warning signs and amend the negative aspects of my behaviour before harm is done or before I make myself unwell? How might I adapt or change my default modes to make myself more effective?
4. What *motivates* me about leadership? What are my drivers and how does that affect my behaviour and how I feel about myself? Is my main driver making a difference, status and power, income/paying the mortgage, not being a failure or being liked?

Being an imperfect leader means that you develop an accurate, balanced view of yourself as a leader. You know what you do well, and you know where you have gaps in knowledge, weaknesses or insecurities.

Self-awareness is developed naturally over time through experience and feedback, but there are several ways that self-awareness can be nurtured in a more proactive and deliberate way. We do this through things like:

- Working with a mentor or coach.
- Recording our behaviour in meetings and watching it back, perhaps with a facilitator.
- Inviting external critical friends into our organisation to watch how we operate.
- Keeping a personal diary and using it to reflect on our leadership behaviours and feelings.



Steve

I kept a personal diary for ten years as a leader. It wasn't too onerous, and I only made occasional entries, but it definitely helped me to be more aware of the patterns and habits in my leadership and to reflect on how I was developing on my leadership journey.

One psychological tool that can help to frame how we might expand our self-awareness is the Johari window (see Figure 1.1 on page 10), created by Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham in 1955. There are two dimensions to the Johari window: what you know or don't know about yourself, and what others know or don't know about you. The model has four quadrants. Firstly, anything you know about yourself and are willing to share is part of your open area (quadrant 1). You can build trust when you disclose information to others, which in turn allows them to share things about themselves as well. However, there will be areas where you have a blind spot (quadrant 2). This is where others around you can see things about you and your leadership of which you are unaware. With the help of feedback from others you can become aware of some of your positive and negative traits, as perceived by others. Clearly, there are also aspects about yourself of which you are aware but might not want others to know. This is known as your hidden area (quadrant 3). This leaves just one area, which is the area that is unknown to you and to others (quadrant 4).

The key is that it is possible to increase your open area by asking for feedback from other people. When feedback is given to you honestly, it can also reduce the size of your blind area. For example, maybe you interrupt people before they have finished speaking, which can cause frustration. Sometimes you don't realise these aspects of your character until it is pointed out to you. By working with others and asking for feedback, it is possible to discover aspects about your leadership that you can build on, develop and improve.

The Johari window reminds us that we all have blind spots or areas where we hide behind a facade. The people around us have a contribution to make to our journey to self-awareness. How we solicit feedback is an important first step in understanding

how we are known and perceived by others. (At the end of this chapter there is a simple exercise you can do to begin this process of asking for feedback.)

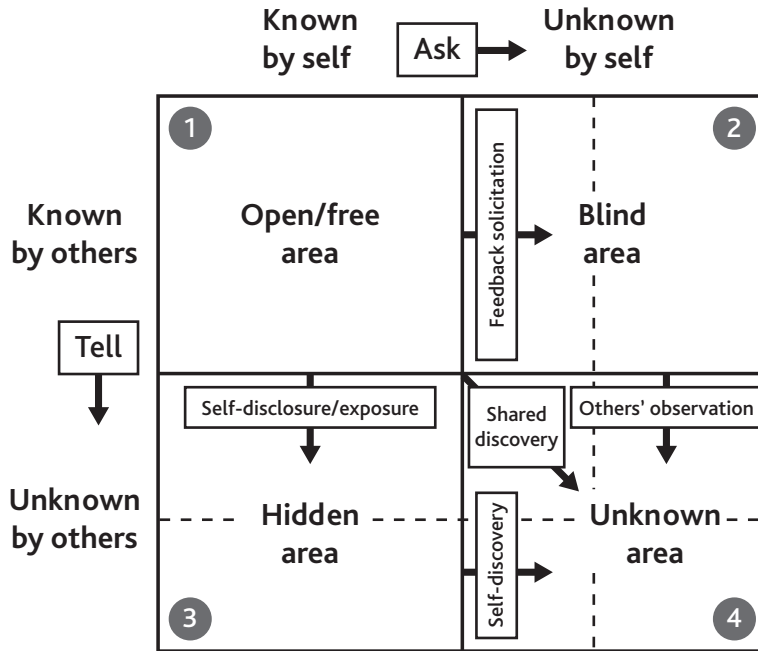


Figure 1.1. The Johari window (Luft and Ingham, 1955)

360° feedback can be a very powerful way of developing self-awareness

The National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) was introduced in England in 1997. This was a part-time programme for prospective head teachers, to be completed over one or two years, leading to a qualification awarded, from 2000 onwards, by the National College for School Leadership on behalf of the government. By 2008, it had become a government requirement that all those applying for their first headship role had to have the qualification or to be enrolled on the programme.

But there was a problem: too many people had achieved the qualification but were either nowhere near ready for headship/principalship or else they didn't really want to become heads. The reputation of the qualification had therefore been diminished; its brand had been tarnished.

One of the changes that was introduced to improve the situation was that all those applying for the NPQH programme were required to take part in a 360°-feedback process. For every applicant, a sample of colleagues would be asked to complete a questionnaire about their leadership. When the applicants received the feedback about their areas of strength and areas for improvement, if they embraced the feedback, recognised it and were keen to work on their weaknesses, they were more likely to be admitted onto the programme. Conversely, if they did not recognise the feedback, challenged it or were overly defensive about their areas for improvement, then they were less likely to be accepted. This was based on the firm belief that self-awareness is a key to effective leadership. Over time, this process worked well as one of the guardians of quality for the development of head teachers.

360° feedback can sometimes challenge us in ways that make us feel uncomfortable or vulnerable. It takes courage and commitment to be open, to listen and reflect; having a balanced attitude is an important foundation. 360° feedback represents other people's perceptions of us, not necessarily the whole truth. Aim to use the feedback as a starting point for more in-depth conversations with a coach or mentor about how you can grow.

Sometimes it is hard for us to accept the positive feedback we get, as too often we fixate on the negative. We have a tendency as humans to overly focus on our weaknesses and deficits rather than be encouraged by the constructive feedback we get. There is an abundance of research about how strengths-based approaches to leadership and personal development have a positive impact on both well-being and performance (Buckingham and Clifton, 2001; Dubreuil et al., 2016). Consider how you can identify and develop further the things you do well as a leader, as well as the areas you want to improve. According to Miglianico et al. (2020), 'The best opportunity for individual development lies in investing in people's strengths, not in managing their weaknesses.' In other words, minimising our weaknesses can prevent failure but it cannot inspire leadership excellence.

There is a risk, of course, that undertaking formal 360° feedback can become just an event or a task on your leadership to-do list. Consider ways in which you can build in frequent micro-moments of feedback from leaders and colleagues in your teams.

The next generation of leaders in education will be so much more successful for reading this readable book which matches theory with fascinating personal stories and cameos.

Sir Tim Brighouse, former London Schools Commissioner and Chief Education Officer for Birmingham and Oxfordshire

A practical, empowering and uplifting handbook to rejuvenate our own leadership insights and finally kick imposter syndrome into touch.

Geoff Barton, General Secretary, Association of School and College Leaders

Written with disarming honesty and humility, *Imperfect Leadership in Action* offers a series of incredibly helpful tools, reflections and ways of thinking which is a little bit of a goldmine for leaders.

Leora Cruddas, CBE, Chief Executive Officer, Confederation of School Trusts

Readers will be refreshed by the candour, humour and pragmatism of this book, which serves as both a mirror and a route map.

Sir Hamid Patel, CBE, Chief Executive, Star Academies

Imperfect Leadership in Action will be a constant and reassuring guide for many in our schools.

Rt Hon Baroness Estelle Morris, former Secretary of State for Education

Use this book alone and with others and you will be immediately rewarded with ideas, confidence and readiness to act. It is a treasure trove for dealing with the most difficult issues you will face.

Michael Fullan, Professor Emeritus, University of Toronto, and author

Imperfect Leadership in Action should form part of every school leadership team's library. I cannot recommend the book highly enough.

Sir David Carter, former National Schools Commissioner

If you want a book that resonates with you, lifts you up and gives you hope and optimism about the future, then look no further.

Andy Buck, CEO, Andy Buck Leadership Services, and founder of Leadership Matters

This is a must-read for leaders everywhere – it is, quite simply, a tour de force of a book!

Alma Harris, Professor Emeritus, Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty, University of Swansea

A remarkably useful and deeply human book. Munby and Bretherton invite leaders into a space of self-discovery, reflection and growth.

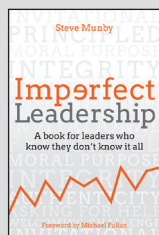
Dr Simon Breakspear, Adjunct Senior Lecturer, Gonski Institute for Education, the University of New South Wales

Authenticity, integrity and inspiration are words I have often used when describing Steve Munby. This book is rich in all three. For me, it is *the* book on school leadership.

Richard Gerver, educator, speaker and author

The engaging writing style and rich examples make this book a very worthy follow-up to *Imperfect Leadership*.

Viviane Robinson, Emeritus Distinguished Professor, University of Auckland, and author of *Reduce Change to Increase Improvement*



Imperfect Leadership

A book for leaders who know they don't know it all

Steve Munby

ISBN: 9781785834110



www.crownhouse.co.uk

ISBN-13: 978-1785836015



9 781785 836015

Education Organisation and
Management of Education