

WHAT WILL BRING HAPPINESS IN PRINCIPALSHIP?

After years of experiencing joy and happiness in my career in education I found myself in the shoes of a principal and suddenly felt as if my brain function had moved into early dementia. For years as a teacher, coach, consultant, a member of leadership teams, I had operated unconsciously with competence but within 18 months of principalship I was very conscious of how incompetent I felt. I seemed to be grappling to articulate beliefs and understandings that had been embedded in my way of being. By 2.30pm each afternoon the constant stream of people seemed to stop speaking English and reverted to a foreign language I could no longer understand. I felt as if I had glazed over and my brain had shut down.

So it was either pack my bags and go or try to find an understanding of what was happening to me.

I chose to use the Principal Health & Wellbeing 2016 Study Award to enrol into a 3 day course "Brain Based Conversation Skills" led by the Neuroleadership Institute. This course changed my leadership and my life.

The course is based on the theory of coaching using contemporary neuroscience. Models and frameworks are used throughout the course to support the coaching conversations.

The structure of the course leads participants to learn to facilitate thinking by asking powerful questions that lead to a solution. The questions are future focused and help the participant or a coachee generate their own insights to move from an impasse.

Neuroscience is explained by unpacking the natural reactions of the brain. I learnt that the brain responds in the same way to an emotional threat as it does to a physical threat. This pivotal understanding explained to me, why it is so important as a leader to realise when feeling threatened and what might have caused that threat. The threat response limits the ability of the prefrontal cortex to function. This means that the possibility of a new Principal operating creatively, viewing ideas from a wide perspective, collaborating or recalling facts from their memory are all limited.

In size the prefrontal cortex is only 4 % of the brain but it uses 80% energy. It is the part of the brain that does the strategic thinking. Research has found that it can focus on three to four things at any time to be successful. The Neuroleadership Institute refers to it as the Goldilocks of the brain. This is because all conditions must be right for the brain to function optimally. Learning from the course also developed understanding that the limbic system reacts to stress which creates a threat response. To lessen the stress created in the limbic system a simple strategy like "labelling" the threat can lessen this response and allow the pre frontal cortex to function.

I realized after completing this course that the daily threats faced by a principal, particularly a new principal can leave a limbic system in a constant state of threat and limit the capabilities of the PFC preventing optimal performance. Introducing the many models and frameworks from the Neuroleadership Institute has supported me and my leadership team in leading our school community whilst managing the constant 'threats' that are part of the nature of life in leadership.