

Nurture the Collective Genius with Ferocious Warmth

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LEADING LEARNING CULTURES is bread and butter for education leaders. Balancing between high support and high challenge with our teachers is the tightrope we tread to get momentum for the shift and transformation needed. The Ferocious Warmth leader is constantly aware of the push and pull of relationships and results, culture and strategy, head and heart. Together, hand in glove – not one without the other. Ferocious Warmth leaders are skilled at creating an environment where individual and collective genius shines through. People are encouraged to stretch and grow together, to lift higher and find their genius, while being held with empathy, support and trust.

I've always likened the strength of the collective agency and genius of a school staff to a rich master stock that is the foundation of many of the world's cuisines. The hot, sweet, salty and sour balance of Asian master stock taps into the diversity of experience, skills, knowledge and backgrounds as we come together to move the school forward.

It creates the buzz in a school – the vibe, the joy of connecting around something bigger.

What's The Buzz? It's the energy in a culture built on collaboration, trust and learning. It's an exciting place to work, with a buzzing learning zone. The sense of purpose is palpable, as is the willingness to find new ways of transforming the work. Sitting at the very core is the impact The Buzz has on the students. They experience positive outcomes, assisted by a team focused on making a difference for them. Educators and support teams who learn and grow together, gaining momentum and collective impact.

We seek a rich, luscious master stock environment of co-creation, debate, curiosity and experimentation, not a thin broth of a few voices. It requires a willingness to tend and sustain our relationships and dynamics. This type of

environment provides psychological safety – which in the words of Timothy R Clark, is one of ‘rewarded vulnerability’. Schools who regularly discuss behaviours, beliefs and systems that drive a psychologically safe learning culture have far more hope of maintaining it through complexity than those who leave it to chance. Our culture is created either by design or default.

Harnessing genius comes from designing this culture. Genius comes from individuals contributing whole-heartedly to the discussion with ideas, wonderings and energy. Cultures that create a rich ground for people’s genius to come out focus on the ‘we’ of co-creation. Individuals are not seeking accolades for themselves, but a ‘what’s possible when we combine our genius?’ When we see that our environment creates better thinking as a collective, we open up possibilities. Genius comes out when we feel safe to wonder why we do things the way we’ve always done it.

Where do you start in building the collective wisdom rather than only the individual?

SEE THE INDIVIDUAL

Paradoxically (of course!) it starts with the individual. Creating relationships where everyone feels seen, valued and stretched starts with individual connection and conversation. What sort of educator or leader do they hope to be throughout their career? Where do their passions lie? Identify where you have witnessed growth in their teaching and learning practice and discuss this with them. Know them as humans. Feeling seen is one of our most intimate and essential human needs.

LET VOICES IN

For perspectives to be heard and authentic discussion had, we need individual voices from all levels. I’m challenged by the number of middle leaders and team members I work with who say that their senior leaders don’t ‘allow’ voice. First important step – self-reflection. As a leader, how much voice from others do you invite in your daily interactions? Do you foster good robust debate, open and curious interactions? When we embrace contribution and co-creation we encourage people’s input. We move from a permission, compliance and control environment. We drop the mindset of ‘only leadership knows what to do’ or the habit of ‘I know better than you, so you have no say’. More voices mean better ideas, more perspectives. Discussions become partnership-focused rather than leader-led.

Voice enables autonomy and wellbeing. Authentic voice creates a culture where people feel heard, seen and valued for their skills, expertise and perspectives. The more we encourage voice and contribution, the more connected we are. The less people feel a part of that, the more distance between us. The more connection – the more the head and the heart is engaged and the better the thinking and collaborating.

CREATE ENVIRONMENTS THAT BUILD THE MASTER STOCK

Just like our own wellbeing and centredness, our collective environment needs nurturing to create The Buzz required to do the challenging work of looking at teaching and learning deeply. If we don’t cultivate this culture of professional, authentic and deep learning around our craft, our teams can suffer from the Collaboration Killers. Our cultural and professional learning environment can affect our mindset and, therefore, our behaviours. Behaviours manifest through a lack of focus on three things: a collective growth mindset, a compelling environment for us to learn together, and authentic dialogue – we fail to talk about the right things.

THE ARCHETYPES THAT STIFLE COLLECTIVE GENIUS

Let’s look at how these can manifest in our teams or whole staff and become archetypes. These archetypes stifle the collective genius and affect our mindsets. Often we blame the person – but what if it is equally the environment we’ve set up?



THE ENLIGHTENER

‘I will save the day with my ideas. When I am in full flight, no-one else gets a word in. I will fill any space. I speak far more than listen. If it weren’t for me driving, nothing would get done.’

Possible environmental contributors that enable (not exhaustive!):

- Other people choose not to speak and look to the same people to do it for them.

- > Protocols for robust discussion and voice from all not used when needed.
- > Hierarchy culture – only the senior/ longest serving people contribute here.
- > Habit of who answers first in place.
- > Discussion points brought up on the spot, favouring those who think out loud or process more externally with others.

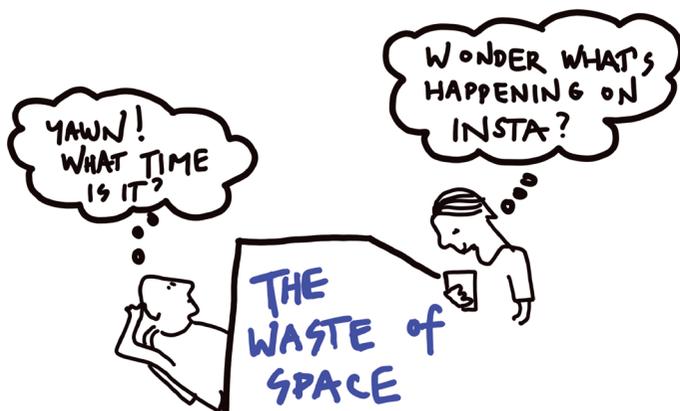


THE WASTE OF SPACE

'I come to the meetings because I have to, not because I want to. My contribution is negligible. I'm not even sure why I need to be here. Total waste of time.'

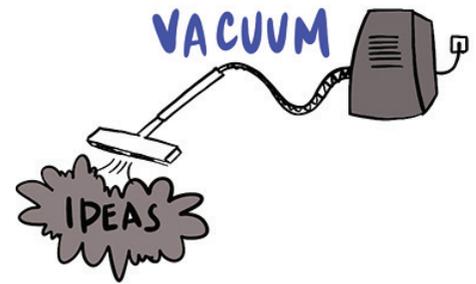
Possible environmental contributors:

- > Unclear purpose.
- > Regular meeting with little or no focus.
- > Tell rather than discuss culture.
- > Rabbit hole discussions that go nowhere.
- > No action or decisions made.
- > Unclear or no stated norms or protocols used.
- > Behaviour of other archetypes.
- > Little personal connection to both purpose and people.



THE VACUUM

'I see collaboration as a way to take and use everyone's great work. If it's already been done by someone else, I'll use that. My contribution isn't needed and probably wouldn't add anything more anyway.'

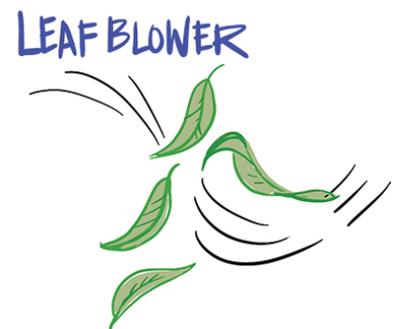


Possible environmental contributors:

- > Habit of leader providing resources rather than sharing and team co-creation.
- > Lack of expectation of contribution.
- > Little reinforcement and encouragement for individual input.
- > History of giving then not valued in any way.

THE LEAF BLOWER

'Any ideas and contributions that mean I need to get out of my comfort zone I blow off the table with cynicism, negativity or stone walling. It's all stuff I've heard before. None of it works or is useful. I'm having to listen to people with far less experience than me tell me what to do.'



Possible environmental contributors:

- > Norms and protocols not used (I call them MVPs – Minimum Viable Practices).
- > Long-standing low levels of trust and connection between team members.
- > Not enough connection to the purpose and evidence.
- > No longer listened to with value or empathy – so cynicism as resistance and protection.
- > Lack of inspiration – why bother?
- > Failure of the right conversations with the individual over a period of time focused on professional behaviours and commitment.

THE WASTED SPACE

'I would love to contribute if I felt safe to do it, or my opinion valued. I'm just a ... and so what I say isn't as important. I can't get a word in.'



Possible environmental contributors:

- > Other archetypes let run rampant – especially the Enlightener and Leaf Blower.
- > Punished rather than rewarded vulnerability – behaviours that belittle, exclude or invalidate the giver post sharing (feeds internal fear).
- > Lack of individual thinking time or pre-thinking space.
- > Protocols to encourage contribution not used.
- > Lack of leadership encouragement and validation.

MINIMISE THE COLLABORATION KILLERS

How do we avoid these? Of course, a big part of this is the individual mindset we bring in the room, but I think we underestimate the impact what happens in the room has on it, and our ability to work collectively. Here are some ideas to reverse or minimise some of the archetypes. Talking about the Collaboration Killers with your teams will provide even more genius and contextual ideas about how you can all get around them.

INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE COLLECTIVE

Consider:

- > Do I come prepared?
- > Am I clear on: purpose; my contribution; my role in creating our collaborative learning culture?
- > What conversations do I need to have to gain more clarity when I am unsure?
- > How can I make myself heard with more courage and conviction?
- > How am I seen by my colleagues in terms of my contribution?
- > Do I encourage or discourage others' contributions?
- > Can I listen more and ask more questions?
- > Do I make others feel psychologically safe?
- > Is my language the language of a learner?
- > Am I committed to my team?

TEAM CONTRIBUTION TO THE COLLECTIVE

Put in place systems that support:

- > Meetings with a clear purpose.
- > Norms – Minimum Viable Practices identified, including clear, explicit examples of above the line behaviours and those that are below the line.
- > Protocols and processes that encourage contribution – both voice and listening.
- > Turning defensive or shut down statements into curious questions.
- > Facilitation of meetings.
- > Inquiry questions posed prior to meetings.
- > Actions that are identified, with all expected to fulfil responsibilities.
- > Courage to discuss what is working and what is not.
- > Making decisions.
- > On track and relevant discussions.
- > Acknowledgement of contribution.
- > Protocols that allow for reflection.

The best fruit comes from fertile soil. It is so much easier when the soil is watered and nurtured to support growth. Ferocious Warmth leaders always seek to be expansive – stretching themselves and their teams to more extraordinary things. Bringing out genius in your teams allows them to really fly – but without nurturing the collective we are just a bunch of 'I's – and that *never* has as much impact.

Tracey Ezard's latest book 'Ferocious Warmth: School Leaders Who Inspire and Transform' was published in March 2021. Tracey's books are all available to QASSP members with a 20% discount at her website www.traceyezard.com (Coupon Code QASSP20).

The Buzz Academy, an online platform of over 24 videos and 80 resources for building The Buzz along with a Global Community of Practice, launched in September. To learn more, go to www.thebuzz.academy. Early bird launch pricing is available for the remainder of 2021.

Engage with Tracey Ezard at The School Leadership Conference 2022, 8–10 June at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre.