

Cross Sector Capacity Building Case Study

A Partnership of Equals



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Meralyn Te Hira, Principal, Kaikohe West School, Northland

When Meralyn Te Hira signed up for SpringboardTrust's Strategic Leadership Programme for Principals (SLPP) at the beginning of 2014, she was brimming with ideas about what she saw as a golden opportunity to work in a way that could be – in her words – “more powerful and inspiring” for her students and community.



For Capacity Partner Ian Burns, however, the prospect of swapping leadership insights with the principal of Kaikohe West School was more daunting. The CEO of Kiwi Wealth Management had no shortage of experience to share, but admits to feeling a little outside his comfort zone initially.

“Here’s a middle-aged financial services professional sitting in a young principal’s office in the middle of Kaikohe, in a school with a ninety per cent Maori roll,” says Ian. “Apart from talking about Meralyn’s objectives and strategic plans, there is not a lot of obvious overlap between those two situations ... and yet it turned out to be hugely productive and rewarding.”

SHARED LEARNING

The aim of SpringboardTrust's SLPP programme is to support school principals to become more effective leaders. Over 12 months, they attend a series of strategic planning workshops, and work one-on-one with a volunteer business leader or “Capacity Partner” (CP) as they develop one and three-year strategic plans for their school.

Ian and Meralyn started out by sharing about themselves, their lives and their families, and then moved on to making a list of what they expected from each other as working partners. A second time CP, Ian strongly believes that the SLPP learning is both a journey, and a two-way process.

“More than anything it is about the learning journey that the principal goes on and what they get out of the programme. It is about listening, letting them articulate, helping them, and supporting them on that journey. Often the CPs learn as much as the principals do ... the discipline of helping someone else go through that process reinforces those lessons and principles – and the importance of them – in your own job.”

Meralyn also felt that the partnership was one of equals: “Ian would ask me for advice on his business; what I would do in a certain circumstance. I could give him advice, and whether or not he did anything with it, it was nice to give back because he was giving me so much. And he was interested in learning about my Maori heritage.”

ALIGNED VALUES

For Meralyn and Ian these meetings were logistically challenging. With Ian initially located in Auckland, and then later in Wellington, and Meralyn in Northland, getting together in person happened less often than they would have liked – phone-calls and emails made up the difference. Interestingly, it was this physical distance, and what it necessitated, that was the starting point for Ian's learning.

Meralyn came to Auckland to attend a conference, and she and Ian planned to meet. He had extended an invitation to her and her family to stay at his family's lifestyle block. Seeing Meralyn interacting with her family formed the basis for his key insight:

"My 'aha' moment was that actually the values that Meralyn was seeking to introduce and embed in the school, were the values she maintained at home. So that alignment between home and work lent a real substance to the new initiative. Often work culture and home culture can be very different, but here there was a very strong alignment of values, which gave what we were doing much more gravitas."

For Ian, another highlight of the programme was the day the pair arrived at a simple and clear articulation – a one-page plan – of what Meralyn wanted to achieve: "I remember thinking, 'Wow! This is both powerful and really simple.'"

INCREASED COLLABORATION WITH STAKEHOLDERS

This process of sharing helped Meralyn realise she also needed a much more thorough and collaborative engagement with the school's stakeholders.

"I began to see that strategic leadership is actually a shared process; and that's probably been the most significant shift in my practice. In the past I have done the strategic leadership process and then convinced the Board and convinced the staff. Now this way, we've done it together on the way."

Meralyn Te Hira, Principal, Kaikohe West School, Northland

Meralyn says the strategic plan she developed through her work on the programme is now integral to the implementation of ideas within the school: "It's not getting to the third year and then reviewing everything. It's part of our staff meetings, the vision is now part of what we do ... Everything we do in the school has practical links back to our vision and strategic plan. That's a huge difference in my practice."

EQUIPPED FOR THE FUTURE

The pair agree that many more schools could benefit from having what Kaikohe West now has: a coherent and strong strategic plan as it moves into the next three-year period.

"If SpringboardTrust could do what I've gained six times every year, that's a huge impact on New Zealand education," says Meralyn. "Once you're an experienced principal you don't get a lot of quality professional development, so there is a gap there, which this is filling and having a huge impact. I'm looking forward to my 350 students reaping the gains of this one year I've had."

JOIN US

SpringboardTrust exists to improve the life skills – and lives – of young New Zealanders.

Our flagship programme, SLPP, partners senior business leaders or “Capacity Partners” with school principals to build their leadership and planning skills, and in doing so, contribute to improved educational outcomes for schools and their students.

Over 12 months, each Capacity Partner acts as a sounding board for one principal as they step through the curriculum (written by our Chairman Ian Narev, CEO of Commonwealth Bank of Australia) and develop new one and three-year strategic plans for their school using the SLPP framework.

Capacity Partners find the role hugely rewarding. They bring a fresh lens to the leadership challenges faced by principals and provide invaluable skills, knowledge and experience. In return, they receive a great refresher for their own strategic skill set, learn about the role that business can play in education, and get to make a meaningful difference for young New Zealanders.

SCAFFOLD LEARNING, CHALLENGE THINKING

The SLPP curriculum is delivered in eight 3-hour workshops over 12 months and requires an annual Capacity Partner time commitment of approximately 20-40 hours, including:

- An initial meeting with the principal at their school
- The opportunity to attend several workshops over the year
- Participation in a teleconference debrief after each workshop
- A minimum of two contacts each month with the principal to scaffold their learning and challenge thinking
- Participation in graduation at the end of the programme year

HOW TO APPLY

SpringboardTrust is always looking for experienced business leaders to train as Capacity Partners.

If you are interested in finding out more about this rewarding voluntary role, please complete an expression of interest (EOI) form available online at www.springboardtrust.org.nz

All Capacity Partners receive full training and support materials. Capacity Partners are also eligible to attend our ongoing programme of alumni leadership workshops and events, and our annual leadership Forum. Experienced Capacity Partners can progress to the role of Facilitator and lead SLPP workshops.

“You won’t regret being a Capacity Partner,” says Ian Burns, CEO of Kiwi Wealth Management. “It is one of the most uncomfortable things I have done in my career, but also one of the most rewarding ... there is a personal challenge there to say, ‘Do you have the skill set to relate to people in very different circumstances, and are you able to work successfully in a relationship that is non-hierarchical?’, because being a Capacity Partner is a very different environment to what we daily face generally where we generally have a depth of subject matter expertise and credibility that comes with position.

“What SpringboardTrust is endeavouring to do is provide tools which will help principals to be more successful, and if they are more successful in their roles, then ultimately the education system will work better to the benefit of all.”