

# Balancing collaboration and decisiveness

**HELEN WILDY** writes about the 'autonomy dilemma' – the competing demands of being in a formal role of authority but, at the same time, expected to work collaboratively with others in decision-making processes.

IN my doctoral research (Wildy, 1998), I identified three dilemmas facing principals in the shift from a centralised education authority to one in which authority is devolved to the school. I wrote about these dilemmas at that time (Wildy, 1999; Wildy & Loudon, 2000; Wildy & Punch, 1997; Wildy & Wallace, 1997). The key dilemma is what I called the 'autonomy dilemma' – the competing demands of being in a formal role of authority but at the same time expected to work collaboratively with others in decision-making processes. Over the years, particularly in my leadership roles, I have become increasingly clear about aspects of the autonomy dilemma in practice. In this short paper, I present three ideas: firstly, the benefits of being a collaborative and decisive leader; secondly, the challenges for practice; and thirdly, some practical steps to assist in balancing collaboration and decisiveness.

## A balancing act

Balancing the competing demands of collaboration and decisiveness, though challenging, offers the leader benefits. The most important benefit is that better quality decisions are generated by groups than by individuals alone. In collaborative problem-solving, the variety of options is expanded; a range of types of thinking is available; opportunities for challenging assumptions are provided; and creativity is enhanced. Bringing groups together to solve problems has advantages, too. When groups solve problems, they are more likely to take responsibility for the implementation of outcomes than decisions made by others. They are more likely to 'own' the ideas.

From an organisational perspective, sharing responsibility builds capacity among group members, as

they experience a range of decision-making processes. From the leader's perspective, working closely with groups helps build relationships, as each learns about the others in a variety of settings. Group members learn about the values, beliefs, priorities of others, too. Again, from the leader's perspective, working collaboratively is a way of accessing others' knowledge.

The leader cannot know all the answers (even though some leaders might seem to). Finally, it is lonely at the top and sharing responsibility through collaborative decision-making builds a supportive network of colleagues to whom the leader can turn. In my view, these benefits outweigh the small number of challenges.

---

**When groups solve problems, they are more likely to take responsibility for the implementation of outcomes than decisions made by others. They are more likely to 'own' the ideas.**

---

The challenges of collaborative decision-making are well known. There is no doubt that making decisions together takes more time than deciding alone. Some people (both leaders and group members) feel it is an abrogation of responsibility: there is a view that 'you should decide; that's your job'. Perhaps the biggest challenge is having the skills and patience to use collaborative decision-making in the workplace. Listening and hearing and taking note are not always the same thing. Having agreed processes for the conduct of meetings and discussions takes time and skill, too.

Even when well-developed processes are used, there is the opportunity for 'group-think' to occur, where no one fully agrees and no one confronts the possibility that the direction of the decision might not be the best one. Historically, there are numerous instances of group-think that have led to serious international incidents. A strategy to guard against group-think is to pause and say, 'Let's go back and see where we are going with this line of thinking'.

## Three organisational layers

In my view, strategies for implementing collaborative decision-making can be conceptualised in three organisational layers: formally; informally; and personally. At a formal level, collaborative decision-making needs clearly articulated structures involving relevant people in regular meetings to make decisions about meaningful issues, using respected and explicit processes. At an informal level, collaborative decision-making often involves leaders in spontaneous information gathering and sharing, opinion checking, listening, and reflection. For some leaders, such informal activity involves 'walking the floor'. For others, it involves a great deal of coffee drinking. At a personal level, it is a waste of time to go through the formal and even informal structures and processes of shared decision-making if the leader does not believe in it. As for fairies, Father Christmas and private schools, collaborative decision-making works if you believe in it, deep in your heart. Believing in collaboration requires a genuine acceptance that others have views to contribute and that the leader's role is to find a way to access these views.

---

**Even when well-developed processes are used, there is the opportunity for 'group-think' to occur, where no one fully agrees and no one confronts the possibility that the direction of the decision might not be the best one.**

---

In this brief paper I have described the benefits and challenges of working collaboratively to make decisions in the workplace. I have also presented my view of strategies for successful shared decision-making. I conclude with a reminder about the dilemma of collaborative decision-making. The dilemma is that the leader, although responsible for involving others, is accountable for the decisions reached by the group. The leader, as a member of the group, has the responsibility to contribute to the process and also to represent the outcome of the decision made by the group. The dilemma lies in being both a part of the group and also apart from the group.

### References

- Wildy, H (1998). *School principals and the dilemmas of restructuring*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. The University of Western Australia.
- Wildy, H (1999). 'Restructuring and principals' power: Neither freedom from nor freedom to'. In *Leading & Managing*, 5(2), 114-124.



Photo: Professor Helen Wildy

Wildy, H & Loudon, W (2000). 'School restructuring and the dilemmas of principals' work'. In *Educational Management and Administration*, 28(3), 173-184.

Wildy, H & Punch, K (1997). 'The challenges of changing power relations in schools'. In W. Connors (eds.), *Change, challenge and creative leadership: International perspectives on research and practice* (pp.95-110). Hawthorne, Victoria: Australian Council for Educational Administration. ISBN 1 876083 01 8

Wildy, H & Wallace, J (1997). 'Devolving power in schools: Resolving the dilemma of strong and shared leadership'. In *Leading and Managing*, 3(2), 132-146.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor Helen Wildy is Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Australia. She has worked as a secondary mathematics teacher in Western Australia and Victoria, in government and independent schools. Professor Wildy is a researcher of leadership, especially of small schools. She is also a writer and presenter of leadership development courses for school principals, both as pre-service and professional development programs. Professor Wildy can be contacted by email at: [helen.wildy@uwa.edu.au](mailto:helen.wildy@uwa.edu.au).