

Leading with FEROCIOUS



WARMTH®

By Tracey Ezard

In today's complex job of leading education, our ability to both achieve results and build strong relationships is critical. Without a focus on results, with whatever outcomes we set, we meander along without a clear vision and plan for the type of education we are providing. Without a focus on relationships, not only is collective efficacy elusive, but also well-being, inclusivity and community.

Leading Transformation and Connection

The balance of these two core focusses often suffers as schools and systems struggle to emerge from a challenging few years. This, coupled with an urgent need for the education paradigm to address increasing inequity, embrace greater student agency, and keep up with rapid technological advancements, presents exciting yet confounding times. How do we ensure we support ourselves to be able to lead change and transformation, while also have the warmth to inspire and connect people?

I call this approach to leadership Ferocious Warmth. At the best of times leadership is messy. It's about a way of being, not doing. When great leaders are in balance, they are both ferocious about the moral purpose and courageously making a stand, while warmly building strong and enduring relationships. These leaders manage the nuance of the head and the heart.

The Impact of Ferocious Warmth Leadership

There is an elation I feel when I discover a Ferocious Warmth leader. I can sense their passion through the newsletters and videos on the school websites. I hear it in the language they use when communicating face to face, via email, over the phone or virtually. I experience their connection with students and staff as we walk through the school. Their belief and love for those they serve is expressed in their words. I feel the psychological safety in place for people to raise and discuss ideas, differences of opinion and personal challenges. I feel the sense of

trust, fun and hard work in the halls and rooms of the school. I see them reflect with deep self-awareness on their own growth. I see them lift expectations and build momentum to achieve the results and changes required. There is a discernible love for learning in both students and educators. I see people walk away from working with these leaders just that little bit taller, ready to make their own ripples on the world.

Our job as leaders is to build both our logical and emotional skills, our head and heart skills. Simultaneously reflecting on both sides of the equation takes curiosity and a willingness to develop our less accessible skills. Like an artist mixing two seeming opposing colours, we end up with a third choice, which becomes richer, incorporating strengths from both sides. It is nuanced and mature and encourages us to have deep self-awareness of our impact. Rather than approaching our work with polarity, we step into the ‘yet’ of great leadership:

- Explicit, *yet* empowering
- Strategic, *yet* people focussed
- Challenging, *yet* providing psychological safety
- Director, *yet* co-creator
- Compassionate, *yet* with high expectations
- Courageous, *yet* vulnerable
- Realist, *yet* optimist

This seeming paradox of ferocity and warmth comes together in great leadership no matter the context. Leading within the tension of both epitomizes the daily dance of leadership. Ferocious Warmth creates the nexus of both sides, when both come together hand in glove.

Support and Stretch

Like the constant movement within the infinity symbol, Ferocious Warmth leaders stand balanced to pull from both the head and the heart, the logic and emotion, to focus on results and relationships. They draw strengths from both sides to create the equilibrium needed to manage the day-to-day dance of leadership and education. They build environments characterized by high challenge and high support. They bring together community and school, mend

broken trust and lift outcomes for students with their teams. They instil hope and joy in those they lead and create collaborative professional learning cultures that front up to the hard conversations.

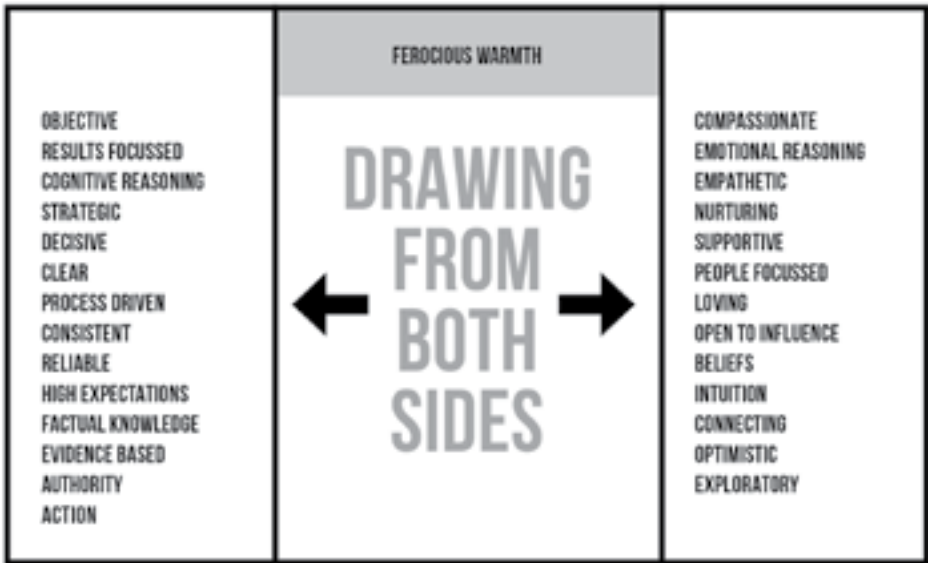
Are You Out of Balance?

Yet, especially in times of exhaustion and stress, people experience leaders who lead in an unbalanced and uncentred way, focused solely on results or relationships. One is a win-at-all-costs approach; the other usually entails indecisive direction and a focus on the welfare and relationships of the teachers that supersedes the good of the students. Systems can also default to everything focussing only on measurement that is no longer relevant and more about compliance than learning and growth.

For those who default more to results it can feel like this: the to-do list is four metres long, everyone is after a piece of us, and we wish people would move faster, take responsibility or make the right decisions. But they don't, and we step in to fix things. Instead of clear, we become harsh. Instead of gaining commitment, we demand compliance. For some of us, our default leadership needle tilts towards the ferocity side of imbalance, results at all cost. As our ferocity speeds up with no filter, our people meter starts to diminish. Our need for control and compliance increases as our emotional connection decreases.

‘When schools are structured around control, standardization and compliance, among the first things to lose are trusting, meaningful relationships.’

Michael Wehmeyer, Yong Zhao, Teaching Students to Become Self Determined Learners (2020)





Leadership Impact Tracey Ezard

Our need for action, finalization and decisiveness short circuits our thoughts away from people towards hard-edged results. The pendulum swings too far from centre to the results. Taken too far, ferocious becomes fearsome, disregarding warmth. The fearsome leader uses fear, shame, intimidation and unchallenged authority to gain compliance.

On the other side, for leaders erring more to warmth without balance, as everything speeds up and stress rises, our results meter starts to lower, and we lose sight of our purpose. The volume gets turned up in our heads and, before we know it, we're sucked into stories and dramas – our own and those around us. This is the rocky territory of the leader driven unhealthily by relationships – pressured and stressful. At the extremity of warmth, we become enmeshed, tangled in relationships that display co-dependency, avoidance and passive-aggressive behaviour.

Both extremes cause cultures to descend into corrosiveness. Poor performance is coupled with relationships bouncing around this drama triangle (Karpman, 1968). Rather than adults working together with collective professionalism (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), we become victims, rescuers or persecutors, where trust, learning, focus and momentum suffer.

Getting Back in Balance – Start with Self

Amid the stress generally experienced by school leaders, let alone the additional pressure of leading communities through and out of a global pandemic, staying in balance is a daily challenge. Our emotions are contagious, and our impact on others can last a lifetime, for better or worse. It takes big, daily doses of self-awareness to realize the effect of our leadership on those we lead. Ask people suffering at the hands of fearsome or enmeshed leaders which skills they wished their leaders had more of, and the answer often is self-awareness and empathy.

Are you aware of when you're balanced and when you start to tip to one side or the other?

Actioning Self-Care

Without self-care and self-compassion, the Ferocious Warmth balance quickly begins to wobble. The exhaustion in school leadership currently is palpable. Putting out such intense energy and support to others takes its toll on many. Along with systemic shifts to provide greater support to leaders, our willingness to see our own personal well-being as a leadership behaviour rather than a 'nice to have' is vital for our sustainability in balancing the head of the heart.

What does your self-care look like? Here are some fast reframes if you find yourself moving out of Ferocious Warmth, leading solely from the head or the heart, obsessing over just results, or just relationships:

Find your joy bubble

Hang out somewhere in the school with the people, activities or things that give you the most joy. This provides us with a burst of the chemicals that help our thinking and connectedness – oxytocin, serotonin and dopamine (Zak, 2018).

Reflect on how far you have come

Give you and your team time to reflect on the achievements over the past year. Unearth the great number of things to be proud of and surprised at. Never underestimate the impact of reflective storytelling.

Just be

Sometimes we need to sit with our feelings when not staying as centred as we'd like. A big dose of self-compassion is what we need here.

Breathe

Square breathing helps us settle and reduce cortisol in the brain. In for four with the nose. Hold for four. Out for four with the mouth. Hold for four. Repeat. This technique is used by professionals, such as emergency responders and special operations forces. It's a calming, gentle way to recalibrate.

Connect

If you're feeling disconnected, focusing only on results and forgetting who you're doing it for, go and spend time with teachers in the staffroom, the students in the yard and the classroom, the parents at the gate. Listen deeply to their perspectives, share stories, empathize, seek to understand.

Do a wonder walk

Take time to walk around your school, specifically to observe and relish in wonderful daily things. Make a note in a journal about them, mention them to others, show gratitude, acknowledge them. Give your head and your heart a moment to acknowledge all the good going on, and your contribution to these.

Great Leaders are Like Great Teachers

Being a great leader is not that different to being a great teacher. The leaders who make a difference value us and bring out our best. We remember great leaders long after they've left our arena, but their legacy continues in us. They connect our heads and our hearts to the challenges and joy of life. They help us see a grander vision than the one we might have for ourselves. They see in us things we can't see ourselves and give us the nudge we need to aspire to more. They laugh with us and let us see their foibles, wrinkles and blemishes. They admit when they're wrong and seek to make things right. They reflect and learn from their mistakes and see the world with curiosity and wonder. These leaders push against inequity and are never complacent.

Ferocious Warmth leaders are by no means perfect. They are always seeking to bring their best selves to the work, picking themselves up with compassion when they fail. Learning and evolving. They aim to blend the right amount of head and heart in any given situation. Education leaders turn up to provide this balance everyday. The challenge is staying there through complexity and an adversity. [CP](#)

For Your Reflection:

- As an individual and as a team, when we are out of balance which way do we tend to default to? Results or relationships?
- What are some of the outcomes when this happens?
- What strategies can we put in place to get back into balance?

Tracey Ezard is an international educator, speaker and author based in Melbourne, Australia. Tracey works across schools and systems in the area of leadership and professional learning cultures. She is the author of three books, including *Ferocious Warmth*, *School Leaders Who Inspire and Transform* (2021), and *The Buzz, Creating Thriving and Collaborative Staff Learning Cultures* (2015). Tracey is a National Fellow of the Australian Council of Education Leaders and was awarded the Hedley Beare Educator of the Year Victoria Branch 2022.