

Someone's daughter, a child's mother

Dr Stephen Brown, Managing Director of The Brown Collective, explores how leadership 'wounds' can transform identity and purpose, urging leaders to embrace humanity, resilience, and multiple identities.

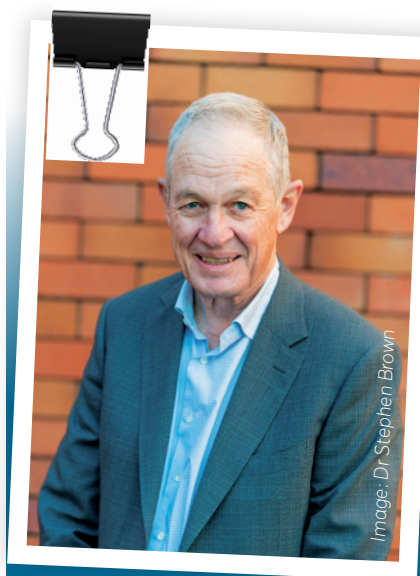


Image: Dr Stephen Brown

Dr Stephen Brown is the Managing Director of The Brown Collective, focused on the formation of educational leaders and partnering with schools, networks and system to enable sustainable impact. The organisation reflects both his collective experience over 40 years in policy, strategy and leadership development – and that of the remarkable global network he has developed during this career.

Ernest Hemingway once said, "In our darkest moments, we don't need advice." What we truly need is presence, someone to sit with us in the shadows, to acknowledge our suffering without trying to fix it. In those moments, silence and understanding speak louder than words, offering a quiet strength that reminds us we're not alone. It's not solutions we seek, but connection.

It's a Saturday morning in a busy, bustling city. I am sitting across the table in a coffee shop from a friend, a person who I admire as a talented, dynamic, intelligent education leader. She is ashen faced, sad and emotional. Why? A few days prior she was informed that despite her flawless performance her contract of employment would not be renewed. Her departure was reported in the media, and the maelstrom had begun – stories, gossip and a wonder about the truth. I simply listened. She had dedicated a significant part of her life to her work, successfully leading with colleagues' major reforms and initiatives. Now she was suddenly feeling abandoned and a great sense of hurt inflicted by decision makers who simply saw her as expendable – a chessboard piece in a broader political game.

Richard H. Ackerman and Pat Maslin-Ostrowski (2002) in their text, *The Wounded Leader: How Leadership Emerges in Times of Crisis* note that the 'wounding experience'

of a leader triggered by public criticism, betrayal and or systemic failure can deeply wound a leader's sense of identity and integrity. These wounds are not just professional and existential. They also suggest that rather than being purely destructive, these crises can become catalysts for transformation. Leaders who reflect on and learn from their metaphoric wounds often emerge with a deeper understanding of themselves and their purpose.

This is not always the case.

Sadly, I have seen first-hand the real and personal impact on people of the callous and inhumane decisions made in workplaces. In some cases, this impact is long lasting and at the extreme resulting in debilitating mental, physical illnesses and even suicide. Some of these stories make their way into the public domain through media, court cases and within the protected privilege of parliament. Most do not and remain in the darkness left with the individual(s) to repair, regroup and reinvent their careers and restart their lives. I often hear people say they cannot be away from their workplace, their school, due to a sense that they are indispensable.

Huma Abedin, Hillary Clinton's former private aide in her 2021 memoir entitled, *Both/And A Life in Many Worlds* cites the words of Charles Dickens from *Great Expectations* to reflect on the

personal and professional challenges she has faced in her life:

"Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but – I hope – into a better shape."

We all have a professional profile and identity typically attached to a role – school principal, leader of curriculum, chief executive officer, deputy Principal, area supervisor and so on. In leadership it is important to discern who you are, what you value and what you care about. Such conscious deliberation and contemplation give rise to a leader's why, their purpose. However, all of us have multiple identities, a multiple mix of personal and professional roles we manage as we undertake living our lives. In my friend's case, she is someone's daughter, a wife, a mother of four children, an aunty, a musician and so on. She is like most leaders so much more than others may see her. She like the rest of us loves, laughs, cries, cares, has fears and self-doubt.

Our self-representation consists of multiplicity. The contrasting cognitive behaviours we possess are merely because we do not have a singular self-identity that fully governs our thoughts, values, and emotions. There are multiple identities inside each one of us. Inside of adopting the view of a person as one whole self, everyone can be considered a range of distinct but related identities (Institute of Managers and Leaders, 2023). This is important to remember when leaders are working with others, considering decisions and preferences that we adopt when responding to problems of practice. We need to acknowledge and leverage multiple identities in our workplaces.

In leadership we must also remember to separate ourselves from self and role. Heifetz and Laurie (2017) in their text, *Leadership on the Line*, note that the roles we play in our organisations, community and in our private lives are mainly dependent on the expectations of the people we interact with and who surround us. They contend that the self relies on our individual capacity to

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witness and learn throughout our lives; to refine the core values that orient and inform our decision making and whether they conform to expectations.

What does this mean for our leadership practices to enable us to sustain ourselves and enable us to thrive in our roles? To continue to be compassionate, curious, positive and hope-filled in the pursuit of shared aspirations? We need anchors that keep us centred, supported by sanctuaries, special places or experiences that take us back to who we are and renew us (Heifetz and Laurie, 2017).

The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and found their way out of the depths. These people have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen (Elizabeth Kubler Ross).

My friend is a beautiful, gentle person, a loving daughter and a wonderful mother. Her professional gifts will continue to be shared in organisations and contexts who care about people. Others sometimes confuse our professional identity or persona as who we are – the real us. When leading others remember to ask them about their many identities and when you do you will be a better leader. **EM**

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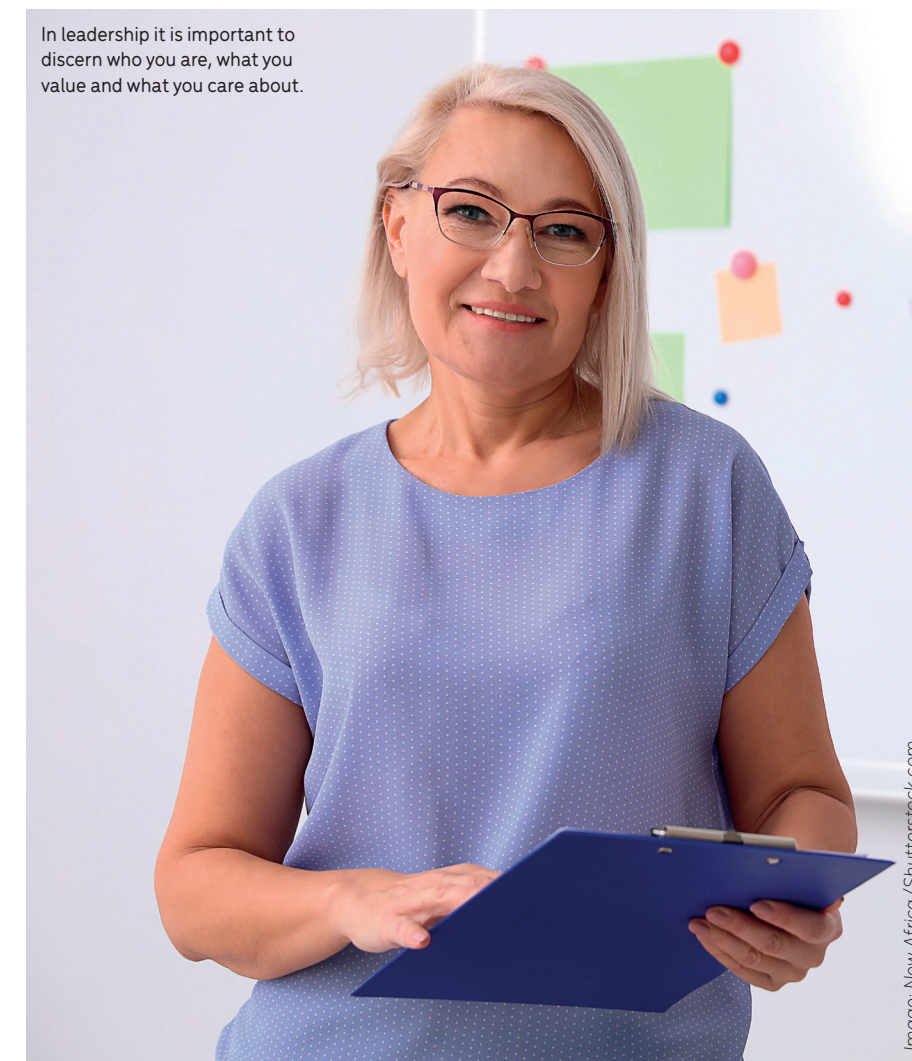


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