

Steve Munby

# Imperfect Leadership

A book for leaders who  
know they don't know it all



Foreword by Michael Fullan



Crown House Publishing  
[www.crownhouse.co.uk](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk)

First published by

Crown House Publishing Ltd  
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK  
[www.crownhouse.co.uk](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk)

and

Crown House Publishing Company LLC  
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495, USA  
[www.crownhousepublishing.com](http://www.crownhousepublishing.com)

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First published 2019. Reprinted 2019.

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#### British Library of Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-178583411-0  
Mobi ISBN 978-178583427-1  
ePub ISBN 978-178583428-8  
ePDF ISBN 978-178583429-5

LCCN 2019935636

Printed and bound in the UK by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

To my wife, Jacqui, whose love and wise counsel have helped me  
to be a better leader and a better person.





## Foreword by Michael Fullan

My colleagues and I have a fantastic conclusion about educational change. Whether we are considering the school, the local authority or the system as a whole, one change fact stands out: about 80% of the best ideas come from leading practitioners. Steve Munby has embodied this truth over three decades of being the CEO of three complex organisations, operating in volatile, sometimes roller-coaster, circumstances. Fortunately for us, he kept track of what was happening, reflected on it in real time, made corrections, and made himself vulnerable to his own inner self and to those he led. At the end of this chapter of his life, at age 61, he is still an imperfect leader, but he now knows what this means and he shares the lessons with us.

The core of these lessons in some ways centres on the eight years he spent as CEO of England's National College for School Leadership. Each year in June he gave an inspirational speech at an event entitled *Seizing Success*. Each year the crowds got bigger, from 400 in year one to a door-busting 2,000 leaders in the final years. They did not come just to see Steve, although that was part of it. They came because this was *the* place to be with colleagues if you wanted to know about and be at the forefront of leading ideas for changing England's schools and your own, whatever country you lived in.

By 2012, Steve had left the college to become CEO of CfBT, a trust organisation doing international work in developing countries. The

annual event, *Seizing Success*, became *Inspiring Leadership* and Steve continued to give his annual speeches.

The themes of his 12 annual speeches reflect the roiling and rolling circumstances he contended with and helped to improve. Whether they represented gut-wrenching setbacks – like having to cut 40% of the college’s budget or seeing his beloved National College whittled into extinction by an unfriendly government – or soaring success – like when schools across the country achieved better and better student results because of improved school leadership – Steve epitomised the meaning of a lead learner.

The evolution of the titles of his speeches capture the essence of the imperfect leader in action: ‘Enthusiastic and Invitational Leadership’ (2005), ‘Authentic System Leadership’ (2006), ‘Imperfect and Courageous Leadership’ (2007), ‘Power and Love in Leadership’ (2012), ‘Grown-up and Restless Leadership’ (2016) and ‘Principled Leadership in Challenging Times’ (2017).

Because I was attuned to learning from lead practitioners, I found Steve early – just after he took his first CEO job in 2000, as director of education in Knowsley, a small local authority in north-west England which had scored second-last in GCSE performance in the country. After one year of Steve’s leadership, Knowsley had become the worst performer in England! Imperfect became one step backward, before Steve and his team led a remarkable turnaround at Knowsley. The so-called worst local authority became a success story – one of the first in the country to demonstrate that you can turn around an entire education authority from terrible to great.

Like many other what I call ‘nuance leaders’, Steve combines empathy, closeness and toughness, mobilising the commitment of scores of people to do what seems impossible. The National College was founded in 2000. Its first few years were characterised by a diffuse agenda and it was hard to locate its centre of gravity. Steve took over in 2005 and one of the first things he did was to take a cue from the leadership of his mentor, Tim Brighouse, the former Birmingham chief education officer. He decided to personally call every leader of every local leadership group and association. There were about 500 of them across the country. He said publicly in his first speech that this was exactly what he was going

to do. And he did it, asking each one how the college was serving their needs and how it might change for the better. He launched a new era for the National College.

In my book, *Nuance*, I delved into how some leaders are effective, while others using many of the same strategies fail. Now that I review my extended definition, I see much of Steve in it:

Nuance leaders have a curiosity about what is possible, openness to other people, sensitivity to context, and loyalty to a better future. They see below the surface enabling them to detect patterns and their consequences for the system. They connect people to their own and each other's humanity. They don't lead, they teach. They change people's emotions, not just their minds. They have an instinct for orchestration. They foster sinews of success. They are humble in the face of challenges, determined for the group to be successful, and proud to celebrate success. They end up developing incredibly accountable organizations because the accountability gets built into the culture. Above all they are courageously and relentlessly committed to changing the system for the better of humanity.<sup>1</sup>

Read *Imperfect Leadership* to see how Steve fits the definition of nuance. He has written an honest, fascinating and engrossing book. Afterwards, ask yourself what a perfect leader would do in this or that situation. The answer will almost always be that there is no such thing because the world is imperfect and always will be. We need people like Steve to take the job anyway.





## Acknowledgements

There are a great number of people I would like to thank for their help not only in the production of this book but also in helping to shape my leadership over many years.

Sir Tim Brighouse, Sir Michael Barber and Baroness Estelle Morris have had a profoundly positive impact on me and on my leadership and I am hugely grateful to them for that. I have tried to follow in their footsteps.

Michael Fullan, more than anyone else, has helped me – through his writings – to articulate the leadership that I have attempted to demonstrate. Andy Hargreaves, Tony Mackay, David Albury and Vanni Treves have shared their wisdom, their support and their friendship with me in equal measure, for which I am deeply grateful. In my early career, Kevyn Smith, Mark Pattison and Steve Gallagher, in their own individual ways, showed me what leadership could be and modelled it for me. I will never forget what they did for me.

I am greatly in the debt of Maggie Farrar and Geoff Southworth, not only for their significant contribution to improving the manuscript for this book but also for demonstrating on a daily basis the power of leadership that is principled and full of integrity.

I would like to publicly acknowledge the fantastic support (and challenge) provided by my senior colleagues at the National College (especially Toby Salt and Caroline Maley) and at CfBT/Education Development Trust (especially Patrick Brazier, Tony McAleavy, Bob Miles, Chris

Tweedale and Philip Graf). I would also like to acknowledge my fabulous executive assistants over the years – Lynn Morley, Chloe Smith and Alison Millar.

I am greatly indebted to the people who have helped me to craft the speeches in this book, especially Michael Pain, Tony McAleavy and Matt Davis, but also Patrick Scott, Christine Gilbert, John Dunford, Marie-Claire Bretherton, Jane Creasy and Lucy Crehan.

I would like to extend a huge thank you to the exceptional Laura McInerney for her wise advice on the manuscript and also to Toby Greany for giving me such expert, helpful and constructive feedback.

Finally, I would like to thank my dear friends, Peter Batty and John Turner, not only for reading and commenting on the manuscript but also for helping to influence my leadership for the better over many years.



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# Introduction

Many's the time I've been mistaken.  
And many times confused.

Paul Simon, 'American Tune'

I am in a meeting of my leadership team and we are about to receive the financial figures for our annual budget. I am very nervous. The figures show yet another huge deficit of more than £4 million – putting the organisation under great strain and my leadership under considerable pressure. I have been in the CEO role for 18 months and there is still no turnaround as far as the bottom line is concerned. Should I resign? Will the board still have confidence in me? How much time will I be given? Have I got the strategy wrong?

This was not the first time I had experienced these feelings of self-doubt and potential failure. In 2000, I had taken up the role of director of education in Knowsley Council. Knowsley was a small local education authority (LEA) with about 80 schools, including 11 secondary schools. When I was appointed in October, we had the second worst GCSE results out of all the secondary schools in the country. After nearly a year of my leadership, we had the worst GCSE results in the country. I went live on Radio Merseyside on results day and the broadcaster said to me, 'With respect, why don't you just give up? It's hopeless.' Later that week I received a telephone call from the *Daily Mail* saying that they wanted to do a story on the worst LEA in the country and asking would I do an interview. Within a few days, there was a call for my resignation in

the *Liverpool Echo*, suggesting I had brought disgrace to the borough of Knowsley. If it hadn't been for a wise mentor at that time, who helped me to see that I was doing the right things but just needed more time for them to make an impact, I might have walked away and given up.

Five years later, in 2005, after some success in Knowsley, I took up a national role as CEO of the National College for School Leadership, feeling well out of my depth. By 2010, having made some progress, the context changed completely and we had a new right-of-centre coalition government with a radical secretary of state for education – Michael Gove. I wondered whether I should continue to try to lead the National College under these completely new circumstances. Should I resign, or should I try to make it work positively for school leaders? And if the latter, what should my new strategy be? Much later, in 2014, I found myself – as chair of the CST multi-academy trust (MAT) – being challenged by a minister of the Crown and by a board member of the Department for Education, who were pushing for my resignation.

As this book outlines, there have been many times in my leadership when I have doubted whether I was the right person for the role. Many leaders will have been in situations in which they have asked themselves similar questions. There have been several mistakes and some pretty fundamental errors in my leadership, but there has also been some success and, overall, a legacy of which I am proud.

This is, I hope, an honest book about leadership. It is about my leadership journey – some of the highs and lows, and, most of all, how I learned to improve my leadership. It is about messy leadership, trial and error leadership and butterflies in the stomach leadership. It is also about thoughtful leadership, invitational leadership and, most of all, imperfect leadership.

'Imperfect leadership' is one of the best terms I can think of to describe my own leadership. This is not something I am ashamed about; imperfect leadership should be celebrated. Too often we are given examples of leaders who are put on some kind of pedestal – superhero leaders, leaders who have it all worked out, who are hugely successful and so good at what they do that nobody else can come close. This book is, I hope, the antidote to that concept. I have yet to meet a perfect leader, even if they might be portrayed by others as such. The notion that a leader needs

to be good at all aspects of leadership is not only unrealistic, it is also bad for the mental and physical health of leaders and will do nothing to attract new people into leadership.

As you read this book I hope that the value of imperfect leadership and the positive impact it can make will shine through. For those reading it who have yet to step up into leadership, my sincere hope is that it will encourage and empower you rather than put you off.

What also makes this book different is the fact that between 2005 and 2017 I made an annual keynote speech to a large audience of school leaders. These speeches are at the heart of the book. In them I attempted to map the educational landscape for school leaders in England at the time – to help them understand their own shifting context and their role as leaders within it. The speeches attempted to describe, to analyse, to challenge and to inspire. In some cases, the speeches became very personal and, on several occasions, I was speaking to myself as a leader as much as I was speaking to the audience. They are, in part, a commentary on the changes in the education system in England over a 12-year period; but they are more than that, and I hope also that they will be of interest to those who are not familiar with the English system. In these speeches, I increasingly tried to describe for school leaders the kind of leadership that I believed was necessary at that moment in time. This is a question that every leader, in whatever context and in whatever country, should be asking of themselves on a fairly regular basis.

This book begins with my appointment as CEO of the National College, so it might be helpful for readers to know a little bit about my career background. After completing a degree in philosophy and a postgraduate certificate in education, I started work as a secondary school history teacher in Birmingham and, later, in Gateshead. After seven years, I became an advisory teacher in Sunderland, working for the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative. This was followed by a short period as a lecturer at Sunderland Polytechnic and two years employed by the North East Local Education Authorities as an expert consultant on assessment and records of achievement for students. I spent eight years at Oldham LEA as a school adviser and inspector, and then I made a big step up to become assistant director for school improvement and life-long learning in the new unitary LEA of Blackburn with Darwen. After quite a bit of success, including the local authority being awarded Beacon

Status for school improvement, I was appointed as director of education and lifelong learning in Knowsley in 2000.

One of the overall messages in this book is that context matters. What works well in one context may be unsuccessful in another. As Dylan Wiliam has written, ‘In education, “what works?” is not the right question because everything works somewhere and nothing works everywhere, so what’s interesting, what’s important in education is: “Under what circumstances does this work?”’<sup>2</sup> We should never think that a leadership approach or strategy which was a great success in our previous organisation can just be transplanted into our new organisation. As Michael Fullan argues, if strategies are to travel well, we need to show nuance in our leadership.<sup>3</sup>

Context is subtle; it doesn’t just apply when we change roles or move schools, and there is no place for standing still. What worked for us as leaders last year, even within the same organisation, won’t necessarily work for us this year. Moreover, a tough year can be followed by another tough year, or by a year of success, and sometimes these things are not entirely within our control. At times, the context changes and requires a new approach from us as leaders, but we can be so close to things that we don’t see it until it is too late. That has certainly happened to me on more than one occasion.

Leaders need to develop their own leadership style based on their beliefs and values, their expertise and skills, their personality and their context. Much of this is fixed but some of it changes, so we need to change with it.

This book describes some fundamental changes in the English education system over a 12-year period and how school leaders altered their leadership as this context changed. It also describes how my own leadership developed as my personal context changed.

But there are also some fundamental aspects of leadership that never change, in spite of the context: the need for us to be self-aware, to be learners, to be enthusiastic, to be authentic, to be invitational and to be principled.

In the final chapter, I try to bring all this together – summarising my views on the current educational landscape in England and the lessons I have learned about leadership, including the power of imperfect leadership.



## Chapter One

# Asking for Help

I'm on my way,  
I don't know where I'm going.

Paul Simon, 'Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard'

In December 2004, I was interviewed for the role of CEO of the National College for School Leadership. I was excited about the role and did my very best at the interview, preparing thoroughly, but I didn't really expect to be offered the job. Surely others with more experience of working at the national level than I had would apply and be appointed? Anyway, why would they appoint someone who had never been a head teacher to be the CEO of the National College – wouldn't that be like appointing someone who had never been a police superintendent to lead the College of Policing or someone who had never been an officer in the army to lead Sandhurst?

And yet I did get the job. I found out later that this was only after the interview panel (who had recommended me for appointment) had been asked by the Prime Minister's Office to reconsider because I had not been a head teacher. They did reconsider and they still recommended me for the role. So, several weeks after I had been interviewed, the then secretary of state for education, Charles Clarke, signed off my appointment and I suddenly found myself thrust into the public eye as a national figure in the education world.

The National College for School Leadership was set up in 2000. The first CEO, Heather Du Quesnay, oversaw the creation of the college – its brand, its staffing and, of course, its new building: a residential conference centre with a high-class restaurant, 100 en-suite bedrooms, a moat and a lake. It was very plush – it even had Molton Brown shampoo and soap in the bedrooms.

I started the new role in March 2005 and I immediately felt out of my depth. I had moved from being director of education in Knowsley (a deprived and challenging part of Merseyside), where the view from my office window had been a car park and a McDonald's, to an office in Nottingham where the view was of a lake with swans and the occasional heron. When I arrived for the first time late one afternoon – to have a briefing with the outgoing CEO – the head waiter asked me if I would like a glass of wine. It was a completely new world to me.

The National College had been set up as a body that was at arm's length from government, with its own board, but the chair of the board and the CEO were both appointed by the education secretary. Each year a 'remit letter' was sent to the National College by the education secretary, allocating a budget and outlining what the government expected to be delivered in return for that budget. The CEO of the National College also had a formal role to advise the education secretary on matters relating to school leadership. I had never worked with a board before. I had never even met a secretary of state, let alone had responsibility for advising one (by this time the education secretary was Ruth Kelly) and I had no real idea how the national political process worked.

The National College had got off to a good start under its previous leadership. The impressive building had been put up and several high-quality leadership programmes had been developed, but certain things were beginning to go wrong. Overall, the government was not happy and had commissioned an end-to-end review of the organisation, led by David Albury.<sup>4</sup> The review praised the innovation and energy of the college but also expressed a number of concerns. It was criticised for taking on too many initiatives (usually at the request of government!) which were not always directly about school leadership, and, as a result, the college had begun to lose its focus and identity. Moreover, many of the most highly regarded and high-profile school principals had formed the view that it had nothing to offer them and was not listening to their

views. In addition, there was a feeling that too much of the content and design of the various leadership programmes was being done by a small number of experts at the centre and that the organisation was not making enough use of the widespread expertise that was out there. It said that the college needed to become a commissioner instead of designing its own programmes. In short, the government was starting to wonder if the National College was becoming a problem. In the wake of the report, the chair of the board had resigned and a new chair, Vanni Treves, was appointed. Soon after that, Heather Du Quesnay left to take up a role in Hong Kong and, as the new CEO, it was my remit to implement the recommendations of the review.

After speaking with the author of the review, as well as with officials at the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), I soon realised that the National College was actually in trouble – more trouble than I had realised when applying for the job.

My first decision, before I even started in the role, was to seek out some mentors. Imperfect leaders know that they don't have all the answers – they ask for help. It has always slightly bewildered me that so many people take up leadership roles without thinking that they need a mentor. I find it equally bewildering that others seem to understand the need to have a mentor but then agree to have one allocated who doesn't have the expertise they need. Others seem to think that there is a kind of rule that you are only supposed to have one mentor. I knew that I needed people to help me who had the expertise that I lacked.

I chose four mentors and, to my delight, each one of them said yes.

Estelle Morris was a former secretary of state for education and now sat in the House of Lords. She was herself a former teacher and someone I admired greatly, though I had never met her. I emailed her and we met for coffee at Waterstones in Charing Cross. She agreed to be one of my mentors, and immediately I had access to someone who understood how the national system worked in Whitehall, who could advise me on how to get things done, who to talk to and how to conduct myself. This proved to be a huge help to me over the next few years.

My second mentor was Tim Brighouse. Tim had been an informal mentor to me when I had been director of education in Knowsley. He was already one of my heroes. I remember the honour I felt when he agreed

to speak at our first Visioning Conference in Knowsley. I introduced him by saying: 'I have five heroes: Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, Mark Knopfler, Kevin Keegan and Tim Brighouse – and Tim isn't even at the bottom of that list!' I needed Tim to help me focus on my moral purpose and to make sure that I did the right things for children and for schools. I also needed him to help me connect with school leaders. Tim gave me two pieces of advice straight away:

1. Go and see Ted Wragg and get him onside – then he won't write negative things about the National College in the back of the *Times Educational Supplement* (a national weekly publication about education issues).
2. Find a way of writing personal cards to head teachers. Even though there are 22,000 schools in England, you can get a lot of powerful messages across through personal contact and it will mean a great deal to them.

I took Tim's advice. I went to see Ted Wragg and asked for his advice on what to do. He was delightful and helpful, though he tragically died less than a year later. With regard to the personal cards, this was already something I had been doing a lot of in Knowsley, but Tim gave me the confidence that it would work at a national level, in spite of the numbers. He could not have been more right about this. Over the next eight years, I wrote personal handwritten cards to hundreds of school leaders – probably more than a thousand – and even today, many years later, I meet people who tell me how much it meant to them. Being a school principal can be such a lonely job, so being thanked or congratulated in a personal way really matters. Tim is not only an authentic leader, he is also a genius.

My third mentor was Tony Mackay. Tony actually had a home in Australia but appeared to spend most of his time on an aeroplane travelling the world. He never seemed to get jet lag because he rarely stayed long enough in one place for his body to know what time it was supposed to be. Tony is the best networker I have ever met and also a world-class facilitator. He was doing lots of work at the time for the DfES and he was also a member of the governing council of the National College. Tony helped me to get in touch with the right people and made sure that I never neglected the importance of forming positive relationships with

the key influencers in the system – those who could help me and those who could potentially do me harm.

My final mentor was David Albury. I chose David because he was the author of the fairly critical end-to-end review of the college. I figured that if he knew what was wrong with the place then he could help me to fix it too. This proved to be an excellent move, especially in my first couple of years as CEO.

In my interview for the role, Sir Michael Barber had asked me if I was up to organising a national conference that would inspire and motivate school leaders. I replied that if appointed I had every intention of doing so. Fortunately for me the National College, with support from Sir Iain Hall, who was then on the governing body, had already begun to organise its first ever national conference. It was called Seizing Success and it took place in Birmingham at the International Convention Centre in early March 2005, a few weeks before I commenced my role as CEO. Geoff Southworth was acting CEO and we agreed that he would do the first half of the speech and then hand over to me as 'CEO designate'. This was my first ever Seizing Success speech. To be honest, I still didn't know that much about the National College, and I hadn't spent very long thinking about leadership, for that matter. My theme was how the emerging new challenges of school leadership were mirrored by my new challenges as CEO of the National College.

This theme of talking 'leader to leader' proved to be a very powerful one for me over the next 12 years, as I began to develop my own views on leadership at a school level and at a national level. I have always had the utmost respect for school leaders and could never understand the mentality of some of my colleagues in LEAs who were disparaging or dismissive. For me, school leaders have an extraordinarily demanding job, and I can honestly say that I never thought that my job as a director of education in an LEA or as CEO of the National College was harder or easier than theirs – just different. Having a wife who was a secondary head teacher probably helped!

In this speech I made a very important public commitment: I declared that I would personally telephone the chair of each secondary head teachers' group, each primary head teachers' group and each special head teachers' group in each LEA, along with other key stakeholders, and that

I would invite them all to attend one of nine regional conferences to discuss the future of the National College. As there were 150 LEAs, I was publicly committing myself to making about 500 telephone calls to school principals within the first few months of being in the role.

This notion of making public commitments and then implementing that commitment became part of my leadership style.

*Imperfect leaders make public promises because they are acutely aware of their own weaknesses, and they know that without making public promises they might fail to deliver on something that is really important.* It was my way of making sure that I made myself do things that were hard but extremely important. In fact, I had a very tough time trying to make those 500 phone calls. I needed to do them in the space of 10 weeks, which meant that on average I needed to make 10 phone calls per day for 50 consecutive working days. If I hadn't made a public commitment to do this, I probably would have given up. I had no idea how hard it was going to be.

As the director of education in Knowsley, if I telephoned a school in Knowsley then the school principal invariably took the call. But now that I was telephoning schools from all over the country, often the school office thought that I was trying to sell something and refused to put me through. I often had to call back two or three times to actually get to speak to the principal. But I made all those calls myself – every single one – without going through my PA, and it turned out to be one of the most effective things I did as CEO of the National College. Some principals never forgot that I had called them personally to listen to their views, and the message soon spread in every LEA that the new CEO of the National College wanted to listen to the voice of school leaders.

It also meant that after conducting 500 phone calls with head teachers, and asking them what advice they would give me to improve the National College, I knew more than anyone else in the country what school leaders wanted from the college, which gave me a strong hand when discussing the way forward for the National College with ministers and officials. I learned from this, and from my experiences later, that making public commitments can sometimes be risky, but it can also keep you on track and help to make sure that you do the right thing when you are under pressure.

There is no other book like it. If you are, or aspire to be, an educational leader, and if you have even an ounce of integrity, this has to be the next must-read for you.

**Andy Hargreaves, Research Professor, Boston College, and Visiting Professor, University of Ottawa**

This is an important book. It's important in its subject matter, in its point of focus, and most of all in its unblinking honesty.

**Lord David Puttnam, Chair, Atticus Education**

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**Sir Ken Robinson, PhD, educator and *New York Times* bestselling author**

*Imperfect Leadership* is a book of breathtaking wisdom. I can't recommend it highly enough.

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This book could be the perfect gift to encourage those who are humbly striving to improve their leadership – not for perfection, but rather for their service to education.

**Dr Pak Tee Ng, Associate Professor, National Institute of Education,  
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore**

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ISBN 978-178583411-0



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