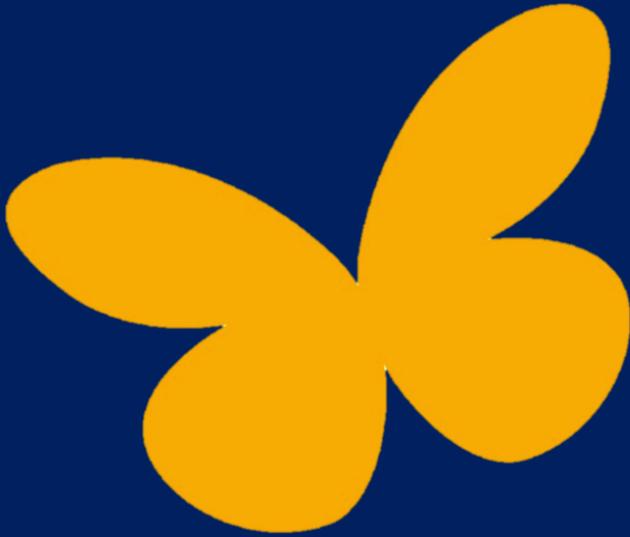


REPORT



School Leaders' Retreat

8 – 9 July 2020

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Pallavan
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CONTENT

01	Introduction	02
02	Concept Note	03
03	Day 1: Session on Managing Change	04
04	Group Discussion on the Impact of Change	06
05	Day 2: The Crucibles of Leadership	08
06	The Way forward – Takeaways, Strategies and Action Points	10
07	A Synthesis: Dealing with Change – Opportunities for Educators and School Leaders	12
08	List of Participants	14
09	About the Facilitator	15
10	About the Organisers	15



01 Introduction

The School Leaders' Retreat is a biennial programme for school leaders to hold discussions and take part in common learning experiences. This helps to build a foundation of shared values and create a network of leaders in the Asia-Pacific community. An integral part of the Asia Pacific Schools Initiative (APSI), the School Leaders' Retreat brings together school leaders with the intent of inculcating an understanding of 'Leadership through Serene Strength' and inspiring them to support the students and teachers of their schools. We believe that if schools practice and promote 'Leadership through Serene Strength', it will have a multiplier effect and will spread in the community, country and region.

A retreat of this kind is best done in a physical space with close interactions that foster serious debates and useful discussions. However, due to the current global scenario, organizing such an event was not possible. Instead, we dared to hold it online, knowing the group dynamics and bond established in 2018-Retreat would provide the required spirit and energy.

The banner features a dark blue background with a yellow border. At the top left is the Pallavan Learning Systems logo with the tagline 'आओ सीखना सीखें'. At the top right is the Centre for Escalation of Peace (CEP) logo. The main text reads 'Pallavan Learning Systems and Centre for Escalation of Peace present School Leaders' Retreat 2020 8 - 9 JULY'. Below this, a grey bar contains the text: 'The Lockdown has given us time to pause and reflect. Now is the opportunity to reimagine education and ensure wholistic development of all learners.'



02 Concept Note

COVID-19 has created such an upheaval that we are all trying to navigate in uncharted territory. It has never been so challenging, but with opportunities galore it has never been as exciting.

The Lockdown has given us time to pause and reflect. We have time and again lamented the fact that we have become 'an over-schooled society' with very little education. Now is the opportunity to reimagine education, reiterate its true purpose and identify ways of ensuring wholistic development of all learners especially in these trying times.

There is a move towards reopening schools, and in many countries they have already started phased reopening. But there is uncertainty, confusion and complications. Everyone is asking questions about safety, health concerns and reopening protocol but there are no clear answers. Even governments, world leaders and experts seem to have divergent views. But one thing is certain – there are going to be changes in the way we live and the way we learn.

In such a scenario it seems important that we, as school leaders, put our heads together to figure out the way forward for education and nurturing the learners. We need to equip ourselves to deal with the change and the new normal. We must collectively figure out what we should be doing - at the very least, come up with different possibilities and choose the ones that fit our individual circumstances the best.

It is with this intent that we invited the participants of School Leaders' Retreat 2017 to reconnect in a virtual space for School Leaders' Retreat 2020 on July 8 and 9, and along with Arun Kapur, Gaurav Saklani and Saroj Thapa to think of the various possibilities for the future of learning and how to lead the change.

The Lockdown has given us time to pause and reflect. Now is the opportunity to reimagine education, reiterate its true purpose and identify ways of ensuring wholistic development of all learners especially in these trying times.



03 Day 1:

Session with Gaurav Saklani on Managing Change

Saroj Thapa introduced the session by explaining that the current situation is the biggest VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) situation the world is facing collectively since World War II. We need to explore and understand the phenomenon of change and learn how to be the driver of the change. She then introduced the facilitator for the session, Gaurav Saklani.

Gaurav Saklani began by reiterating that the current pandemic has changed everyone's lives. But he reasoned that change is inevitable and we need to learn how to deal with it and possibly direct it along a positive trajectory. He explained that the session will look at the process of change in two distinct parts. The first part will analyze our thoughts, emotions and actions when faced with a changing situation. The second will look at how we can become forces that drive change.

As an exercise, he asked the participants to think about a moment in the past where a major change was taking place in their lives. He urged them to focus not necessarily on the incident but on the feelings, emotions, thoughts, turmoil or excitement experienced. Then, participants were asked to share their thoughts. Some of them were:

- Change is difficult because there are so many iterations and ways of dealing with it. Even when done with the best of intentions, the process of change can be unnerving
- There were feelings of fear, sorrow and confusion but also a glimmer of hope that things were changing for the better
- What really helps during difficult transitions is talking to family and friends who then become your anchor. Going inwards is equally important because you get to understand yourself more
- If a change is really bothering you, it helps to distract yourself and immerse yourself in work or hobbies

Gaurav then explained that transformation always comes with a feeling of a threat or a reward, owing to the chemicals released in our bodies. How we visualize the transformation will ultimately depend on which side the scale is tipping. That is why optimism and hope is very important while



faced with change; we need to recognize that while there is a threat, there is also an opportunity being presented.

Then, there were numerous discussions pertaining to the various levels of dealing with change; pessimistic and optimistic views of change as being personal, permanent and pervasive; and learnt helplessness and optimism.

Then, Gaurav asked the participants to think about the struggles or obstacles while trying to drive change. Some of the responses were:

- Convincing others of the need for change and ways to achieve it can be daunting
- Do they believe in it? Oftentimes, there is no consensus. Therefore, a common belief for its necessity needs to be established beforehand
- Who drives the change and how is it driven? Is the process distributive or authoritarian? – the issue of power and method can play a big factor
- There is a need for the leader to step into others' shoes and empathize. Otherwise, she is unable to know their situation and understand their beliefs
- A leader should believe in the change and keep herself grounded and focused. If not, she will come across as inauthentic and be unable to build momentum
- Even when the leader is convinced, she sometimes loses focus or energy. It is crucial that she reminds herself not to give up

Gaurav explained that change cannot be sustained with logic alone. Despite wanting change, we are creatures of habit and often easily revert to the old way of doing things. In order to bring about change, it is necessary that we own the change and be invested in it. That is why we need to cater to the emotions, in addition to logic, while dealing with change. We need to recognize that humans are emotional creatures and most of their actions are driven by emotions and not logic.

While driving change, we often tend to focus on what is not working. We need to instead focus on what seems to be working and direct most of our energy in that direction. In a team, we need to identify who the innovators, early adopters and resisters are, and strategize when and how to deal with them to move the entire team forward.



04 *Group Discussion on the Impact of Change*

Saroj Thapa conducted a group discussion on the impact of changes in the past four months. Participants shared how the pandemic has affected them as educators and as human beings, and how they have dealt with change.

The comments by the participants were as follows:

- It has been a learning curve for me and my teachers as we have begun to adapt to online learning and tools
- It is easier to rally the team when we are able to identify the common issue and shared outcomes
- As soon as we sensed that physical schools would be closed, we designed activities and worksheets for students to take home. We identified the kind and extent of technological access that each student had
- We have realized how schools play a big role as an equalizer. During this time, we have witnessed the inequality among students, in terms of technological access, family environment and support systems. We need to be sensitive about all these differences.
- In some cases, teachers have found it difficult to conduct online teaching because they feel judged or scrutinized by parents and family members. There needs to be a proper channel for feedback
- We have witnessed a pandemic of mental health affecting not only students but also teachers and parents. The issues of job losses, isolation, abuse, stress and depression need to be addressed and dealt with in a sensitive manner
- As a way of being responsive instead of reactive, we need to now think about how to live our lives, even in schools, with COVID. Right now, there are more questions than answers but we need to be aware of these questions and address them to the best of our abilities
- This is a great opportunity for us to rethink education and what we want our children to learn. We have always maintained that parents are the first educators and here is the opportunity to reach out to them and make them an integral part of the child's learning process
- We need to realize that what we considered problems three months ago have become the new normal for most of us now. This speaks of our ability to adapt and reinvent ourselves



- This is the opportunity to encourage students to take ownership of their learning, and for teachers to learn new strategies to keep learning interactive and exciting. Even after the pandemic, we need to keep the momentum going and not abandon what we have learnt during this time
- This is a great opportunity to include not only the parents but also the surrounding community in the learning process
- We need to keep ourselves motivated and optimistic because the children are watching us and will be swayed by how we are managing this change
- We need to accept that change is the only constant and show adaptability and resilience in the face of crisis

This is the opportunity to encourage students to take ownership of their learning, and for teachers to learn new strategies to keep learning interactive and exciting. Even after the pandemic, we need to keep the momentum going and not abandon what we have learnt during this time.



05 Day 2:

The Crucibles of Leadership

Saroj Thapa introduced the topic for the session and expressed that the test of good leadership is to understand one's own strengths and learn to deal with adaptive changes. It is also the task of leadership to come up with the most considered way forward.

Participants were divided into three groups and asked to read an article and discuss it with the focus on the crucibles of leadership. Then, each group presented their main points.

Group 1:

- We are a summation of all our experiences, knowledge, actions, relationships and beliefs – when we say we act based on our instincts in times of crisis, we are often acting out of practiced intuitiveness
- Crisis can often be a litmus test of who we are and can debunk our core beliefs – we need to be resilient and adaptive in order to emerge from it stronger than before
- Practicing moderation and maintaining equilibrium in our day-to-day lives can help us cope in the time of crisis
- In times of crisis, we need to shift the focus from oneself to the outside (others, immediate community, world at large) so that we are able to see the bigger picture
- There is a solution to everything and we just need to find it. However, the solutions might keep changing so we need to be willing to adapt constantly
- A leader should not only exhibit confidence and optimism but admission of vulnerability and willingness to find solutions together go a long way

Group 2:

- It is often the challenges that make us realize our strengths. True leadership requires unwavering focus on the objective and sense of togetherness with the team
- Timing is everything. We need to know when to engage the various members of the team, depending on whether they are innovators, early adopters or resisters
- As leaders, we need to have an open mind, and be mindful that we are responding instead of reacting



- People will judge no matter what so we should not let it affect us or our decisions – it is important to hold on to our values and commitment in order to keep moving forward
- We should never waste a good crisis; it often presents ample opportunities to question status quo and bring about positive change

Group 3:

- It is not only the stress and trauma that test us as leaders. Sometimes, how we deal with positive change and optimism can also define us as leaders
- As leaders, we should not let the system define us. Instead, we need to work on defining and adapting the systems according to the need of the hour
- There are different kinds of leadership. During this pandemic, students have taken ownership of their learning. Teachers have displayed resilience and parents have risen to the occasion to the best of their ability.

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06 *The Way forward – Takeaways, Strategies and Action Points*

Participants were asked to mention key takeaways from the discussion and realistic strategies and action points that they hope to employ moving forward. The salient points mentioned are given below:

Effective leaders:

- It is crucial that leaders have adaptive skills so they know when to be more authoritative and when to be more democratic. They need to be dynamic and flexible and willing to reinvent themselves on a regular basis, while the core beliefs stay unchanged
- In order to be an effective leader, one should be able to contextualize one's approach to the situation and team members
- In addition to exhibiting positivity and optimism, a leader needs to be an effective communicator and use humour to reach out to her team members
- A leader needs to be able to say 'I don't know' and admit that she does not always have the answer. But she needs to be willing to seek out the right resources and relevant information to fill in the gap
- Leadership of the self is the first step towards effective leadership because a good leader should be able to lead by example. She introspects and reflects on a regular basis so that she is more mindful and aware of the situation
- In order to become a good leader, one needs to learn how to be a good follower first because that requires adaptive skills

Effective processes:

- Creating a culture of collaboration is crucial for successful engagement with a team. For that, the prerequisites are common core values of integrity, perseverance and compassion
- Transparency and honesty will go a long way in building trust and ensuring a buy-in from all stakeholders. Leaders need to strive to understand everyone's perspectives, and all stakeholders should hold themselves accountable
- Relationship is the foundation of effective collaboration. We need to invest time to form authentic relationships with our team members and get to know their abilities, strengths and challenges



- A culture of trust takes years to build so we need to invest in bonding time, celebrations, rituals and circle time in order to create learnt group optimism
- We need to acknowledge that resisters are equally important because they make us question our beliefs and hone our strategies. We need to establish a channel for constructive dialogue with the resisters
- One of the best ways to convince people is to showcase common goals that benefit everyone
- For collaboration to thrive, there needs to be a community that allows its members to feel safe to share their views and show weaknesses and vulnerability

Leadership of the self is the first step towards effective leadership because a good leader should be able to lead by example. She introspects and reflects on a regular basis so that she is more mindful and aware of the situation.



A Synthesis

Dealing with Change - Opportunities for Educators and School Leaders

The pandemic crisis has created such an upheaval that we are all trying to navigate in uncharted territory. It has never been so challenging, but with opportunities galore it has never been as exciting. As educators, we need to equip ourselves to deal with the change and the new normal. We must collectively figure out what we should be doing - at the very least, come up with different possibilities and choose the ones that fit our individual circumstances the best.

For that, we need to first explore and understand the phenomenon of change and learn how to be the driver of the change. It is true that the current pandemic has altered everyone's lives but we need to acknowledge that change is inevitable and learn how to deal with it and possibly direct it along a positive trajectory.

We have to understand that change cannot be sustained with logic alone. Despite wanting change, we are creatures of habit and often easily revert to the old way of doing things. In order to bring about change, it is necessary that we own the change and be invested in it. That is why we need to cater to the emotions, in addition to logic, while dealing with change. We need to recognize that humans are emotional creatures and most of their actions are driven by emotions and not logic.

While driving change, we often tend to focus on what is not working. We need to instead focus on what seems to be working and direct most of our energy in that direction. In a team, we need to identify who the innovators, early adopters and resisters are, and strategize when and how to deal with them to move the entire team forward.

Perhaps more than ever, being a good leader is paramount today. We need to show adaptive skills and the ability to recognize when to be authoritative and when to be democratic. We need to be dynamic and flexible and willing to reinvent ourselves on a regular basis, while the core values and beliefs remain constant. In order to be an effective leader, we should be able to contextualize our approach to the situation and team members. In addition to exhibiting positivity and optimism, we need to be effective communicators and use humour to reach out to our team members. We need to be able to say 'I don't know' and admit that we do not always have the answers; but, at the



same time, we need to be willing to seek out the right resources and relevant information to fill in the gap.

Leadership of the self is the first step towards effective leadership because a good leader should be able to lead by example. That is why, we need to introspect and reflect on a regular basis so that we are more mindful and aware of the situation. It is crucial that we realize that in order to be a good leader, we also need to learn how to be a good follower because that requires adaptive skills.

In order to deal with uncertainty and bring about positive change, we need to ensure that we have conducive systems and spaces in place. Creating a culture of collaboration is crucial for successful engagement with a team. For that, the prerequisites are common core values of integrity, perseverance and compassion. Transparency and honesty go a long way in building trust and ensuring a buy-in from all stakeholders. As leaders, we need to strive to understand everyone's perspectives, and encourage all stakeholders to hold themselves accountable.

Relationship is the foundation of effective collaboration. We need to invest time to form authentic relationships with our team members and get to know their abilities, strengths and challenges. A culture of trust takes years to build so we need to invest in bonding time, celebrations, rituals and circle time in order to create learned group optimism. We also need to establish a channel for constructive dialogue with the resisters because they make us question our beliefs and hone our strategies. It is crucial that we invest in creating a community that allows all its members to feel safe to share their ideas and show weaknesses and vulnerability.

In order to be an effective leader, we should be able to contextualize our approach to the situation and team members. In addition to exhibiting positivity and optimism, we need to be effective communicators and use humour to reach out to our team members.



08 List of Participants

Title	Name	School	Country
Ms	Anju Wal	Shiv Nadar, Faridabad	India
Dr	Annie Koshi	St. Mary's School	India
Ms	Deki Pem	The Royal Academy	Bhutan
Ms	Monica Sagar	Shiv Nadar, Gurgaon	India
Ms	Neten Lhamo	Ministry of Education	Bhutan
Mr	Penjor Ghaley	The Royal Academy	Bhutan
Mr	Pramod Ranwaka	Mayo College	India
Ms	Punam Shringi	Pallavan School, Jhalawar	India
Col	Raju Peter	Modern Indian School, Kathmandu	Nepal
Mr	Ram Dahal	The Royal Academy	Bhutan
Ms	Rekha Krishnan	Vasant Valley School	India
Ms	Richa Agnihotri	Sanskriti School	India
Ms	Shashi Banerjee	Shiv Nadar, Noida	India
Mr	Tshering Nidup	The Royal Academy	Bhutan
Mr	Yesh Bahadur Ghalley	Ministry of Education	Bhutan



09 About the Facilitator

Gaurav Saklani

Founder - [Exper Executive Education](#) & [inme Learning](#)

Gaurav has been leading learning programmes with companies and institutions for over 20 years. He facilitates powerful and highly engaging workshops around Creating Winning Teams, Realizing Leadership Potential, and Handling Difficult Conversations.

Gaurav has worked with leading schools like The Doon School, Lawrence School, Sanawar, Neev Academy, Inventure Academy and Hill Spring International School and also facilitated the APSI 2017, APSI 2019 and the School Leaders' Retreat 2018.

10 About the Organisers

Pallavan Learning Systems (PLS) - PLS is an education research organization. It specializes in creating education centres of excellence with innovative learning spaces and systems so that learning takes place seamlessly. It conducts research, seminars and conferences for the creation and dissemination of new knowledge so that what it does remains current and relevant to the rapidly changing times. [Read More](#)

Centre for Escalation of Peace (CEP) - CEP focuses on issues of conflict and poverty, lack of proper education and skilling, and disengagement with communities, to find viable solutions at a policy level. It creates platforms and establishes programmes that encourage the free exchange of ideas across borders, with a distinct focus on empowering young minds. [Read more](#)

Centre for Escalation of Peace

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