# Transcript

**Podcast episode 4 – Steve Munby celebrates imperfect leadership**

Duration 32.06 minutes

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**ANGELA SCAFFIDI:**

Welcome to the [Bastow](https://www.bastow.vic.edu.au/) Podcast – conversations with big thinkers about the big questions in education and leadership today. I’m [Angela Scaffidi](https://senateshj.com/our-people/angela-scaffidi/).

Steve Munby is a lifelong educationalist. He began his career as a secondary school teacher in the UK and has since turned his attention to leadership and the role it plays in education systems around the world.

Steve was the CEO of England’s National College for School Leadership and then led the Education Development Trust. As leader of the Trust, he worked to improve education systems and school clusters across the globe.

Steve is an expert in the field of school improvement and works as a lecturer and a consultant with many international organisations. He has two honorary doctorates and in 2010, he was awarded Commander of the British Empire for services to leadership in schools and children’s services.

So, Steve, how did you get into educational leadership and what is it about it that interests you?

**STEVE MUNBY:**

I started as a teacher and I always wanted to be a teacher but actually, at first, I just wasn’t very good at it. In fact, I looked up, a few years ago, on Friends Reunited to see if anyone had written anything about my first few years as a teacher and I found something that had been written – “Does anybody remember Mr Munby? He had a beard and drove a yellow Cortina. He was a nice man, but he couldn’t control us. It’s a wonder we learnt anything.” And that’s, as far as I know, is the only written record of my first few years in teaching.

But I did get better and then I was encouraged by others to step up into leadership. And, you know, it’s interesting when you step up into leadership because in most cases, you stop doing something you know you’re really good at in order to do something that you might be good at and that’s a risk, to step up into leadership, and it needs encouragement and support from others, I think, and that’s certainly what happened to me and suddenly, I found myself as Director of Education for a local authority.

**ANGELA:**

It almost sounds like a surprise! How prepared were you for leadership?

**STEVE:**

When I became a leader, when I was Director of Education at a local authority, to be honest, I’d never really thought much about leadership. I hadn’t. People have encouraged me to step up because they saw that I was a good communicator and I was enthusiastic and had moral purpose, but I’d never really reflected upon leadership. I’d read a few books.

But when I went to the National College for School Leadership, I was now in charge of an organisation whose sole responsibility was leadership development for 22,000 schools and 150 local authorities. And then I felt I actually had to think about leadership, not only because I was leading an organisation responsible for leadership development but also, how could I possibly ask leaders to do things that I wasn’t prepared to do myself?

So the big learning for me, as a leader, was when I was Chief Exec at the National College for School Leadership because I felt I needed to model and demonstrate and be authentic as a leader if I was expecting and hoping school principals to develop their leadership too. And that was the key learning for me. I couldn’t expect them to do anything that I wasn’t prepared to model too. So, I really had to think hard about my own leadership, my leadership styles, my leadership approaches and I became a much more reflective learner, as a leader, because I found myself in that role.

**ANGELA:**

How long had you been a teacher before you became a Director?

**STEVE:**

It was about 10, 12 years between teaching and becoming a leader of a local authority and I did five years as the leader of a local authority. And when I went there, we had 80 schools and when I went there, we had the second worst examination results in the whole country. And after a year of my leadership, we had the worst examination results in the whole country. So, it was a very tough, challenging period for me as a leader, a baptism of fire, and if I hadn’t had a mentor in that first year, I might’ve walked away ‘cause it was so tough.

**ANGELA:**

Mentors are incredibly valuable. What sort of support did you receive from your mentor?

**STEVE:**

Well, I think what the mentor said to me was, “You are doing the right things. You just need more time.” And once I was convinced that I wasn’t just inadequate but actually I was doing the right things and I needed more time, I remember getting all the head teachers together, soon after the examination results had come out. And I’d been on radio that morning and the broadcaster had said to me, “Just give up. It’s hopeless.”

But I got all the head teachers together and I told them that in three years’ time, people would be coming from all over the country to find out how we’d been so successful. And it turned out that we were successful, but I needed, at that time, once I’d had my mentoring support, I needed, at that time, to show optimistic leadership.

**ANGELA:**

Steve, you’ve spoken about the balance of power and love in leadership. It’s a really an unusual topic. Why do we need both?

**STEVE:**

Well, it’s based on a very famous quote from Martin Luther King, who said that, “Power without love is reckless and abusive and love with power is sentimental and anaemic.” And I’ve worked all over the world now. I’ve worked with teachers, I’ve worked with school principals, I’ve worked with senior officials and I’ve worked with ministers in different education systems around the world and I’m convinced that whether it’s teaching or leadership or even running governments, we need to have a combination of both power and love and by ‘power’, I mean focus, passion, drive, determination, pace, commitment, having high expectations and by ‘love’, I mean kindness, empathy, inclusion, being humble, taking people with you. And it seems to me that where we often go wrong on leadership is, we have a focus on one but not the other.

I’ll give you a story. My wife and I bought a house about 15 years ago and there was a whole list of things that we regarded as totally unacceptable in the house that had to change. And we drew up a list of all the things we were going to change and we worked through that list in the first year and we got about two thirds down the list and then we stopped. Now, there were two reasons why we stopped. The first reason was we ran out of money but there was another reason why we stopped and that was because we’d stopped noticing the things that initially we said were unacceptable. We’d lowered our expectations. And I think that’s a danger in leadership. The good leaders do not lower their expectations, they keep driving, they keep being focused on what needs to happen and they keep their high expectations.

But the other problem with leadership is that some people lead with power but don’t show enough love. And I see a lot of this in governments, where they make changes in the legislation, they expect the people to implement their new policies, but they don’t take people with them. They don’t show empathy and kindness and build an invitational approach to leadership and as a result, their policies fail. So, in my view, we need to have both focus and drive and high expectations and confidence to see things through, but we need to show kindness and listen and be inclusive and invitational and take people with us.

**ANGELA:**

We’re looking forward to reading your book *Imperfect Leadership*, which you’re soon to publish. What do you mean by that term ‘imperfect leadership’, Steve?

**STEVE:**

That’s a great question and I’m delighted to have written a book about this. The book’s called Imperfect Leadership: A Book for Leaders Who Know They Don’t Know It All. And as I’ve look back on my own leadership over 17 years leading big organisations, I think the best way to describe my leadership is imperfect. And it’s not something I’m ashamed of. I think we should celebrate the fact that we are imperfect leaders. In fact, I think that if we don’t celebrate imperfect leadership, if we started thinking that we have to be perfect leaders, it’ll damage us mentally and physically. It will put other people off wanting to be leaders and we’ll end up disempowering those around us so I think imperfect leadership is a really fabulous concept and something we should be celebrating.

**ANGELA:**

So in essence, because all leaders are people, all leaders are imperfect. What are the hallmarks of leaders who recognise their imperfection?

**STEVE:**

I think imperfect leaders are self-aware. They know their own weaknesses as well as their strengths. They don’t try to be the perfect leader. They try, therefore, to build a perfect team. They appoint skyscrapers. They appoint people who are even better than they are at things. So, they know that they can’t do everything. They’re not good at some things and that’s why they need a team and that’s why they empower the team and distribute that leadership. If they think they have to be perfect, they wouldn’t do that.

Secondly, I think imperfect leaders acknowledge their mistakes. They’re not afraid of being seen to be imperfect. They avoid narcissism and they manage their ego and because they’re genuine and authentic and are open about things that they get wrong, people actually are more likely to follow them rather than less likely to follow them because they’re genuine.

And next, I think, imperfect leaders understand it’s better to be right at the end of a process than be seen to be right at the beginning of a process. So, it doesn’t matter who’s view it was that ended up being the right one. The issue is let’s make sure it is the right decision in the end. They don’t have to necessarily push their own view forward but just make sure the right view is the one that they end up going for. And, I think crucially… And this is from my own leadership experience, well, all of this is...crucially, leaders ask for help. Imperfect leaders ask for help. They know they don’t have all the answers. They know they don’t know it all. They have mentors, they get coaching, they get support from outside.

**ANGELA:**

I imagine that acknowledging the need for support is especially important when leaders are on steep learning curves.

**STEVE:**

When I went to be Chief Executive of the National College for School Leadership, I went from running a local authority to being in charge of an organisation with the responsibility for the leadership development of 22,000 schools and 150 local authorities and I had a responsibility to advise the Secretary of State, the Education Minister, on leadership. Well, I’d never even met the Education Minister before, never mind advised him on leadership. So I was well out of my depth. It was a big jump up for me. I would never have managed that job if I hadn’t had a lot of help, if I hadn’t had four excellent mentors, for example, if I hadn’t constantly asked for advice to understand what I needed to do and to welcome challenge, both internally and externally.

And finally, I just wanna say something about imperfect leaders, accept the fact that they might’ve messed up, they might’ve got it wrong on a particular day. There have been loads and loads of times I’ve come home from work, as a leader, and said, “I messed up today. I made a mistake. I got that wrong. I mishandled that conversation. I’m not sure I handled that meeting very well, et cetera.” But if you’re imperfect, you’re concerned about getting it right tomorrow, you accept the fact you got it wrong today and you ask for help to make sure that you get it right tomorrow. So, this notion of imperfect leadership is not something we should be ashamed of. Actually, the best leaders are self-aware, imperfect leaders and that’s what makes them such good leaders.

**ANGELA:**

Steve, looking at your own leadership journey, what mistakes have you made and what aspects of your leadership would you not change?

**STEVE:**

I’m reminded of the song ‘American Tune’ by Paul Simon which says, “Many the time I’ve been mistaken, and many times confused.” And I think that’s a good summary of my leadership! There have been times when as a chair of a multi-academy trust in England I was being pushed out of the role by a government minister who thought that I was the wrong person for the job, and I resisted that, and I became very defensive. And actually, he was right. I should’ve stepped back. I had too much on. And so, I just took it too personally instead of making the obviously sensible decision to step back from that role.

There have been times in my leadership when I’ve tried to implement change too quickly and there have been some casualties sometimes, of people in that situation where I’ve pushed change through a little bit too quickly. But equally, there have been times when I’ve tried to reverse that and pushed change through too slowly and got that wrong too. So, I think leadership is iterative. You kinda make a mistake and you adjust, you make a mistake and you adjust. But what I haven’t got wrong in my leadership and it’s really, really important, is I haven’t changed my values and my principles about moral purpose in leadership, about being authentic and having integrity and at least trying to do the right thing, even if you mess up.

**ANGELA:**

It sounds as though moral purpose is very important to you in your work. What role does it play in leadership?

**STEVE:**

To me, it is fundamental. It’s absolutely fundamental in educational leadership. Education, I think, is a human right. Every child should have a right to a decent education. And I’ve worked all over the world. I’ve worked in some of the most challenging places, in Africa and Asia and in the Middle East. I’ve worked with children who haven’t got a chance to go to school and when they do get a chance to go to school, it gives them hope where they wouldn’t have hope otherwise. So moral purpose is essential.

But even in developed countries and even in more…even in middle class districts, education is still the means by which children have hope for the future and that should be what drives us as teachers and as leaders. And it should enable us, therefore, in putting the needs of children first, it should enable us to take the tough decisions that leaders sometimes have to take. You know, sometimes, we have to have a difficult conversation with a member of staff because they’re letting the children down and we don’t want to have that conversation. We’d rather stay under the duvet that morning and not go to work but we go to work, we have that conversation, not because we enjoy it but because we know we have to do it in the interests of the children and that moral purpose gives us the incentive to, as I would say, walk into the wind rather than walk away from the wind.

**ANGELA:**

Purpose and authenticity are two themes I see emerging here. You’ve worked with countless leaders over your career – who stands out for you?

**STEVE:**

Two people that spring to mind that’ve been a huge influence on me are both from England. There’s a guy called Sir Tim Brighouse who was the CEO in Birmingham but then went on to be the London Commissioner. And he’s been one of my mentors for many years and he’s such an inspiration because he’s able to see the big picture, but he connects with people in the detail. People often couldn’t find him in Birmingham because he was out visiting schools. They expected him to be spending all of his time in meetings and being strategic but actually, some of the time, he was just off watching teachers and talking to school leaders and being out there in the field. And I admire him such a lot for being both inspirational, down-to-earth and strategic.

And the other guy who’s been a huge influence on me and another one of my mentors is Sir Michael Barber, who set up the Delivery Unit for the Prime Minister Tony Blair, in the English government, and his focus on delivery and impact but to do it in a way which is humble and takes people with you, has also been an inspiration to me. So, I would regard both of those two people as geniuses in their leadership, as well as being imperfect, of course.

**ANGELA:**

You’ve been involved in professional learning for schools and early childhood leaders for many years now. What learning for leaders have you seen that’s had the biggest impact on improving student learning outcomes?

**STEVE:**

OK. That’s a great question. Um, one thing I do know is I know what works in terms of leadership development. I know what you need to have in order to develop effective leaders and it’s these five things. And the first one of these is the most important and it’s this – the opportunity to lead. This is the fundamental way you develop as a leader, not by going on a course. You learn by doing, by having a go but that’s not enough but if you want to develop leaders, the first thing you do is give them a chance to lead.

But secondly, they have to have a chance to get regular feedback from a mentor or a coach or a line manager or a colleague that’s honest and robust and regular and systematic so they’re learning through feedback. It’s crucial that we have that. But thirdly, they have to have a chance to see outstanding practice in other contexts, otherwise they may be in danger, in their own context, of just recycling mediocrity. You have to be able to see what other leaders can do in different circumstances so exposure to that is really important.

Fourthly, they need access to the research about what’s working internationally and nationally and locally - so access to research and guidance and materials. And finally, they need to have an opportunity to discuss what they’re learning with their peers. So those five things are at the heart of a great leadership development program. Of course, it could be a program that you’re on, but it doesn’t have to be. It could just be a way of working within your context, as long as you have those five things there.

And the focus for leadership, we know, if it’s going to be about improving student outcomes, has to be fundamentally about improving the quality of teaching and learning and too often leaders can get side-tracked, understandably, in schools, away from that focus but we know that it’s fundamental. There may be other things that you have to focus on initially to get the show on the road and get the school working effectively. But fundamentally, as Viviane Robinson has shown, if you want to have effective leadership that improves outcomes, then leadership should be focused on developing the teachers in their skill at teaching and learning.

**ANGELA:**

So, if you were a leader in school or a network today, where would you focus your energy, Steve?

**STEVE:**

Do you know, I think that’s a really interesting question because context matters hugely. I think it was Dylan Wiliam who said, “In education, everything works somewhere and nothing works everywhere.” So, the issue is not what you should do in any circumstances, it’s under what circumstances would this work here. So, I think it’s very dangerous to say, “You go into a school and this is what you should do.” ‘Cause I think that’s recipe for disaster. You’d probably get kicked out for not understanding the context well enough. So the first thing you need to do, if you’re a leader going into a school as a principal, is understand the context, listen, watch, talk to the parents, the students, the staff, the school board, the region or the local authority, get a good handle on what the issues are and then, in the light of that context, decide what’s right.

**ANGELA:**

What are the kinds of questions that a new principal going into a school or into a network might ask in order to get a deep understanding of context?

**STEVE:**

I think that’s the same, whether that’s a network, a school or a big organisation. You’re going to ask people what they think’s going well in that school or organisation, what the issues are, how they feel about it. You’re going to ask them to say a bit more about themselves so you understand their wishes and hopes and aspirations. And you’re going to make sure you triangulate that so you don’t just listen to the staff, you listen to the parents, you don’t just listen to the parents, you listen to the students,  you don’t just listen to the students, you listen to external stakeholders, the school board or whatever. And you triangulate that in order to make sure that you’ve then got a good understanding of what the issues are.

You know, it’s interesting, when you go to a new school as a principal, people think you should have the vision all set up and know exactly what you’re doing. And it’s true they don’t expect you to say, “I haven’t a clue what to do.” But it’s important also that they share the vision and that’s why this notion of invitational leadership is so important. When I went to the National College and I got all the staff together, I told them a story. I said, “My wife and I heard that the view in Santorini, the Greek island of Santorini, of the blue Aegean Sea and the extinct volcano and the blue sky was one of the most beautiful in the world and so we decided to go and see it for ourselves. And we got off the plane and we got into the car and we were driven to the cliff edge to see this wonderful view and the mist had come down and we couldn’t see a thing. But we knew it was going to be beautiful. We just had to wait for the mist to clear.”

So I said to the staff of the National College, “There are some things I know about what’s going to be great about the National College but it’s a misty vision and I want you to work with me so we can, together, clear the mist and create that beautiful vision.” So that’s that notion of invitational leadership and working together with colleagues to create an ‘own vision’ that everyone is part of.

**ANGELA:**

So, Steve, you’ve had the privilege of seeing and working with a broad range of education systemS around the globe. What excites you about the future of education internationally?

**STEVE:**

Again, that’s a great question. One of the things that excites me so far is the massive increase in access to education across the world, especially for girls. It’s still a huge issue but there’s been huge increases in education and schooling for girls, especially at elementary level and that’s fabulous. I mean, it really means that you are giving hope where there was no hope. But it’s not good enough, even though it’s fabulous, because actually what’s happening is many of them are going to school but they’re having such poor teaching that it’s not helping them. So, the next big step in the global development in the developing world is to move the focus from access to a focus on quality.

Secondly, I’ve been working with Wales, the Welsh. There’s only 205 high schools in Wales so it’s not a huge education system but they’re genuinely attempting to co-construct the policies with school leaders, to co-construct the accountability system with school leaders, spending time with school leaders together to agree the principles of that, for primary schools and secondary schools and doing the same with curriculum and the same with they set up a Leadership Academy and the same with professional development. And I think that co-construction is really interesting ‘cause it’s about power and love at government level and I’m really interested in the way the government itself is modelling for schools the kind of things they want to see.

**ANGELA:**

What does this modelling look like?

**STEVE:**

So schools are being asked to produce a report card and to have their self-assessment reviewed by another school and then to publish an action plan. But the government is doing the same thing. It’s doing a report card for the Welsh education system and it’s getting its self-assessment reviewed by other countries and then publishing an action plan so they’re modelling for schools the processes that they wanna see. I think that’s great leadership.

The third thing I’m finding really interesting is the exciting work I’m seeing about school collaboration and actually, I’m seeing this in Victoria. I think some of the work that’s happening in Victoria on schools and school collaboration is some of the best I’ve seen in the world. And the determination and passion, not just to collaborate but to do it through communities of practice and to focus on improving outcomes for children through genuinely evidence-based approaches I think is very exciting and I’m glad to be part of that.

There’s something else I’m really excited about and that has been the growing focus, not just on excellence and high academic standards in educational systems but on equity, on human rights, on inclusion. And I’m seeing this through especially places like Finland and Canada. But also, I’ve got the privilege to be involved in something called the ARC partnership which involves systems from all over the world. It was founded by Professor Andy Hargreaves, who’s a good friend and colleague of mine. It involves systems from all over the world who are committed not just to excellence but to equity and inclusion, who come together with their ministers and their officials and their professional associations to share ideas and work together in the interests of equity and excellence and I’m really excited about that too.

**ANGELA:**

Steve, you’ve mentioned the importance of collaboration in working towards excellence and equity in education. We know, though, that leaders can sometimes be reluctant to collaborate. Why do you think that is?

**STEVE:**

I think it’s pretty clear that this is a difficult thing to do. If I can use the analogy of a, um…of a fish tank, if you were in a little fish bowl on your own, with a few other fish swimming around, it’s comfortable. You mightn’t like everything about it but there you are swimming around. You know everyone. There’s some stability. And then you’re asked… Instead of swimming around in your little fish bowl, you’re asked to jump into the lake to network with other schools. And there’s some strange fish in there that you don’t know and, er, you have to do some different kind of swimming and different kind of leaping and it’s uncomfortable. So, it’s hard to make that step because it’s unfamiliar and it’s risky.

On top of that, of course, schools are often judged by their performance in their own school, normally by government who hold them to account for how their own school’s doing. They wouldn’t necessarily hold them to account for how a group of schools are doing. So, the accountability which is school-based doesn’t support, necessarily, networking and collaboration. And on top of that, I think there’s a danger, especially in systems where there’s a market of some kind so that parents can choose where to send their children, you find you’re competing with schools that you’re collaborating with and that makes it hard too.

So it’s much safer to isolate yourself, especially if you’re very busy, and most school leaders and teachers are. So, it’s perfectly understandable why people will choose not to network and not to collaborate but actually, it is essential that they do it. It’s essential for two reasons. One is we’ll never improve a whole system if we just focus on our own school. I know of no system in the world that is doing well and progressing in its outcomes for children that doesn’t support school-to-school collaboration and knowledge transfer. Without it, you’ll just get a greater gap between the good schools and the not-so-good schools. You won’t get a whole-system improvement.

So it’s essential for system improvement that we collaborate but in addition to that, just from a personal level if you’re in a school, you may end up not experiencing and seeing what great practice looks like ‘cause that mightn’t be happening in your school. So it’s really important that we network in order to make sure our expectations are high, otherwise we might end up having what’s called ‘groupthink’, where everyone tends to agree and you’re unanimous with what you do in the school but you don’t have enough challenge, don’t have enough grit, don’t have other voices, other opinions, other perspectives. If you wanna be effective, you’ve got to welcome challenge and avoid groupthink. So, it’s really essential, absolutely fundamental that we collaborate between schools because isolation, as Michael Fullan says, “Isolation is the enemy of improvement”.

**ANGELA:**

Steve, you’ve talked about how important it is to not only cope with ambiguity, but to actually enjoy it. What does that mean for school leaders?

**STEVE:**

Yeah, the fact is that leadership is not paint-by-numbers. It’s not like you do this and then you do that and then you do the other. It really isn’t. There’s no rule book. There’s no formula. It’s an iterative process. Unless you can embrace that, embrace the ambiguity, embrace the fact that it’s complex, I think you’ll struggle as a leader. But if you actually enjoy the ambiguity, enjoy the fact that you’re having to wrestle with difficult issues and it’s not clear cut and you have to get different views and you have to work on a challenge and ask for help and think carefully about it and actually enjoy the problem-solving that it creates, then I don’t think you’re going to be as effective as a leader.

And the fundamental thing is this – leadership requires agility, mental agility. I think Simon Breakspear talks about this – ‘agile leadership’. It requires leaders to enjoy complexity and enjoy the ambiguity that organisations provide for you and if you don’t get enjoyment out of that, then I don’t think you’re going to be effective as a leader.

**ANGELA:**

Thank-you Steve. It’s been lovely talking with you.

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