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this month's interview

LISA BROWN

PRINCIPAL OF MERIDEN SCHOOL, SYDNEY

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AUTHENTIC BY DESIGN: LEADING MERIDEN WITH HEART, FAITH AND COMMUNITY.

"You don't have to be perfect to do the role. You just have to be yourself."

For Lisa Brown, Principal of Meriden School in Sydney's inner west, the path to educational leadership was never a straight line.

It was built, step by step, through sport, relationships, and an accumulating willingness to say yes. Her inspiration began with a PE teacher at Cheltenham Girls High School - a passionate educator who lit a fire in a young student that would never quite go out. That spark led to a Bachelor of Physical and Health Education at the University of Wollongong, and then into the classroom in the western suburbs of Sydney.

"A government co-ed school can be a little daunting for a young teacher," she reflects, "but the great thing was that I was given many opportunities." Chief among those early gifts was a mentor: Tim McCallum, then Deputy Principal at St Clair High School, who saw potential in her and encouraged her to pursue postgraduate study.

"I'd never even thought about it," she says, "but he said it would be good for my career." It was the beginning of a pattern. At St Clair, Lisa tried new things, stepped up when asked, and discovered something fundamental: saying yes to opportunities opens doors. That lesson has never left her.

Finding a home at Meriden

In 2004, Lisa joined Meriden School as Director of Sport and PE teacher.

The role suited her well but it held another pivot point. In 2011, she recognised that she needed to stretch beyond the sporting arena. The following year she moved into a wellbeing role as a Year Coordinator, beginning a journey through almost every corner of the school.

"Each one of those experiences has added so much value," she reflects, "particularly now in my role as principal." What she could not have predicted was that a young PE teacher who once found the very thought of principalship terrifying would one day lead the school she had come to call home.

A philosophy grounded in authenticity

Ask Lisa about her leadership philosophy and the answer comes quickly: authenticity. "I can only be me," she says simply. "The strengths and skills that I have are going to be different to the strengths and skills that another principal might have."

That conviction was hard-won. Stepping into the principalship after a predecessor who had led Meriden for sixteen years, the pressure to measure up or to imitate was real. "It took me a little bit of time to realise that actually I don't have to compare. I just have to be me and do it in my way."

Her early reluctance to pursue leadership was rooted in a perception that leaders had to be perfect.

What changed that was a series of female mentors who modelled "realness" in their leadership, women who spoke candidly about the challenges of leading while juggling family and professional demands.

"They helped me to see that you don't have to be perfect to do the role. You just have to be yourself, work to your strengths and understand your weaknesses, and keep on learning." That ethos now shapes how she sees her role. She describes herself not as someone who must have all the answers, but as a facilitator.

"Saying yes to opportunities really opened doors for me. That's what I look for in others too."

Lisa Brown

"It's a real blessing that I get to work in an environment where I can be proud of my faith and actively share it with my community."

"How can I support other people?" is the question she returns to again and again.

Motivation in the everyday moments

On the question of motivation, Lisa is candid. "When you're asking me in week five of term one, it can be a little hard to find," she says with a laugh. But the answer, invariably, comes back to the girls. "I take so much energy out of the students," she explains. "Just being out on gate duty, having girls walking past saying good morning and so excited to come to school, that reminds you of what your purpose is."

Sustaining that sense of purpose also comes from the network of principals she has built. She describes the relationships with other heads as a genuine surprise and a lifeline. "It often feels more like a therapy session than a meeting," she admits, "but I know that I can always pick up the phone." In her early years as principal, a more experienced head served as a monthly Zoom mentor, providing a sounding board through the inevitable challenges of a new role.

Faith as foundation

As Principal of an Anglican school, Lisa's personal faith is not separate from her leadership, it shapes it. "I'm a Christian," she says, "and my faith really does shape how I lead." At its heart, that means recognising that leadership is not about her. "There's something really humbling in knowing that it's not about me. I'm doing this for others." She draws comfort from Philippians 4:13 "I can do all things through him who gives me strength" a verse she returns to in difficult moments.

For Lisa, leading a school where faith can be openly shared is a privilege she does not take lightly.

Modelling what it looks like to live that faith as an adult is, she believes, a meaningful gift to the young women at Meriden.

Leading through challenge

The principalship presents challenges of remarkable variety. But the most significant, for Lisa, have been personal: navigating illness and the death of staff members. "I've needed to lead others and show strength, but also have been experiencing grief of my own at the same time," she reflects. In those moments, her faith provides both an anchor and a reminder that she is not carrying the weight alone.

For the operational challenges, staffing pressures, environmental constraints, competing demands she turns to her executive team. "I have a wonderful exec team and they're very insightful," she says. "Together we really problem solve and have a way of working through most challenges." The value of collective wisdom, she believes, is one of the most underrated resources in school leadership.

Balancing students, staff and parents

Each of the three groups Lisa serves can need something quite different, she observes. But the through-line is clear: the students remain front and centre, even as she recognises that without good staff, their needs cannot be met. "Ensuring the environment supports the staff to work to their best so that the girls can get the best possible opportunities, that's really the goal."

Her own experience as a parent for 15 years has proved unexpectedly valuable. "I've anticipated some of the needs or the frustrations of parents through my own experiences," she says. 22 years in the Meriden community has also given her a depth of relationship she describes as irreplaceable.

A recent encounter in the playground captured it simply: a Year 7 girl, lost with her timetable in hand, walked up to her principal and asked for directions. "I was very relieved that I knew where she had to go," Lisa laughs. "But it doesn't just come naturally. You need to be able to facilitate really good relationships with your community."

Hiring for culture

Lisa is personally involved in every hiring interview at Meriden, and she makes no apology for it. From the first moment of each conversation, she takes the opportunity to set the tone - explaining who the school is, what it values, and where it has come from.
"Culture is just so critical," she says. "You can be the most accomplished and qualified teacher, but if you don't fit the culture of the school, the relationship isn't going to work here." Her favoured technique for revealing cultural fit is an unexpected question: "What's an interesting thing about you that's not on your CV?" It cuts through the nerves of the interview room and shows her something a polished rehearsed answer cannot.

"You see their eyes light up, you see a real relaxation," she says. When assessing leadership potential, she looks for people who say yes. "Every one of those opportunities adds experience to you," she observes. Equally important is optimism combined with problem-solving. "Lots of people can identify what the problems are. Few will propose solutions. And they're the ones who have great leadership potential."

"Adaptable, authentic, occasionally vulnerable and empathetic. Those are the qualities that matter most in leadership today."

Growing professional capacity

Meriden operates a generous professional learning programme, combining whole-school focus days with individual programmes tailored to subject area, role and leadership level. All teachers engage in professional learning conversations with their line managers twice a year: goal-setting early in the year and a reflective reset at its close.

Leadership development has become a particular focus. The school has worked to make training at key leadership positions intentional and systematic, recognising that many people moving into middle management roles may not automatically think they need specific training. "Even just psychologically equipping them with that training can do a lot to enhance their confidence," Lisa says.

Retaining staff through genuine care

Staff retention, she believes, starts with feeling valued. Regular surveys now conducted through the X-Ref Engage platform allow the school to track performance and improvement honestly. "Even when we have room to improve, it's important to report back on those," she says. "It's great for staff to see you acknowledge where there are opportunities to improve and make plans to address them."

Fortnightly morning teas bring professional and operational staff together informally. End-of-term social gatherings foster cross-department relationships. The message embedded in all of it is consistent: "People need to feel valued. They need to be acknowledged. They need to know that people notice."

The ringmaster and the spinning plates

Lisa describes her leadership style as deeply relational, built on relationships, sustained by trust, and guided by the belief that she does not need to know all the answers. "I just have to know the right people to ask."

She is also collaborative in instinct. Having followed a principal who led Meriden for sixteen years, she chose not to imitate but to inhabit the role in her own way. "Mistakes will happen," she acknowledges. "That's just a normal part of life. What we will do is acknowledge when we got it wrong and try to improve for next time." She has a metaphor she returns to when describing the role. "Someone once described it to me as being like the ringmaster of a circus.

No one comes to the circus to watch the ringmaster, but they're the ones who are really directing all of the activities." Within that image sits a second observation: "It's knowing which plate needs a little extra push, and which ones are going along fine. Being aware of what's happening and being responsive when things need it."
In terms of the essential qualities a modern educational leader needs, she offers a short list: adaptability, authenticity, occasional vulnerability and empathy.

"Trying to put yourself in other people's shoes," she explains, "particularly when you're dealing with complex parent situations or staff complaints - thinking, how can I see this from their point of view?"

A legacy of discovery and voice

When it comes to legacy, Lisa approaches the word with care. "If you focus too much on it, you risk leading for the wrong reasons," she says. But if she reflects on what she hopes will endure, the answer is clear: Meriden should be a place where young women can discover who they are and what they are capable of and leave prepared to make a real positive contribution to their communities.

She is equally clear about the staff culture she wants to leave behind: one where people feel genuinely valued, where saying yes to opportunities is encouraged, and where authentic leadership is modelled and celebrated. Running alongside her school leadership is a broader research ambition. Lisa is in the final stages of a PhD examining women in leadership and sport, through which she hopes to contribute something meaningful to how the next generation of female leaders are prepared and supported, not just in schools, but across society.
"I hope the work I'm doing both in schools and in my research can shift the conversation slightly to how we can better equip women to be leaders in the world."

What are you most proud of?

"I'm most proud of the community that we have here and the attitude of the girls. New staff, particularly those joining from overseas in recent years consistently remark on the warmth and gratitude of our students. One teacher, at the end of her very first class, found girls approaching her to say thank you. 'No one's ever thanked me,' she told me.

They are humble, but they're very appreciative. For many of them, they know their parents are working very hard to send them to a school like Meriden. And so there is a real appreciation from the girls about the education they're getting here. That's a culture I intend to keep fostering."

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