



Authenticity, Responsiveness and Purpose

by Peter Langham

Graduation Ceremony for Monash University Arts and Education faculties.

Being recognised as a distinguished alumnus of Monash University is an honour, one that I never anticipated. But one that has led me to privileged opportunities, like this address today.

So, when asked to speak, naturally, I was thrilled and hastily accepted the opportunity, and then I was panicked. What could I possibly share with our graduates that may add value or meaning to your experience today, something that you may be able to take with you as you progress into the next stage of your lives?

As a Millennial, an Information Technology teacher, and an early adopter of the internet, I did what many people in my position would do, I jumped on to Youtube and found some Graduation Addresses that had been delivered at other ceremonies, and of course, that led me to further panic, those speakers were incredible people who had achieved so much and spoke so eloquently. Perhaps some people would hold that view of me.

That process led me to think about what I value most in myself and in the people that I work with, and after much deliberation, I settled on sharing three professional attributes with you today, the first attribute is **Authenticity**.

Being Authentic enabled me to step away from the Addresses that I'd seen on Youtube. More importantly though, as a Principal you are the driving force in setting a culture, authenticity enables you to be vulnerable and make mistakes and it also enables you to be assertive and make decisions.

Across the first 10 or so years of my career I was incredibly fortunate to work under two amazing Principals, whilst I had strong relationships with both, I didn't see myself in either of them and I didn't believe that I could be nearly as amazing as they were.

Being Authentic enabled me to act on the learnings that I received from them, and to be influenced by them, whilst staying true to myself. Whilst in this example, I am talking about Principalship, I was intentional with the phrasing: *"being the driving force in setting a culture"*

Many of you will become teachers, responsible for classroom culture, others will work in teams and be responsible for the culture within that team, all of you, at times in your careers, will be the *"driving force in setting a culture"*. Don't aspire to be a new version of your favourite teacher, don't aspire to be a new version of a previous team leader or manager, be comfortable with putting forward the best version of yourself.

The second attribute that I want to highlight is **Responsiveness**.

Monterey Secondary College, the school that I have led for the past 5 years, is not like other schools. The demographics are unusual and have created a unique set of challenges. Without delving too deeply into it, we have a concentration of students who face intergenerational poverty and intergenerational trauma that is significantly higher than most other settings.

I held very strong views of what a “good school” looked like before I began at Monterey, and Monterey doesn’t resemble those views in any shape or form, but we are unquestionably a “good school”. We have become a good school, a different version of a good school, by being responsive to the needs of our community; building our school to meet those needs.

Many of the greatest feats of engineering and improvement come about due to responsiveness; consider the way our own world has changed in response to the pandemic.

An example within education is the increase in schools that utilise a fully-online model, enabling students from anywhere in the world to access their curriculum and lessons. This change can greatly improve the educational opportunities for students in remote settings as well students with significant mental health or mobility issues that make physical attendance at a school difficult.

The third, and final, attribute that I want to highlight is **Purpose**.

Earlier this week I was speaking with a member of my staff, a 5th-year teacher, and graduate from the Education Faculty at Monash University, who has been thriving in leadership roles for the last few years.

As we spoke, I was reminded of a career-shaping decision that she made when accepting her first position in 2020. On the same day that I offered her a position at Monterey, she was also offered a position at one of Melbourne’s most elite independent schools.

She held and continues to hold, such a strong sense of Purpose, and wanted desperately to improve the outcomes of some of the most complex young people in Melbourne, and she made a decision that very few would. A decision that was tied solely to her purpose.

I choose to share her sense of Purpose rather than my own because I wasn’t driven to Monterey due to a strong moral purpose. But having now served five years as Principal here, I have developed a very strong sense of purpose in addressing inequity in Education and in advocating for those who are unable to advocate for themselves.

I needed to be immersed in such a complex community to fully understand the barriers that some young people face, the impact that those barriers can have, and the incredible transformational power that Education and therapeutic support can have in overcoming those barriers.

I suspect that everyone in this room knows just how important Education is to the life outcomes of all people. However, I wonder, if in rooms like this we can take for granted that without Aspiration, Education will not be accessed.

For a child who is not born into a home where aspiration is fostered, they need their teachers to be more than just teachers;

- they need positive adult mentors,
- they need understanding when they falter,
- they need their confidence built and their eyes opened to possibility,
- they need routine, structure and organisational skills to be developed,
- they need to be seen, they need to be heard,
- they need to feel valued, they need to feel wanted,
- they need to have their most basic needs met.

When we talk about great schools, great organisations, or when we talk about great teachers, they all have a great sense of purpose. I implore all of you to consider your Purpose. It doesn’t

have to be equity in Education, it may be ensuring that all students are highly literate, it may be coaching high-potential sports people, it may be building leadership capacity in young women, it may be captivating minds in STEM, it may be something else completely. Consider your Purpose, and work diligently to ensure that your opportunities align with your purpose. Reach out to schools or organisations that have alignment with your purpose.

They say that if you do something that you love, you'll never work a day in your life. I don't agree with that. I love what I do, and I work tirelessly – but valuing the work that I do because it aligns with my purpose makes the really tough days worthwhile.

In closing, I would urge all of you to remember those three attributes: Authenticity, Responsiveness and Purpose, and I will quickly recap why they matter.

Authenticity is all about **YOU**. Be unashamedly you. Be proud to be you. Present your quirks and your off-centre interests to your colleagues and students, that vulnerability will help others to connect with you and, particularly for our students, they will be able to see themselves in you.

Responsiveness is all about our **STUDENTS**. For those who work in industries other than education, it will be about your clients or your customers. Listen, observe, and be empathetic. The people you serve may not have the language or insight to tell you what they need, but if you're paying attention and trying to imagine what it would be like to walk in their shoes, you will be able to figure it out.

Purpose is your **WHY**, it's what gets you out of bed on the coldest, darkest, winter mornings. It's what pushes you try that bit harder, to resolve that conflict, to "reinvent the wheel" and consider how you might do things differently; do things better; do things to have a greater impact.

You've reached a remarkable milestone today, celebrate this moment because you've earned it.

Congratulations to you all.