

Eight Leadership Maxims

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With acknowledgements to the headteachers and principals across the UK and overseas I have worked with this academic year.

1. Leave them with a smile on their face

Leading schools requires taking important decisions at regular intervals. Getting the right tone with colleagues matters, especially when leaders have to convey difficult messages. There is a real knack to 'telling it like it is', and still leaving the member of staff in good spirits. Accomplished heads manage to get this right most of the time. And learn quickly when they make a mistake. 'It's not what I'm saying that matters. It's what you're hearing'.

2. Less is More

In the face of daunting bureaucracy, wise heads know how to cut to the chase. Emails, reports, letters of complaint, advisory notes, safeguarding updates, financial spreadsheets - the sheer volume of material can threaten to swamp. A hallmark of thoughtful leadership is the ability to sift at pace, with an eye for the important detail. Crafting one side of A4, with the right words in the right order, is practical and accessible for any audience, whether governor, inspector or parent.

3. It's not what's in the diary that kills you, it's what is not in the diary

Headteachers' diaries can be proverbial bomb-sites. Everyone wants to see the head, right now. If you're not very careful, the urgent consumes the important. But with a full list of scheduled diary commitments, along comes something *really* urgent. The best heads have developed creative solutions to potential diary crashes, usually involving a skilled secretary, willing deputies and the occasional 'white lies'. Time juggling is part of the job: live to fight another day.

4. Leaders enable.....managers control

It is a natural inclination early in a manager's career to want to control. You've been promoted so show what you can do. Observing skilled middle managers is

to see them starting 'tight' then being willing to 'loosen'. And it's certainly what great heads do: appoint the right people in the right places, and let them flourish in a climate of measured risk. The average *manager* seeks to control colleagues, while the confident *leader* is quite content for others to shine and to take the plaudits.

5. Easier to beg forgiveness than seek permission

Not every leader subscribes to this principle of management. But show me a great school leader who seeks permission rather than following deep professional instincts, and I'll show you a school which risks faltering. Children get one chance, so no head compromises that basic tenet. But principled and values-led decision making, inclusive of staff and students, creates vibrant teaching and learning communities. Folk don't look over their shoulders and seek permission. They occasionally have to say sorry.

6. A quick 'no' or a slow 'yes'

The old headteacher adage of 'never say yes in a corridor' rings true for many school leaders. Staff often want instant decisions from headteachers - and there's a place for those, for example in certain health and safety contexts. But wisdom suggests that a little time pondering with colleagues will lead to a better course of actions. Judicious timing in headship is crucial, so better a quick 'no' and slow 'yes'. The alternative can be 'command and reverse', a recipe for confusion.

7. An email is a postcard to *The Sun*

In politics, so in headship: timing and communication are everything. Contemporary headship is played out against a backcloth of 24-hour media, Twitter and Instagram. Pupils and parents can turn a petty drama into a crisis at the flick of a thumb. Heads today spend a disproportionate amount of time picking up the pieces of poorly worded emails. Good schools and wise leaders have established clear protocols for all staff when responding to social media. *Caveat emptor* has become *sender beware*.

8. Graveyards are full of indispensable people

Spending time alongside heads in schools, helping them see afresh their daily routines, is endlessly fascinating. The best amongst them stay resolutely focused on the children they serve. Equally, they are highly skilled in identifying the next generation of leaders. Succession planning informs heads' everyday working, nudging potential future leaders to follow their instincts, to believe in their potential, to carve out ways of doing which challenge prevailing orthodoxies.

Blink! Life goes faster than you think. Today's agile school leader remembers Prime Minister David Cameron's parting parliamentary words: 'I was the future once'.
