

## GUEST COLUMN – September/October 2024

### The Stories We Tell Matt Bromley

#### Four school leadership qualities

##### *Energy*

To my mind, school leaders possess determination, plus an indomitable will and passion for success. They show an interest in every aspect of their school, visiting all areas and speaking to all staff as often as possible. For example, standing in the foyer first thing in the morning allows leaders to greet staff, who can then book a meeting later in the day if they need to talk.

Walking the corridors at break and lunchtime and during lesson changeovers can make leaders seem omniscient and give confidence to teachers that they are not alone, that their leaders have got their backs. This requires excellent time management skills, using the diary effectively and delegating where appropriate to protect their precious time.

Shadowing a learner once a term allows a school leader to see their school from the learner's point of view – an invaluable and humbling exercise which can really inform a school leader's actions and priorities. Walking the floor enables leaders to collect stories of success too, and stories can prove powerful tools when enthusing colleagues and inspiring effort.

##### *Enthusiasm*

Great leaders exude positivity, especially when communicating their school's vision and values, and when reminding staff of past success as well as future promise. Such positivity is best communicated through stories which act as 'state of the nation' addresses told in assemblies, staff briefings, professional development events, and open evenings in which a school leader gives a Henry V-style speech. This is where great leaders really harness the power of stories – and utilise the stories they've collected by walking the floor – to flesh out their ideas and hopes and to galvanise and unite people behind an improvement effort.

Great leaders have an intellectual curiosity too, reading widely and sharing research with colleagues. They also lead by example, as a great practitioner where appropriate, but always as someone who loves to learn and strives to know more and be more effective. Great leaders can also be role models by performing well in assemblies, by visiting tutorials and lessons to talk to learners, and by covering

lessons for colleagues to allow them to engage in quality professional development.

### **Hope**

Great leaders display a certainty that their vision will be realised, as if they expect it to be achieved rather than just wish it to be so. They always seek positive change and keep colleagues focused on the process of improvement by telling stories that describe the journey from the past to the present (what have colleagues already achieved?) and from the present to the future (what is their next challenge?).

Hope is also about displaying a boundless optimism and resilience in the face of setbacks. Great leaders can pick themselves up after experiencing a setback, dust themselves down, and keep walking forwards. Yes, they learn from past mistakes rather than airbrushing them out of existence, but they are not deterred by mistakes, regarding them as an integral part of the improvement journey and of growth. They focus on the future and tell stories of recovery and rebirth, of the successes that were born of repeated failure.

### **Kindness**

Great leaders routinely recognise and reward success in a way favoured by each member of staff (some people like public adulation; others melt to a puddle at the mere thought of it). Celebrating others' achievements is an everyday part of what these leaders do rather than an afterthought or rarity. And these celebrations also act as stories of success which inspire others to emulate these achievements and give oxygen to the good and virtuous. Success stories foster a positive culture and a sense of collective triumph. They also keep people moving forwards in the right direction and starve negative thoughts of air, muffling naysayers and nit-pickers.

Great leaders also give quality time to people. Having an open-door policy does not mean being available 24 hours a day, but it does mean being able to meet with staff as soon as possible and listening and responding to what they have to say.

Great leaders are protective of their staff, showing empathy, respecting people's privacy, remembering birthdays, and granting personal leave – without question – when staff have important or urgent personal matters to attend to such as family funerals. They also set as their default position a genuine belief that everybody wishes to do well and will try their best, rather than assuming the worst of people.

But great leaders are also great because they are human. And as humans they are fallible. They make mistakes. They do not always get it right. Do not look to leaders for perfection or expect it of yourself because, where you ostensibly find it, it may mask duplicity or inaction. Instead, look for humanity, for people who are energetic, enthusiastic, hopeful, and kind, and people who are also prone to making mistakes from time to time because they are willing to take risks, to try new things, and to challenge and reform working practices in the hope of improving their provision.

Extract from Chapter 15 of [\*The Stories We Tell\*](#) by Matt Bromley

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