

SPECIAL FEATURE: Autumn 2026

A letter to those who will lead at scale

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~ rooted in a walk around one primary school: Lift Feversham ~

Dear Leader,

You are preparing yourself for one of the most consequential roles in education - leadership at scale, across multiple schools, multiple communities, thousands of children. That is an extraordinary responsibility.

Doctors save bodies. Teachers - and the leaders who shape teachers - save souls. A school that produces excellent results but neglects the inner life of its children and staff has not, in any full sense, succeeded. As you move into executive leadership, you will set the conditions under which thousands of children either flourish or merely comply. That is the weight, and the privilege, of where you are heading.

"As leaders, we are the guardians of the human spirit."

Imagine I have spent my career in the Arctic. I have lived in the North Pole, built igloos, refined the form over years, and I have decades - centuries, even - of evidence that the igloo is the best possible structure for human shelter in that environment. The research is overwhelming. The case is closed.

Now imagine I am posted to the Sahara and told to build housing. If I simply replicate what worked in the Arctic - if I declare that the same structure must be built because it has the strongest evidence base - I will build an igloo in the desert. It will fail, and fail badly, no matter how rigorous the research behind it once was.

Instead, the wiser leader asks: what were the underlying architectural principles that made the igloo succeed? Insulation. Airflow. Use of local materials. Orientation to light. Protection from the elements. Those principles do not change. So in the Sahara, I might build a leather pavilion instead - different in form, identical in principle. Thick woven walls for insulation, raised vents for airflow, local materials, careful orientation to the sun. It looks nothing like an igloo. It is, in every principle that matters, the same structure.

This is the discipline I am asking of you today. As you walk around our school, do not ask, 'how do I copy this exactly?' Ask instead, 'what is the underlying principle, and how would it need to take shape in the climate,

culture and community of my own school?' Separate the core from the cosmetic. The colour of our display boards is cosmetic. The belief that drives why we built them is core. Copy principles, not igloos.

The foundation beneath everything you will see

Everything you observe today - the calm corridors, the engaged classrooms, the quality of relationships, the confidence of our youngest leaders - sits on a single foundation: we have placed the spiritual development of our community at the centre of our culture, not as decoration, but as architecture.

This is not a novel or fringe idea. The very first duty named in the Education Act of 1944 - repeated in 1988, 2002 and 2014 - is spiritual development, ahead of moral, cultural, mental and physical. The current curriculum review speaks of human flourishing, and we flourish only when body, mind and soul develop together. We have simply chosen to take our own legislation seriously.

If you could build a robot that perfectly replicated a human leader's outputs - flawless data analysis, perfect compliance, immaculate reporting - would it have a soul? Would it inspire? Would a teacher walk through fire for it? No.

And in an age of artificial intelligence, the single most powerful and irreplaceable resource any organisation has is the human soul - its capacity for imagination, awe, meaning and connection. Your job, at scale, is to protect and cultivate that resource across every school you lead.

Why this matters now, more than ever

You will already know the data: the United Kingdom records some of the highest levels of unhappiness among 10–15 year olds in the developed world. Anxiety, self-harm and disengagement are rising. But this dissatisfaction is not confined to children. Look at your own staffrooms. Teacher wellbeing, retention, and sense of purpose are in crisis across the system.

A system obsessed only with what can be measured - exam outcomes, league tables, compliance metrics - behaves like a metal detector on a beach. It detects metal. It cannot detect the warmth of the sun, the sound of the sea, or the reason anyone came to the beach at all.

Motivation, joy, curiosity, a sense of purpose: none of it shows up on a dashboard, and so it gets treated as if it does not exist. As an executive leader, you will be the person who decides whether your trust builds only metal detectors, or whether it learns to value what cannot be measured but matters most.

**"Not all evidence is visible.
The fully human cannot always be reduced to data."**

On evidence - and its limits

As you rise into trust-level leadership, you will hear constant calls for evidence-based practice, often drawn from the medical model. That model has given education real and valuable rigour, and I do not dismiss it. But a school is not a hospital, and a child is not a controlled trial.

Psychology, spirituality, life satisfaction, motivation, generational trauma, identity, sense of self - these variables shape every classroom, and they are extraordinarily difficult to isolate, measure or replicate in the way a clinical trial demands. Strong leaders cross-reference evidence seriously. Wise leaders also recognise that the evidence base in education will always be partial, because the human soul does not yield easily to controlled conditions. Lean on evidence. But never let it become the entire foundation. Some of the most important things you will ever notice in a school will never appear in a dataset - and your job is to notice them anyway.

Culture is what you live, not what you say

Culture is not the values on your trust website. Culture is what is actually lived, in every action, interaction, reaction and choice a leader makes when no one is checking. Children and staff do not learn from your mission statement. They learn from what you tolerate, what you celebrate, and how you behave under pressure.

This is why I ask you to build leaders who are thinking, feeling, curious human beings - not compliance robots. A culture built purely on control will eventually destroy the very souls - staff and pupils alike - it was meant to serve. A culture built on lived spiritual and human values will, instead, produce flourishing.

Be a pine tree, not an oak

Picture a magnificent oak: tall, broad, beautiful, dominating the landscape. Underneath it, almost nothing grows. Its vast canopy blocks the light; its roots draw every nutrient from the soil. It is impressive - and it is suffocating everything around it.

Many leaders, without meaning to, become oaks. They are brilliant, capable, indispensable - and nothing grows beneath them, because they have, often unintentionally, taken all the light for themselves.

Be a pine tree instead. Tall, yes - but allowing light through, creating the conditions for an entire forest floor of growth beneath you. Be willing to prune your own overhanging boughs: the tasks, the decisions, the visibility you could release to others but currently hoard. Your success as an executive leader will not be measured by how much you personally achieve, but by how many leaders you grow beneath you.

Leadership at every level

You will see this principle in action today. We give every member of our community a genuine stake in leadership - staff and pupils alike are involved in interviews, book looks, and learning walks, not as tokenism but as real responsibility, real voice, real trust.

Perhaps the clearest example: we pair our Early Career Teachers with subject leaders, shadowing them, growing into leadership from their very first year. During our most recent Ofsted inspection, several of our subject areas were being led, in practice, by ECTs. Inspectors found this almost hard to believe - not because it was reckless, but because the quality of that middle leadership was so strong.

We did not wait for people to be ready before giving them responsibility. We built the team around them, so that responsibility itself became the training ground.

This is what it looks like to create a climate where leadership is not a title reserved for the few, but an opportunity extended to the many, supported by a genuine team around every leader.

Protecting passion, removing fear

If you want innovation, you must first remove fear. We work hard to create a culture of no blame, but learning - where mistakes are treated as data, not as character judgments. Risk-taking and innovation cannot coexist with a climate of fear.

We also actively protect space for our staff to be passionate. We let people follow the projects that light them up, and we act as the safety net beneath them as they take risks. A team that is allowed to be curious, to follow its own intuitions, and to be wrong sometimes, is a team that will eventually get things remarkably right - and stay in the profession long enough to do so.

"The job of a leader is to help others flourish and grow."

Questions to carry with you

As you walk through our school today, and as you step into executive leadership beyond it, I want to leave you with the questions I ask myself, regularly and honestly:

- What does it mean to be human? Do I lead as though my staff and pupils are fully human, or as though they are functions to be optimised?
- What is the true purpose of education - and does my trust's daily practice actually reflect that purpose, or only profess it?
- How do I measure my own success as a leader? Is it solely outcomes data, or do I also measure the energy, joy and wellbeing of the people I lead?

- Do I scan for joy in my team, the way I scan for compliance?
- Do I nurture curiosity, awe and wonder in the adults around me, not just the children?
- Is my organisation grounded in the human soul - the hidden part of the iceberg beneath the visible curriculum - or only in what can be seen and inspected?
- Do I cultivate the inner world of my team: their imagination, their creativity, their capacity to visualise something better?
- Am I treating my team as robots, valued only for outputs - or as souls, capable of far more than any job description captures?
- Am I fulfilling the original duty of education enshrined in our own legislation, whose very first word is spiritual?

As you walk our corridors today, look past the displays and the data. Look for the principles beneath them. Take those principles back with you, and build your own structure, suited to your own climate, your own community, your own people. Do not try to build an igloo in the desert.

Place the human soul at the foundation of your leadership, and everything else - the outcomes, the culture, the results you are ultimately accountable for - will follow as a consequence, not as a substitute.

Go and build forests, not oaks.

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