

Geoff Barton

Keeping the herd moving west

The scientist Linus Pauling memorably said, "The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas." Quite so, and sometimes those ideas ricochet at us from quite unexpected sources. It was during one of our termly meetings with union representatives that someone made a comment about training that most set me thinking. "In what other organisation," he said, "would you wait until the end of a day near the end of a week, get all the staff together for an hour-long meeting and expect it to be dynamic, enthusiastic and happy?" Everyone around the table nodded in agreement and, following a quick staff consultation, we abolished after-school staff meetings.

What a momentous step that seemed. After fifteen years of sitting through (or reluctantly leading) a succession of dreary meetings in various school at which staff shuffled in, sat, counted time till the meeting ended, then bolted for the car park, this felt a liberating step.

It's a reminder of the way institutions often seem to serve the purpose of institutions: we do things in a particular way because that's the way

they've always been done. As Bill Clinton – a man who may not be a role model when it comes to meetings of all types – said: "If we do what we've always done, we'll get what we've always got".

And once you start thinking like that, a lot of the orthodoxies of school life start to fall apart. The rituals disintegrate. Why, for example, do training days have to follow the same format? I remember the novelty of what were once called Baker Days, how unexpected and unnecessary they seemed. Who was he, this heavily hair-gelled Secretary of State, to tell us that we needed to devote time to our own training?

Unthinkably, you realise that for many of our predecessors, training was something that simply didn't happen. You were inspired by a great teacher, you went to university, you came out and did a PGCE, and then you taught in a style that probably replicated the style of that inspirational teacher. That may have been acceptable if you were replicating someone whose style would work across a range of students with different learning styles. More often it meant a kind of educational genetic mutation: the Darwinian passing-on of bad habits. Because my teachers threw board rubbers or yelled down staircases, I could do the same. Too often it legitimised bad practice.

As Professor Michael Fullan rather more eloquently puts it: For too many teachers “twenty years of experience doing the same thing is only one year of experience twenty times over” (Michael Fullan & Andy Hargreaves, What's Worth Fighting for in Your School? Open University Press, 1992)

We’ve all seen the casualties of this lack of investment in the teaching profession, by which I mean a lack of emotional investment by us. It results in the my-chair obsessive, holding forth from their favourite perch, muttering the dark sarcasm of the staffroom, dismissing new-fangled ideas, and rubbishing each new thought as a fad or a flop.

Whilst for many of their reluctant listeners, and in particular new staff, the effect of this can be morale-sapping, tedious, unwelcome, and unnecessary.

Good schools invest in their staff at all levels, and by staff they avoid making a clichéd distinction between teachers and support staff. The nomenclature here is important. I was once at a school which referred to NTPs – “non-teaching persons”. Think about that for a second. Doesn’t it suggest a rather ego-centric version of the world that anyone not deemed a teacher is categorised as not quite existing?

Similarly the terms “support” or “associate” staff may create the sense of a second division team whereas, as we all now realise, it’s this team that can have the biggest, most beneficial, impact on the culture of a school. Therefore let’s think about staff, and stop making often unhelpful distinctions about background and status.

So, how do we get the most out of staff, or – as Professor John West-Burnham puts it – “keep the herd moving west”. Here are five suggestions for culture of dynamic and high quality staff development.

#### 1 Be intolerant of mediocrity

To often school tolerate the mediocre. We put up with litter or graffiti or run-down toilets because we think that’s what schools are like. Not any more. And the same is true of recruitment. In his fascinating study of the top corporations in America, Jim Collins argues that their leaders spend their time getting the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, then the right people in the right seats - and then work out where to drive it.

In other words, our personnel are essential, and the best corporations refuse to appoint anyone if there is the slightest doubt about their credentials and ability. Translated into a school context: no matter how tough the short-term effect may be, whatever the role, don't appoint someone to a job if you know they are not exactly the right person. Be choosy. Build your team. You'll be infinitely stronger for it.

## 2 Rethink training

Of course, we all know the theory that every meeting should be an opportunity for training of some type, but this does strike me as a teeny bit naïve. The only way it can really work is if you have a very clear demarcation of different sources of information and their respective purpose. After all, staff in schools require updates and information for their day-to-day job – notes about new pupils, notification of timetable changes or special events, reminders about deadlines and requirements. The problem is when after-school meetings are clogged up with this kind of thing. We've all experienced that sinking-of-the heart sensation when, as teaching rookies, we've arrived tired at the end of a grin Thursday to a departmental meeting agenda of seventeen items. Emails and departmental bulletins may be useful, but schools thrive on interpersonal relationships. We downgrade these at our peril.

Therefore a disciplined sequence of briefings, perhaps for tutor or curriculum teams, can give an opportunity for bite-size information delivered crisply. Briefings work provided the leader recognises them as briefings: rapid information sessions where there's no space for discussion, just time for quick information. If the ground rules are right, and the chairing self-disciplined, briefings like this can make life easier for staff and, just as important, leave other meetings to serve as training sessions, uncluttered by administrative items.

That, in turn, clears the way for re-thinking those old-fangled concepts, training days. What is it about teachers and training days? We shuffle in in our casual clothes, the message being (presumably) that we only have to dress like professionals when there are students around and that days devoted to our professional development are a kind of no-man's land between real work and holidays.

Worst of all, too frequently on training days we have herded staff into large groups and lecture or berate them way long after their attention span has wilted. With a bitter twist of irony, at least some of these sessions will have been about learning styles or multiple intelligences, whilst

treating the audience as if they were a homogenised and possibly pasteurised herd with no individual needs.

Training days give us an opportunity to do things differently. Why not let some staff visit other schools beyond the county boundary, or work at home, or in groups, or online? Couldn't we develop more grown up and trusting methods of individualised learning rather than the nineteenth century industrial model which has the underlying notion of controlling the workers as a key principle?

### 3 Plan for succession

Jim Collins also notes that the top companies don't go outside for their next choice of leader: they appoint from within. This isn't cosy and inward-looking. It's a sign of a culture that grooms the right people from the earliest stages to have the qualities and skills to take on the top job. Put it like this: when you're next appointing a History or Maths teacher, you may be appointing a Headteacher of the future. Statistically, if figures from the National College for School Leadership are to be believed, we're going to need them, when the current generation of

headteachers retires to the delights of cinema matinees and cheap holiday flights just a few years from now.

That's why we need robust and professional programmes of middle management training in our schools, something more than a monthly meeting over tea and cake to discuss the pastoral system or hear a lecture from the school timetabler.

These are our leaders of the future and they need to get a taste of the reality of the job. I would suggest:

- a guaranteed day or so at a school of their choice, shadowing a senior leader;
- a day's conference reflecting on leadership;
- a course built on case-studies and practical issues;
- an underpinning philosophy of leadership built on the work on great writers like Andy Hargreaves, Michael Barber, Michael Fullan, John MacBeath, David Hopkins and John West-Burnham;
- practical tasks in schools undertaken and then reviewed with others in the 'emerging leadership' group; a mentor; sessions sitting in on the leadership team;

- and as few written tasks as possible, because life's simply too short for that kind of thing.

#### 4 Tap into the expertise of your established teachers

The more you watch great teachers at work – whatever their ages – the more you see that it often comes down to a set of discrete learnable skills. Great teachers obviously have force of personality, inner strength and a natural rapport with students. But they also have skills that can be too easily perceived as intuitive, even genetic. Instead, let's liberate these teachers to be our senior mentors, the people with the essential skills and knowledge to pass on to our next generation of recruits. Get them analysing the skills they use in cross-curricular basics: how they ask questions, respond to answers, avoid asking too many questions, where to stand, how to quieten a group without saying a word, and so on.

These are the attributes of teaching we are supposed to learn through osmosis. So let's speed the process up, using video and simulations, and help our older teachers pass on their expertise to our young rookies.

#### 5 Focus on teaching not subjects

Increasingly subject divisions strike me as arbitrary, cumbersome and distracting. And those are just their good points. They produce students who can apparently produce a graph in Maths but not do the same thing in Physics. They encourage teachers who retreat into their subject expertise rather than recognising that the best teachers are, foremost, teachers and only then subject experts.

Great teachers do the same kinds of things whatever their subject. They know where to stand, how to introduce a topic, how to praise, how to listen, how to interact with young people without ever compromising their integrity as adults.

So let's break down the compartmentalisation of subject-specific training and instead focus on the essential skills all teacher need. Then let's get teachers watching each other in subjects that are related but not the same as the one they teach. Let's get our English teachers watching history and French teachers, and our Scientistis watching Maths and Technology teachers. Let's focus on what they have in common – the essential skills of teaching – rather than what divides them (the shifting sands of subject knowledge).

And if you need to give this more bite, build it into the performance management system. Have, as a first stage in the annual review, an expectation that every teacher will report on three or more lessons that s/he has seen and three or more that s/he has observed. In this way lesson observation becomes part of being a teacher, a natural requirement of the job, rather than something squeezed in at the end of term because there's a light day on cover.

All of which, of course, only begins to scratch the surface of staff development. But the central point, of course, is that our staff are our most valuable resource and that a systematic and creative investment is likely to pay dividends in our own school and for the profession as a whole.

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