

Headteachers

By Geoff Barton

One of the most striking features of being a headteacher or principal is the way all eyes are upon you.

In his autobiography, Delusions of Grandeur, that great headmaster of Westminster School, John Rae, reveals that he would never speak to an audience with notes held in his hand. He required a lectern or table. The reason: he didn't want his audience to see his hands shaking.

This most authoritative of public figures, who endlessly courted the media, even appearing on the BBC's Question Time, reminds us of the symbolic and public nature of the role of headteacher.

In their recent survey of the nature of school leadership, PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC) examined various models of headship in an effort to get us away from the increasingly unworkable 'hero head' approach. When they talked to groups of teachers about the essential ingredients in a headteacher, one of the key messages was that they should be "approachable and visible throughout the school".

It's not just the pupils and the staff who expect to see us stalking the corridors and leading assemblies; we're also under the more distant and equally steely gaze of parents and governors and other members of that ugly but convenient catch-all term, stakeholders.

That's what makes school leadership rather different, I suspect, from running a hospital or biscuit factory. Of course you're expected to set a strategic direction and be adept with budgets, personnel issues and dreary paperwork. But then there's the distinctive mixture of visibility, credibility and authority that the role requires – the expectation of being able to control the lunch queue, quell the riotous class for a cover teacher, break up the giddy crowd at the school gate.

We have to decide whether all of this is ultimately sustainable, or whether the looming headteacher crisis is related to the way the job – from the outside – appears so all-consuming and unmanageable.

The PWC view is that someone from a business background could be chief executive of a school, leaving another key member of the team to focus on issues of standards and curriculum development.

I am, predictably, unconvinced. Since education is our core business – whatever the distractions – then it feels to me essential that at the school helm must stand an educationist.

Equally, if we are to do a good job in increasingly complex times, then something will need to give. It may be that we need to start shifting the expectations of our parents, staff and governors and to show that the old hero head model has had its day. We can't go on absorbing an ever more diffuse agenda because we'll lose our focus on our overriding responsibility.

So it may be that unlike the PCW report we should think about articulating more loudly why heads and principals must be teachers - to remind everyone that schools are centrally concerned with values, relationships and learning.

Let's not sacrifice these by assuming that the head has to take on all the other stuff. Instead let's build our teams of staff and governors to have the broad-based expertise to deal with the plethora of outlying issues.

And let's redouble our efforts to focus our job on that most important and satisfying heart of headship: developing the next generation of pupils and teachers.

5 ways of developing school leadership for a new age

1 Build expert teams:

Talk more of leadership teams, rather than solo heads, combining a complementary range of essential skills. Do the same for school governance, dragging it from an age of enthusiastic amateurism, to head-hunting a strategic board of experts in their field who can give us real guidance in uncharted waters.

2 Develop our future leaders quicker:

We underestimate our new recruits. As they gain their confidence as classroom teachers we need to be developing their appetite and capabilities for school leadership through a range of in-house and national programmes. Many of them are hungry for opportunities.

3 Promote the good bits of headship:

People on the outside guess that it's all stress, conflict and accountability. Let's be more public about the perks and pleasures of the role. Let's wear our angst less publicly.

4 Discuss succession issues openly:

Raise the changing nature of school leadership with governors. Get them to see that, in many contexts, something will need to change in terms of the expectations of the headteacher's role, and involve them in remodelling it.

5 Think globally; act locally

Let's read with bemused interest the reports and recommendations of distant consultants, picking out the bits that may be relevant to us. But then, as with all policy and initiatives, let's do what we think is right for our schools and our students. The single-solution answer for all schools is as alluringly deceptive as it is simplistic. Let's act locally.

6 Rethink governance