

Geoff Barton: Leading Change

I can only hope I'm amongst friends. Whilst others quote the worthy educational philosophies of Michael Fullan, Steven Covey and Charles Handy, I quietly cling to two quotations by Margaret Thatcher. Please – don't stop reading. I realise she may not take up the most space in any Dictionary of Quotations, but two of her remarks to cabinet colleagues have a memorable resonance. I use them with monotonous regularity.

The first is "Don't bring me problems; bring me solutions". As a new, or long-established Headteacher (or Deputy Head, for that matter), a lot of people will make **themselves** feel better by offloading their problems onto you. Simply passing on their frustrations, grievances and bugbears may leave them feeling less stressed, whilst simply adding to your list of traumas. Hence the usefulness of the Thatcher soundbite.

The second is a remark I seem to recall she made to Kenneth Baker, Education Secretary. She encouraged him to announce the introduction of a National Curriculum long before any genuine thinking had gone into how it might work. She supposedly said "Kenneth, never underestimate the power of an announcement".

These quotations are handy when it comes to managing change.

If you've undertaken the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH), you may feel, as I do, that it's strong on vision but shaky on reality. It certainly helps equip you with quackable quotes on values and vision, but is less good at helping you get on top of your school's litter problem. Quite right, many people will say: get the vision right and the rest will follow.

I'm less convinced. In my experience it's the tiny details of school life that make the biggest difference – the levels of day-to-day courtesy are much more significant than the major exclusion, certainly in terms of our morale and well-being.

The best leaders in schools don't simply play the Chief Executive role, locking themselves in their office for hours of strategic thinking. They'll also model the expectations and values of the school, by being on the corridors, in classrooms, and on bus duty.

NPQH encourages us to think that all change is good, that "change management" is a core part of the job. Books and journals are full of grandiose titles about transformation, remodelling and powerfully restructuring everything. Meanwhile in schools we tend to complain about the relentless pace of change, the fact that since (say) 1988 there has simply been an endless spate of initiatives, none of them having time properly to bed in. Actually, I suspect we overstate this. A photograph of a typical classroom arrangement today won't be so different from a photograph taken fifty or even a hundred years ago. In fact, any real changes may only be fairly cosmetic – a whiteboard for a blackboard, a

shirt and tie for a gown, and so on. Intrinsicly, in too many classrooms the fundamental assumptions of learning remain the same – the teacher teaching and the students (hopefully but not inevitably) learning, often passively.

Take most other aspects of our lives and the pace of change is considerably faster. I reckon we'd be unnerved if our dentist's place of work looked the same as fifty years ago. Our supermarkets certainly don't. To illustrate the point, this morning alone I have communicated by email with someone in Texas, ordered online a book I read about in the morning paper (and already had confirmation of when it will be delivered), read that Selby – a town near where I once taught – now has no coal mining industry at all (fifty years ago that was its only major industry), and listened to a digital radio station where the DJs are voice-tracked, so that what sound to me like live links were probably recorded in a thirty-minute session then mixed by computer.

Change, in other words, is a fundamental dimension of modern life, and we delude ourselves in schools by complaining about it. What we've got wrong in the past isn't the pace of change being too fast: it's that we allowed it to be done to us rather than by us. The welter of strategies and initiatives speaks of a Government on a genuine mission to raise educational standards. It speaks too of a teaching profession which has lacked the self-belief and autonomy to make the right changes happen for itself. We have allowed ourselves to be passive recipients and then complained at being treated like passive recipients.

Now, I suspect, that is changing, with the best schools not simply tinkering with change but embracing it wholesale. Specialisation, academies, foundation status, the innovation unit – all of these are no doubt contributing to what we might call a changing culture of change. The bigger catalyst, I suspect, was actually a Thatcherite legacy: the introduction of local management of schools. A generation of headteachers has now enjoyed taking all the big decisions, become ever more irritated with intrusion of any kind, and increasingly determined to do what is necessary to create learning environments based on just that – learning rather than schooling.

As a bit of a change junkie, I have to confess to welcoming all of this. The motivation in my career hasn't been ruthless ambition. More often it has been intimations of boredom. In other words I've applied for the next job for fear of getting bored of what I'm doing now. That's a sign, I suspect, of someone who enjoys change.

So here in the midst of my first five years of headship I can reflect on how we lead change. The 'quick hits' phase is important. As a new head you need to show an appetite for changing something – almost anything – just to establish your credentials. Tweaking the uniform, newsletter format, behaviour rules can all send out the message that you're now in command.

But the bigger issues are inevitably the more challenging ones. From September we're introducing a three-period day. Rather than lessons we will talk of learning sessions, each of 100 minutes. The advantages are significant and well-tested: less preparation for

teacher each day; less for students to carry into school; every session ends with a break, rather than a manic scramble to the next lesson; school will be a calmer, less frenetic place as movement across the site is reduced.

Initiating change is probably easier than managing it. For me, one of the most important stages in the process of re-thinking our curriculum and school day has been to give ourselves a decent time-lag. We have known since the summer of 2004 that the new three-period day will be implemented in September 2005, giving ourselves a year to work towards it.

That's where Thatcher's "Never underestimate the power of an announcement" comes in. Before all the detailed planning and bartering over minutiae takes over, the announcement stage is crucial and symbolic: consultation is over, a decision taken, and here's what we're doing. It focuses the mind and gives impetus to the change-setting agenda.

The real challenge, of course, of our switch to a three-period day will be to ensure that teaching is well-structured, pacy and challenging. If the only reason for clinging on to shorter lessons was to break up the boredom of long lessons, then it's a dodgy argument.

We're now in the thick of detailed planning for a transition to 100-minute learning sessions (we'll dispense with the term 'lessons'); assessing the resourcing implications; driving the agenda on learning styles, pace and variety of tasks; and creating new opportunities for genuinely flexible learning pathways. At the end of the process we ought to see a range of routes for different student populations, the timetabling made simpler by the simplified school day. Some students will continue to study ten GCSEs; others will have a reduced GCSE diet with a day or two following specialist courses at our neighbouring FE college; others will take fast-track courses, including possibly, early AS modules.

More interesting than course content is learning style. We are developing a new guidance programme which will give students a number of options. In due course we anticipate that some students will opt for a delivery model that might give them an initial lecture in a group of, say, 100 at the start of a module; then they'll have independent study time to research and develop their assignment; then they'll attend a seminar to present their findings. Some students will earn, in other words, the right to a mature, independent approach to supported self-study based on their track record. What could be more motivating, or better as a stepping stone to sixth form and university study?

The final stage of implementing change is, for me, the informing stage. It's about keeping people informed of progress towards the desired goal. Our working party on the new Citizenship course we're developing meets every month or so. Its progress – even just tentative ideas which might later be rejected – is always published in the staff bulletin. We want people to know how our thinking is developing. This is important not only from the viewpoint of everyone knowing what's going on. It's also symbolically important –

re-emphasising the long term change that we are working towards, keeping it clearly in the forefront of people's minds.

For me, then, leading change has three essential elements. The quick hits stage demonstrates your capacity to make effective changes happen, however small they may be; the announcement stage establishes the grand vision we're working towards; the informing process keeps staff informed of that vision and the progress we're making towards it.

Of course, in reality, it's always rockier than this, as the emotional temperature of a school rises and falls in response to the rhythms, stress and challenges of different stages of the term. But despite the buffeting we can feel from everyday events and unexpected crises, what has to be stated is that change is inevitable and non-negotiable, and let's not be so naïve as to think that every other organisation isn't also wrestling with significant change. As the racing driver Mario Andretti famously said, "If you feel in control, you're not going fast enough".

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