

Leading during a Pandemic

"My leadership development program never prepared me for this" (quote from a school leader on twitter)

As a leader, I have had to deal with many challenges in my career, including dealing with gangsters, the aftermath of the murder of children and the death of members of staff. But I cannot think of anything in my whole career that even comes close to requiring the amount of bravery and dedication that I am seeing now from teachers, from school leaders and from others in public service all over the country in these unprecedented times.

No development programme can possibly prepare leaders to help them to deal with the current issues and challenges that they face. We are in uncharted territory. Evidence-based strategies that can tell you which actions are likely to be more effective just don't apply. The impact of the Covid-19 virus means that leaders in education and in other essential services are being required to make decisions that could save or endanger hundreds of lives - often with very little guidance to help them. Many are feeling scared, isolated, stressed and overwhelmed but every day they are going to work and showing the leadership that is needed from them.

In 2010 I made a speech on Servant Leadership. I said that servant leaders don't ask themselves "what kind of leader do I want to be?" they ask themselves "*what kind of leadership is wanted of me*". They lead with moral purpose. They see it as their fundamental duty to do everything in their power to act in the interests of those they serve- in our case, children, young people and their families". I have seen this demonstrated over many years in all kinds of schools and settings across the world but in my whole lifetime I have never in education and in other essential services seen such selflessness, such courage and such service from so many.

We are all imperfect leaders and at times like this I think we have to do three things:

- 1. Demonstrate optimism and resilience in bucket loads, even if we are struggling inside.** If we appear negative and cynical or if we come across as a quivering wreck then that makes it so much harder for those we lead and for those who rely on us. We are the best that we can be because that is what people need us to be. At times like this, when there is nobody else, the job of leaders is to be there -to get up the next morning and go back to work – because nobody else can do this and it is down to us. At this moment our future is in the hands of health workers, delivery drivers, shop workers, cleaners, social workers, care home workers, teachers and leaders. Unsung heroes whose songs we- all of us - should now be singing.
- 2. Ask for help from others and don't think that we can do this on our own.** Nobody has all the answers but talking things through with others or asking for help or reaching out is essential if we are to get through this. It has been great to see leaders in the system reaching out, offering help and support and doing all that they can, albeit from afar via social media, newspapers, television and radio. And it has been inspirational to see leaders genuinely asking for help from their teams and from colleagues elsewhere and receiving it with generosity and kindness. Most of all, at this time, we will also need to ask for and value the support and care from our loved ones and friends.
- 3. Trust in our instincts, hold true to our values and make the best choices and decisions that we can, even if we sometimes may get it wrong.** What matters most of all in these

situations is that we are authentic and true. Leadership is a task with humanity and authenticity at its heart. Our brave leaders of our essential services may have doubts and worries but they are currently the bearer of our countless hopes and expectations.

None of us were taught how to lead in a pandemic and it isn't on any leadership development program. But what we can do as leaders is to show up, with optimism and resilience, to reach out and ask for help and, most of all, to do what is right and to "stay true". As one school leader tweeted: *"We are solid! We will look after our colleagues, our kids and our communities. We feel privileged to be able to serve"*.

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