

# Passionate leadership

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## Passionate leadership

Passionate leadership is about energy, commitment, a belief that every child can learn and will learn, a concern with social justice and the optimism that we can make a difference. It takes leadership from the realm of a role or job to one of an abiding drive to enhance children's learning and children's lives. What is it that makes some leaders so passionate about their leadership role that they inspire their staff and transform children's lives?

Passion is often seen in terms of a passion for social justice, passion for learning, passion to make a difference. It is the passion to make a difference that turns beliefs into reality and is the mark of deep leadership. Beliefs are statements or views that help us set our personal views and experiences into context. Passion works on the emotional side of leadership. Bolman & Deal (1995: 12), in their inspirational book *Leading with Soul* emphasise the emotional side of leadership:

Heart, hope and faith, rooted in soul and spirit, are necessary for today's managers to become tomorrow's leaders, for today's sterile bureaucracies to become tomorrow's communities of meaning . . .

Passion must be the driving force that moves vision into action. Bennis & Nanus (1985: 92–3) use a now classic definition to argue that the creation of a sense of meaning is one of the distinguishing features of leadership:

The leader operates on the emotional and spiritual resources of the organisation, on its values, commitment, and aspirations . . . leaders often inspire their followers to high

levels of achievement by showing them how their work contributes to worthwhile ends. It is an emotional appeal to some of the most fundamental of human needs – the need to be important, to make a difference, to feel useful, to be part of a successful and worthwhile enterprise.

Passionate leadership establishes a set of values and purposes that underpin the educational process in the school. Most significantly it is the individual passion and commitment of the leader that drives the values and purposes into reality. Values without implementation do little for the school. It is in the tackling of difficult challenges to change and improve, often by confronting unacceptable practices, that passionate leaders show their educational values.

What skill does deep leadership require to translate passion into reality? How can we capture that unique leadership ability to change all those around them by their undimmed optimism and deep value system to meet the challenges of day-to-day management and rise above it with passionate leadership?

After 1988 which ushered market forces into education, head teachers were for a few years encouraged to be managers or chief executives. It was their job, so they were told, to manage the introduction of the National Curriculum and demonstrate they could manage functions formerly carried out on their behalf by the local education authority (LEA). They were suddenly, if indirectly, exposed to the prevailing management wisdoms of the business world. By the mid-1990s, however, a few LEAs were encouraging head teachers to 'lead' their schools on a journey of improvement. To do that

successfully would require a focus on what went on in the classroom. The incoming Labour government of 1997 seized on and encouraged this focus even though they mandated on schools a plethora of change which required considerable management as well as leadership skills. By 2008 the accountability culture has become oppressive with targets and delivery of 'shallow learning' as demonstrated by the testing culture seriously damaging 'deep' educational purpose and understanding. How do head teachers in this culture manage one side of the coin which is to deliver targets and the other to be passionate about education and the enhancement of human potential? We argue that passion survives and prospers and is a moral driving force in ensuring children becoming all they can become. That brings us to the other thing about our definition of passionate school leadership – for us it's a passion to change things for the better, a passion with a moral foundation. In reading this paper we hope that leaders in education will use it to reframe and reignite their own passion for learning and education which is at the cornerstone of all they do. What do passionate leaders do? We would like draw some of these ideas together as follows.

First, passionate leaders articulate the vision. Passionate leadership is about a deep-rooted belief in better opportunities and alternative outcomes. The ability to conceptualise those new futures and communicate them in a clear and concise way is vital. A vision should connect to the reality of the individuals in the organisation's current experience as well as the hope and aspirations for the future. In essence it has to connect to the heart as well as the head. The ability also to convey both the sense of importance and urgency of the journey to new and better futures is critical. It will only happen of course if others have faith and trust that the leader can achieve the change and that all those in the organisation are involved in this process and its outcomes so they can commit to the vision.

Second, passionate leaders share the values. They move beyond the vision and mission statements and not only articulate values in written statements and programmes but also in their everyday speech and interactions. Invitational leadership highlights how each and every person is valuable and important. In the educational publishing world we are immensely saddened by the series of books entitled *Getting the Buggers to: . . . 'learn' . . . 'do their home work' . . . 'read'* and so on. Is that how we think of children? Are they not unique creations with individual capabilities?

How passionate leaders talk about children, colleagues and the school demonstrate their deep-seated values. How values are expressed and lived in day-to-day speech is vital if passionate leaders are to create a shared sense of moral purpose.

Third, passionate leaders set examples and standards that are possible. They convince people, by their personal standards, of what can be achieved and they behave ethically. They set clear goals that are achievable and encourage students and staff to meet them. They move beyond glib sayings such as 'raising the bar and narrowing the gap'. This year, standing outside the Olympic museum in Lausanne, one of us walked under the men's high jump bar (set at the record height) – he certainly could not jump it and raising it would not be an incentive to try! So what are achievable and meaningful success criteria? Setting targets so that 85 per cent of our children can be above average shows little understanding of the mathematical concept of average! Better that 100 per cent of our children can achieve their individual learning targets.

Fourth, passionate leaders are committed for the long term. They build in sustainable approaches to learning and organisational development. They have a belief system that all children can achieve and that all children will achieve. Data is a key factor here. We would prefer the expression 'data informed' to 'data driven'. Data driven suggests that we react to short-term numerical results and bend all our efforts in that direction. Data informed means we use quantitative data as indicative information but also balance it with qualitative insights about a child's many talents. Information and judgement are necessary to build a holistic picture of a child's progress in order to develop strategies and approaches to enhance deep learning.

Fifth passionate leaders care. They care in a positive way – 'care to make a difference' and 'care to challenge'. They care for the person and support pupils' teachers and parents in their roles as individuals and in their educational roles. Care can be considered as 'soft' and 'easy going' but real care both looks after the person as an individual and challenges their performance, attitude and commitment. Moving from a comfortable and adequate environment to one of high achievement and challenge often involves personal and professional challenge. That takes courage not to accept the status quo. Moving from a 'cruising' or 'strolling' school to a high-achieving school can be as difficult a journey as moving from failure to satisfactory.

Thus passionate leaders are courageous leaders, because they have the courage to challenge. This is a major factor in turning passion into action.

Six, passionate leaders celebrate. They celebrate achievements and success in the broadest sense. How, individuals learn, socialise, contribute to society and make moral judgements are all areas for celebration and recognition. Believing that learning and education is hard work as well as enjoyable and fun is part of the positive outlook they develop. The culture of the school should be bringing out the best in everyone and celebrating when we do so. Passionate leaders create ceremonies and traditions as formal means of celebration. Most significantly in their daily acts of recognition and kindness they celebrate their colleagues' and students' achievements. How we engage in the learning journey as a process of commitment and passion should be a major reason for celebration and success.

Finally, passionate leaders are driven because it matters – it matters to them that they make a difference!

## Acknowledgement

This paper is drawn from Brent Davies and Tim Brighouse, *Passionate Leadership in Education* (London: Sage, 2008).

## References

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