

## **Resilient leadership: why moral purpose isn't enough**

We all know about moral purpose. It's what drives the best school leaders; it's what allows them put students' needs first without distraction; it's what helps them to stride forward into the storm with determination, when the winds of change are against them and others are running for cover.

Did I say 'the best school leaders?' I'd like to revise that. Moral purpose is what drives most school leaders. Over nearly 20 years of working with them, I've met only a handful who didn't seem to have a strong moral purpose at the heart of everything they did. The most effective school leaders are also resilient; a small number of these cultivate resilience – in themselves and in others.

'Resilience' has crept into leadership vocabulary without much introduction. The competencies which underpin the National College's modular leadership curriculum include 'resilience and emotional maturity' defined (in part) as managing and recovering from setbacks, yet few leaders take time to develop and sustain their own resilience. My interest in the subject has prompted me to investigate why some school leaders are more resilient than others, and what can be done to develop and sustain emotional resilience, whatever the starting point.

Why *emotional* resilience? Because when our emotions over-ride our reason we can feel overwhelmed and unable to make decisions. While we are in control of our emotions, we act rationally. When emotions run high, the amygdala (sometimes referred to as the brain's alarm bell) is easily triggered and our emotional response precedes rational thought. ('Is that a burglar I can hear?' – thumping heart 'no, it's the cat' – calming of heart-rate).

Attempts to alleviate stress through the 2003 workforce agreement have failed. Eighty-five percent of headteachers who took part in an NAHT survey in 2009 had experienced work-related stress, and twelve percent of those had taken time off work because of it. If we are to understand why some headteachers remain apparently little affected by the pressures of the job while others are weighed down – sometimes to the point of illness or resignation – it is emotional resilience we must explore.

In order to find a little more about individual reactions, I carried out an online survey in three local authority areas. Ninety-eight percent of those who answered the questionnaire agreed that emotional resilience is 'very important'. Less than 30% were able to identify particular strategies that they use to sustain their own emotional resilience, though more could talk about how they sought to strengthen the emotional resilience of their pupils.

Analysis of the responses by time in headship (up to 3 years, 3+ to 10 years, and 10+ years) showed that those who had been in headship over 10 years were less likely than others to look after their health and wellbeing, less likely to acknowledge their own achievements and more likely to worry that they aren't 'good enough'.

The questionnaire responses guided my agenda when I subsequently conducted confidential in-depth interviews with 6 serving headteachers whose experience ranged from 5 months to

twenty-seven years. All highlighted dealing with personnel, safety or child protection issues as capable of undermining their emotional resilience. All referred to the isolation of the role. Beyond that, responses varied: having responsibility without full control; the need to be resilient for others; being a target for the projection of others' anger or anxiety; workload and public accountability were all mentioned by more than one interviewee. Three headteachers referred to the importance of keeping themselves healthy, taking regular exercise and taking time out. Two of those acknowledged a connection between taking care of themselves and being at their best to lead the school. One of the interviewees acknowledged that she had ignored signs of stress, and paid the price, being forced to take time away from school, and another feared that a viral infection was indicative of additional pressure, and chose to ignore it. Focusing on their own needs did not come naturally to these headteachers.

The interviews allowed me to explore in some depth what leads headteachers to respond differently to their role. All displayed strong moral purpose. All are subject to the demands of their community, the pressures of public accountability and constant messages from the UK government via the media that the education system is failing young people. Some felt Ofsted to be a pressure, and feared a negative judgement, while others saw themselves as accountable primarily to the community. The most important thing to the latter group was that they were true to their own values. How far were they able to be themselves in the role? Responses were on a continuum from the headteacher who felt he was someone completely different (and far less likeable) at school to the one who was quite clear 'I am who I am'. The strain of behaving out of character inevitably takes its toll.

When I talk to headteachers, most know the theory of what sustains people in a stressful role.

- Pay attention to your physical needs: eat regularly, have a healthy diet, take regular exercise, get enough sleep
- Make time for interests outside of work, so that it does not become your only means of expressing or validating yourself
- Engage in work which aligns with your values
- Acknowledge and celebrate your own successes
- Acknowledge and accept your own vulnerability
- Be prepared to settle for 80% perfect when appropriate, rather than spending increased effort for decreasing return

From the research and my own experience as a coach, I know that a number do not act on this knowledge. Those who have tried and failed to sustain these habits need to look deeper. For this group, the very strength of their drive to 'make a difference to the lives of others' becomes a useful distraction from looking at themselves.

At its simplest, emotional resilience is the ability to sustain activity involving emotional connection without being overwhelmed. To sustain or cease activity requires energy, hence taking care of physical wellbeing is important. Energy alone is not sufficient: it must be purposefully directed (We all know about headless chickens!) so a sense of agency is required to make choices which sustain energy. It is difficult to sustain a sense of agency without energy. When energy is directed purposefully, a virtuous cycle is set up where agency and energy support and strengthen each other, and increase emotional resilience.

However our ability to make choices and stay true to ourselves is affected not only by energy and agency, but also by our own beliefs about ourselves. Talking of her early headship experience, one headteacher commented ‘everybody wants a piece of you.’ A school leader who believes it is always right to put others’ needs first will find it difficult to find time to look after him or herself while setting aside the constant demands to look after others. In colluding with others’ expectations that s/he is there to meet their needs, the unhelpful behaviour is reinforced. Our ability to accept ourselves unconditionally (whether or not we are meeting the demands of others) is influenced by our early experiences, our environment and our bringing to conscious awareness our adult sense of self-worth. When they know the theory and constantly avoid putting it into practice, it is here that leaders need to focus their attention if they are to establish habits that sustain emotional resilience.

School leaders are highly visible. What better container for the anxieties and insecurities of society concerning future generations, than the authority figure of headteacher, common to anyone who has ever attended school? So it becomes easy for those who worry about their own performance to pick up these projections and carry them as their own. It is possible to change these habits and become more emotionally resilient. It takes time and self-compassion. Initial steps might include:

1. Find someone impartial with whom to share your darkest fears; someone who will be in your corner, does not have to put the needs of the school first, and will help you gain perspective.
2. Undertake your own ‘risk analysis’. When are you most likely to be draining your emotional bank account? Add credit ahead of time by doing something you enjoy

which grounds you and gives you a sense of perspective. One headteacher I interviewed talked about sitting in the Reception class for half an hour when things became too much. Ask someone to hold you accountable for crediting your account. If left to your own devices you may find yourself too busy.

3. Remind yourself why you took on the job and reflect on your successes. Regularly list the good things that have happened. Practice noticing.
4. Educate your governors and peers (and yourself if necessary): you are not superhuman and need time to refuel.
5. Listen to your body. When it's telling you to stop, take your foot off the accelerator, or hand over to your co-driver. You can't do it all.

The director of a publishing company I worked for recognised that he had a duty to his authors to be available to them. He also knew that responding to **all** their demands could distract him from keeping the main thing the main thing. 'My first duty to my authors is to keep the company in business' he would say.

The first duty of school leaders is to keep themselves 'in business' so that they can give their best selves to the running of the school.