

Inner and outer tears

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April 2021

Mark Carney, former Governor of the Bank of England, was at the epicentre of the 2008 financial crash. He reflected recently on the global banking system's response, concluding that all the lessons of crisis management were applied. Humility. Responsibility. Resilience. Solidarity.

Working alongside, advising and swapping stories with leaders in the education and charity sectors over the past twelve months, I find these four words resonate.

Humility

Leaders have won followers' trust by saying and writing that they don't have all the answers, and that even an answer they have offered may not with the wisdom of hindsight prove to be the right one. This was especially in evidence amongst school leaders in the early stages of managing the pandemic.

'I think this action is in the best interests of the children', wrote one headteacher in a parents' newsletter, 'but events in the next couple of weeks may prove me wrong.' Parents were overwhelmingly supportive of that professional honesty in a period of local and national uncertainty.

In another context, I have read the weekly newsletter to all staff from the CEO of a large and complex organisation. Its tone is unfailingly positive, realistic and measured. The text reminds employees of their first duty to themselves and their families, and their second duty to the organisation and its obligations. The balance of advice, encouragement and news about what's happening across the business never wavers. The CEO's humility shines through and inspires an entire workforce.

Responsibility

Senior professionals in the education system have risen to their responsibilities with courage, compassion and an unfailing commitment. I have seen the outstanding collaboration of Directors of Children's Services and Directors of Public Health, acting promptly and inclusively under extraordinary time pressures.

Equally, leaders of multi-academy trusts have taken bold decisions in consultation with headteachers to take food, books, internet access and laptops to homes, especially responding to children living in conditions not conducive to engaging with the online learning provided by their teachers. (The case has surely been made this past year for universal, affordable and fast internet access as the fourth utility.)

Leaders in the voluntary sector too have been fleet of foot, continuing to work with hard-to-reach families during school holiday periods. Innovative ways of working have been forged.

Resilience

As social animals there can be few of us who have not shed inner or outer tears during the past months of unparalleled loss of personal liberty. The safety announcements on aircraft remind us to fit our own oxygen masks before those for our children.

I have been on enough zoom calls with leaders at ends of day and early evening to recognise that they have been struggling at times to put their own wellbeing first. Most of the time they have, demonstrating reservoirs of resilience.

One evening stands out: a group of headteachers holding an 'in memory' zoom call following the sudden death of one of their peers. They drew on one another's resilience for collective strength in dark times.

Solidarity

Education leaders in the UK and across the world have experienced similarly and differently the impact of the pandemic on their local communities. I have joined virtual lessons in Dubai, Shanghai and Delhi to find students and teachers in international schools thriving on blended learning. And online sessions in areas of the UK with poor bandwidth leading to fractured learning.

Recently in this country all children have returned to schools with teachers identifying a diverse range of 'gaps and gains'.

Leaders are reflecting on how best to address those gaps and gains. The past year has reinforced the habit of collaboration as never before. Solidarity amongst system leaders has meant not just survival but being in a position to flourish ahead. The best leaders have never lost sight of the strategic, even when immersed in crisis management.

'You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.'

In the wake of the 2008 financial crash, Mark Carney recalls the imperatives of investing in innovation, valuing the future, and being prepared to take action in the event of any future failures.

That's not a bad agenda to take education leaders forwards into the summer.