

GUEST COLUMN - January 2022

Lead as yourself Samantha Smith

When I was starting as a headteacher, I was given the advice, *Remember to lead as you.*

This is a most valuable piece of advice and one I often return to. And it has never been more important than in the past two years, when we have all been asked to give more than we ever thought we would.

What does it mean to lead as yourself?

To me, this means to bring all of myself to the job of headship. To know that who I am matters as much as what I know or what I do. Education is a people business. Each moment of school leadership involves an interaction with another person.

- A conversation with a Year 6 child who has had their school journey postponed because of a Covid outbreak in the school.
- A few minutes with a parent who works for the ambulance service and feels like she is at breaking point.
- A staff training event to remotivate and inspire your team to move forward towards excellence at the start of a new academic year.
- The 'initial call' with an OFSTED inspector on the 10th day of the academic year.

How you are in each moment, during each interaction, creates the culture and ethos of the organisation. My personal experience is that this is more easeful if I remember to be me. This may sound obvious, but so often, as a school leader or a class teacher, we are asked to inhabit a persona. We compartmentalise and keep our teacher self separate.

The events of the past 24 months have shown me that this no longer works. Leading through Covid-19 has meant that I have had to make decisions that impact the health, safety and wellbeing of the community. The teachers in our school have

taught virtually in the children's homes and been the person families turn to when life has become too difficult.

The idea of holistic leadership

Holistic is defined as 'relating to or concerned with complete systems rather than individual parts'.

In terms of school leadership, this could be seen as using the right tools and approach at the right time as opposed to sticking with one tried and tested solution which is seen to be right or the best.

In order to enact holistic leadership, you need to have access to a wide range of skills and knowledge so they can be used in the situation that arises. This is about continuing to read and learn about teaching and leadership. Visiting other schools which do things differently, either in the UK or internationally. Maintaining my professional curiosity through accessing networks and thinkers who make me question my own approach.

As important, is to be fully present at the moment when you need to act or make a decision.

What does this look like?

This is where the advice I was given at the start of my career comes into play. I have found that if I have kept balance in my life, which may be as simple as making time for family or a walk by the ocean, then when I need to lead, I am able to do so from a place of strength and integrity. If ever I am in a dilemma about which action is right, my check and balance is to decide whether I am truly comfortable with the action or decision. In effect, to make the decision as me. In so doing, it is not a decision I can 'blame' on my job or role.

This has led to my making better leadership decisions which lead to a stronger culture and ethos in the school.

The personal impact of this is that after 13 years of headship, I still love my job. I know that I have given my best and will continue to do so. I know that I have done the job as me!

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