

A New Year's resolution for leaders: prevailing scepticism

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A new, predictably unpredictable decade begins. The German poet Goethe wryly observed that everything has been thought of before - the challenge is to think of it again.

For the past several years, my own thinking and writing about excellent schools and colleges around the world has focused on their 'deliberate restlessness'.

Toto Wolff puts this feature differently. He calls it 'prevailing scepticism'. Wolff is the unassuming boss of the Mercedes Formula 1 Team who have won an impressive 87 of the last 118 Grand Prix.

He made his fortune in finance and tech start-ups before investing in Williams F1. He joined Mercedes in 2013 and revels in the ethic of teamwork. He talks of an array of experts that Mercedes has available: mindfulness trainers, nutritionists, doctors and so on. Wolff says he hunts for success in the depths of the human psyche: 'I take the greatest enjoyment and purpose by giving my people an environment where they can thrive'.

School and college leaders frequently reach for comparisons with and inspiration from the world of sport. Matthew Syed is widely known for his book 'Bounce' - and his 10,000 hours of purposeful table tennis practice with friends and a coach in a modest garage, leading later to victories on a world-stage.

'Legacy' by James Kerr interrogates and champions the secrets of the All Blacks and their legendary team spirit. Ed Smith's 'Luck' covers a range of sports and analyses what-ifs, probability and those factors which lie within and beyond the athlete's control. Smith concludes that 'luck is what happens to me that is outside my control'.

Much can be learned by education leaders about marginal gains, strategy and motivation from a wide range of sports. What I find singularly compelling about Wolff's arena is that, as he observes, it takes a team of 200+ dedicated workers to put champion drivers Lewis Hamilton and Valtteri Bottas on the track.

As in schools and colleges, it is the Formula 1 back-room staff who are as important as those we watch in awe changing a set of wet tyres in 3.2 seconds. For every Mercedes team member we see in action beside the track in Bahrain or Singapore or Monaco, there are three back at HQ in Brackley. For every computer screen track-side, there are a dozen in the factory.

I have defined excellent schools and colleges as ones which 'deliver superior performance and have a high impact over a sustained period of time'. Amongst the many ways in which they practise 'excellence as standard', these organisations display five special characteristics.

1. There is an unequivocal sense that a 'we' not an 'I' culture prevails.
2. Leaders are very focused on eliminating in-school variation.
3. A never-too-late mentality is coupled with a sense of urgency at the right time.
4. Timely communication of the highest quality pervades.
5. Leaders know that innovation lies both within and outside the organisation.

The Mercedes team's progress and achievements over the past six seasons are rooted in a similar cocktail applied to Formula 1 racing. Just watch this from Ferrari (Mercedes's principal competitor) if you need persuading:

[Formula 1 Pit Stops 1950 & Today](#)

So - the New Year resolution is: *practise prevailing scepticism*. If you practise it already, just touch the professional refresh tab for this new decade.

Further reading

Bounce by Matthew Syed

Legacy by James Kerr

Luck by Ed Smith

The Restless School by Roy Blatchford