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Leadership messages Joe Roberts

At a school I once worked in, we had a phrase that every member of staff understood: “Is it a door-open or door-closed day?” Over time, it became more than just a saying - it evolved into a shared gesture, a quiet code woven into our daily culture. Everyone knew its meaning.

If the headteacher’s office door was propped open, it signalled approachability, warmth, and a readiness for conversation. But on the days when the door was firmly closed, no words were needed. Staff instinctively kept their distance, sensing it was a day to tread carefully and give space.

It was a small thing - just a door, really - but it spoke volumes. Without ever being formally discussed, the entire team learned to read the emotional temperature of the day from that simple cue. It was leadership messaging in its most subtle form. I was never brave enough to ask if it was intentional.

As the leader of an organisation, you set the tone and shape the culture every single day. The old phrase “*heads make the weather*” is well worn because it is true.

Whether you intend to or not, you are communicating constantly. People observe you - consciously or unconsciously - from the moment you enter the building. They notice your tone, study your mood, and interpret the interplay of expression, word choice, and posture. They remember how you made them feel far more than what you said. You are the constant influencer. You are being watched.

Behavioural science reminds us that humans form judgements in seconds. A chin lifted a fraction too high can read as arrogance rather than confidence. Eye contact held for longer than three seconds can imply aggression, dominance or even lust. And when someone’s words and body language don’t align, we instinctively sense that something is off, we smell a rat.

Even the subtlest signals - whether we try to hide them or not - reveal far more about our internal emotional state than we realise. Our gestures, posture, and facial expressions betray our feelings long before we speak.

Yet how often do we pause to consider the messages we're sending - and the impact they have on others?

In a school environment, where interactions happen cheek-by-jowl and at pace, this heightened sensitivity matters enormously. Communication is constant, rapid, and often emotionally charged. Across the hundreds of micro-interactions in a busy day, the messages you transmit shape how others behave. A raised eyebrow, a clipped reply, a weary sigh - each can shift the emotional climate of a corridor or staffroom. We have all felt the sting of a dismissive glance, the deflation caused by a smirk of disdain.

I once heard someone ask, *"Do you light up the room when you walk in - or when you walk out?"*

It's a question every leader should pause to consider. Even the rhythm of your walk - the hurried stride versus the calm pace - sends a message. Some sage once suggested humming *Moon River* while walking the corridors, because it is almost impossible to rush to that tune. It slows your pace, softens your mood, and gently changes how others experience you.

Your messaging sets the emotional temperature. It influences the energy in the room - emotional contagion in action. Ultimately, how you communicate sends out ripples that shape how people feel.

The signals we send carry immense power - power that can build trust, safety, and belonging, or quietly undermine all three. These micro-behaviours accumulate. They shape how others feel and how they behave around us. When leaders recognise the influence carried in these small moments, they can harness that power deliberately, cultivating a culture aligned with their values and aspirations.

This is why intentional communication matters. We must ask ourselves: How deliberate are we in how we behave? Do we consider the influence we have on those around us? Are we so focused inward that we forget to view our actions from someone else's perspective? The uncomfortable truth is this: it's never about what we say; it's about what others receive.

People often say that culture is king, but culture does not appear by accident. It begins with the messaging from the top. When leaders behave with intention and remain mindful of the signals they send, they shape a culture that is calm, confident, and aligned.

So, as you stride the corridors of your school, through the tangled web of human interactions: be mindful of the emotional wake you leave behind.

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