

Closer, simpler, faster

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This academic year I have worked up close with a goodly number of differently sized multi-academy trusts: their teachers, support and catering staff, middle leaders, headteachers, executive leaders and board members.

Rooted in collective and dedicated leadership, children and young people flourish in their primary, special and secondary schools. Joy and purpose characterise classrooms. Strong professional relationships with shared values permeate.

What the trusts have in common is a restlessness to improve. Their annual strategy days address great questions:

- How can we become the trust that would put us out of business?
- Does our mission still make sense today?
- Are we all on this mission together?
- What should we stop doing?

In every school I visit:

- I ask leaders: 'What are you proud of? And we're sitting here in a year's time - what's even better than it is today?'
- I ask children: 'You are headteacher for the day - what are the things you do not change because they are so good; what's one thing you do change?'

Reflecting on conversations and peering into next academic year, I would urge all trusts to move **closer, simpler, faster** towards their schools.

Emanating from the DfE – in common with all national and local government departments – is a tsunami of regulation which threatens to overwhelm school leaders. As the pace quickens, the volume expands. This requires sane and robust resistance.

The most effective trusts shield headteachers with teams of highly competent professionals to field HR disputes, governance matters and the rest. I know of

no successful trust where there is not a united commitment by everyone on the pay-roll to serve the best interests of children and young people – however distant they may sit physically from the classroom.

Further, in highly regarded trusts their CEOs question national, local and regional authorities – and nicely challenge the requirement for yet more data or verbiage which will languish unread.

Yet still - from estates to finance, from curriculum to human resources, from professional development to keeping schools under review, from risk registers to health and safety - the direction of travel needs to be closer, simpler, faster.

What might that mean in agile practice?

Closer

Arguably, trusts which are geographically grouped, and thus their officer team lies closer to the schools, have an advantage. Some seize it, others don't.

'Closeness' is all about how school leaders perceive both trust central teams and their fellow headteachers. It is dispiriting to hear trust directors talk about 'my' schools when what they should be saying is 'our' schools; such careless language leads heads to feel more detached.

The autonomy/alignment debate is rarely far below the surface in multi-academy trusts. Does one-size-fit-all? As one headteacher put it in relation to curriculum: 'let's be clearer about how tight the trust wants to hold the reins'.

Openness and transparency from trust leaders at all levels is vital: do they share their motivations and forward planning in good time? Excellent schools are rooted in trusted headteachers who don't need to look over their shoulders for permissions.

Simpler

Trusts need to view their practices through the eyes of the newest member, just as wise schools capture the first impressions of new pupils and new teachers to shape their ways of doing.

Viewed in this way, systems for placing orders for resources ('computer says not on approved list') or for examination entries or for safer recruitment checks or for contacting the estates department – each could do with a refresh button marked KISS: *keep it simple stupid*.

Does everyone need to fill in the same forms, and are those forms readily accessible online without a myriad of complex passwords and codes? The

minutes of meetings are not state secrets and open anyway through freedom of information.

And what do we as users of public and private services moan about most? The lack of access to a human voice to listen and help. In some trust contexts that adroitness is absent, the dreaded 'leave a message' is on repeat.

Faster

There is an immediacy about teaching and leading in schools which is sometimes not appreciated by those in central offices. Yes, those good colleagues are under their own pressures – but the intense demands of managing a demanding parent, a child with acute special needs, a surprise visitor, spot audit and inspection should not be under-estimated.

That can mean that school leaders require nimble responses to questions about trust policies. It should then mean that the trust responds immediately to an event or incident which, if not 999, is *perceived* by the school as in that category of concern.

As to estates: air conditioning blowing out hot air, radiators not hot enough, toilets leaking, grass that needs cutting, fences which need mending – nothing moves quickly enough to satisfy the headteacher.

A caveat here: 'faster' does not invariably mean 'better'. Efficiency is not to be confused with speed. An open conversation, on a termly basis, with headteachers and trust executives about budget deadlines and data submissions is desirable.

Coda

There are occasions when lack of clarity about what a trust is for, and which services it does and does not provide headteachers, confuses all parties. Tensions and frustrations arise because headteachers are not clear where their responsibilities end and the trust team's begin.

The management guru Tom Peters in his 1987 book 'Thriving on Chaos' wrote of uncertainty as the new normal for leaders. Nearly 40 years later, it remains true that it's not what is in the diary that kills you – it's what is *not* in the diary.

Trust leaders and headteachers together must take individual and collective actions to push back against tides of compliance which risk drowning their focus on children in classrooms. 'Less is more' must be the proclaimed mantra of our top educational leaders.

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