

Staying effective in a challenging world...

YOU COACH YOUR FIRST X1 & YOUR FIRST XV- WHY NOT YOUR SENIOR PEOPLE?

I think we can all agree that the good times are over.

A 'golden age' which started in the late '60s as the post war deprivations melted away is fast being consigned to history: easy to find jobs, plenty of good prospects for graduates and final-salary pension schemes have all but disappeared, and I am of the opinion that the challenges that Independent Schools face now may well become 'business as usual' for us when the current recession recedes.

Benign environment

The last two decades has seen parents with money to spend on private education which coupled with patchy provision of good state education has delivered a benign environment for Independent schools, but the recession is leading to falling school rolls for many and the unfortunate consequence of that will be that some schools will fail, forcing either merger or closure.

Another consequence of a recession is that it shows up a whole host of shortcomings within the school which were hidden when times were easier.

Take stock and put your house in order

Schools need to tackle these shortcomings to ensure that they do not fall prey to the recession and this article suggests what will be to many a fresh focus for unlocking their potential and dealing with the problem.

Shortcomings?

These can come in many shapes and sizes but can broadly be broken down into two categories, the 'what' and the 'how'.

The 'what' is the structure of the management, the strategic plans, the physical school premises and the school finances.

The 'how' is the people issue, their management and leadership abilities leading to how they deal with and deliver the 'what'.

These two areas are of course inextricably linked but I suggest that the key to success is the 'how'. Conventional wisdom says it's 20% content ('what') and 80% presentation ('how').

Experience shows that schools are no different from many other businesses – they focus on training their people on the technical aspects of their jobs, (the 'what'), and whilst much of that training is excellent, it's only part of the story, and at least as important is 'how' it is applied in school.

To illustrate the 'what' and the 'how' let's think about what makes a good doctor: I suggest that what sets the good doctor apart is their 'bed-side manner' – empathy and communication skills and that their technical knowledge is taken for granted. The same applies for the 'inspirational' teacher.

In the school situation, most of those in management positions are qualified teachers (we promote good teachers) who were trained to stand at the front of a class of children and deliver the curriculum in an interesting and engaging way rather than the techniques of leadership and management of a group of adults.

Stand back and see beyond the day-to-day

What the school head and senior people face in a busy working day is learning to stand back to see the bigger picture. Add to that, particularly in the smaller secondary or prep school, a limited and often relative inexperienced senior management team, and you are building an explosive mixture ready for the 'match' of harder times.

Are you driving looking in your rear view mirror?

A school focused solely on today rather than tomorrow finds itself reacting to events rather than 'making their own luck'. By having a thought through vision and strategy for sustained development, regularly reviewed and updated, reality checking all decisions against the goals, constantly with an eye to the competition and changing circumstances, you will be 'ahead of the curve' and ready to react rather than to follow. But having a plan is a great start but is only part of the story - it needs life breathing into it.

Check-list

Quick check-list for you to assess how you measure up:

1. Strategic Plan do you have a clear thought through vision and goals?
 is there a clear understanding of strengths and
 weaknesses?
 is the Plan reviewed regularly & effectively?
 are your decisions ‘reality checked’ against the vision?
 is the Plan communicated to all your staff?
2. Leadership a weak area for many businesses – does yours measure
 up?
3. Management does the SMT work effectively and look at the
 important rather than the urgent issues?
4. Finance fee structure?
 profitability?
 generate enough profit to sustain and grow the
 business?
5. Marketing &
 Promotion planned?
6. Governing Body focused and effective, not bogged down in minutia?

It's a people issue

So let's look at bringing out and developing the 'how': you coach your first X1 and first XV, why not your senior people?

Coach to unlock potential

Coaching is a well used and respected technique in the commercial world where business leaders and senior managers get help – usually 1:1 – to improve their effectiveness and learn to handle situations where they feel less comfortable.

Coaching is not telling others what to do, rather it's a way of developing the individual by making them more aware of the impact they have on people by what they say and how they say it. Helping them understand their strengths and weaknesses, watching them in action in meetings - as you would with pupils in the cricket nets or on the rugby field – and ultimately to use their skills and knowledge to better effect, while retaining their individuality.

Alternatively, in a group situation it might be working with the SMT or Governing Body to help them be more effective.

Coaching is *not* just for poor performers, results show that the greatest benefit comes from the better performers!

Seek help

In the current challenging climate if your answer to one or more of the questions on the check-list is a 'no' or you are concerned about these or other issues then you should seek help. 'Seek help' because undertaking an objective review in-house is difficult with 'blind spots' and pre-conceptions - and your auditor or accountant might not have the breadth of experience and knowledge to do more than review your finances.

Can you afford not to?

There will be objections to spending in the current climate – but can you afford not to - are you sure you are making the most of your great people and assets to safeguard your school? A missed opportunity now might be the deciding factor in your future success. There are very few who can afford to be complacent and many where there is significant 'room for improvement'.

Free Top Tip

After each meeting you call or chair ask yourself '*what did the other party or parties get from the meeting and did it justify the time they invested in attending? Did we just talk or did we reach decisions?*'