

Editorial

The myths of leadership

There are five myths of leadership according to a large scale study of successful organisations across industry, sport and education partly funded by the NCSL and announced at their recent annual conference in Birmingham.

There are also 15 qualities of leadership, but, although we will return to these in future articles, the myths are more interesting to recount in light of the change in government. What of import can our new leaders learn from this immense study?

The first is The Myth of Speed. that a charismatic leader can just come in and turn around an organisation or school in a way that is sustainable. Where it does happen it is usually because a quiet, able, and systematic leader has been sorting out the problems for years before, so that a new leader can have a stable base to be much more radical. In other contexts its called the Moses Syndrome, where the real grafters and visionaries are no longer around to take their due credit.

The minimum time for a private sector enterprise to achieve sustainable success is 5-10 years. So it is, the research project leaders Alma Harris and Andy Hargreaves suggest, with schools.

The second is the Myth of Replacement. The UK is suffering a bad dose of this myth at the moment, with governments, past and present, arguing that a failure of a school should result in the replacement of the head, and if that fails to sort it in a very short time - frame the staff and the pupils should all be changed.

One could add that if the system doesn't work than that should be changed wholesale as well. A lot of the original thought about Academies and Free Schools and Superheads have both these myths at the core of their thinking. However, the research suggests the ability to engage *existing* staff in taking new directions is one of the most important qualities of leadership.

Myth number three is the Myth of Numbers. Those organisations that have an improvement in numbers (exam

results) as their core mission often give a false impression of their achievement. Resources concentrated on borderline grade C GCSE passes and using vocational courses to claim 5 GCSE passes, spring to mind. Often the monitoring and management of statistics takes the place of more significant changes in teaching and learning.

Even in the private sector, top class companies will sacrifice super profits for a more ethical and safe and customer-orientated organisation. But how would Ofsted respond to a school saying that teaching and learning approaches that did not prioritise SATs and GCSE results for some children were their measure of success?

The Myth of Prescription is myth number four. Organisations that devolve innovation and leadership are often much more flexible and responsive and have a more vibrant culture. A lesson Labour would have benefitted from and the current government is superficially at least claiming to follow.

The final myth is the Myth of Competition: top commercial organisations often do cooperate with bigger and smaller companies to develop joint projects even if they compete in the market in other areas. This is also true of schools and is one area where British schools are ahead of the rest of the world.

Where does Gove sit with these myths?

Its not clear whether the government's shutting down of the new primary curriculum is a money saving exercise, a more laissez faire approach to curriculum delivery or preparation for a back to basics drive which re-instates prescription in a new form. Its not clear whether the money going to Free Schools and Academies will force non participating schools into a competition they cannot win.

The aggressive language on schools that are deemed to be failing suggests that Myths one and two are still very much in play.

Research never changes anything, but at least it can give school leaders who are willing to stand up for what they believe in a language of resistance.

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