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STAKEHOLDERS AND PARTNERS

Their contribution to school improvement

Any school operates within a local and national context and is as affected by the climate set by the media and the institutional partners with whom they relate—principally central government and local government, the teachers' associations and other unions—as it is by the behaviour and attitude of its own individual stakeholders. A wet dinner time, for example, is a challenging local and immediate climate for a school: it will immediately affect and test the school's capacity to sustain a purposeful and fulfilling atmosphere amongst pupils and staff alike. In a similar way, the school's life is affected by the announcements of the Secretary of State when he or she issues guidelines on homework. The media's reaction to that—articles by Melanie Phillips, Michael Barber, Ted Wragg's column, the articles and utterances of Chris Woodhead and the teacher associations' leaders—all combine at the immediate crises of the moment, and over a period on other policy matters, to create a kind of educational weather. This affects the attitudes brought initially to a school by all stakeholders, which will be more or less positive or negative in consequence of what happens as a result of the national weather forecast.

The LEA, we believe, has the duty and capacity to affect that climate by the way it behaves towards its schools. It has to choose where to strike the balance between challenge, pressure and support. Each LEA has a different historical inheritance. In *what* the LEA does and *how* it does it, the LEA will perpetuate or change the climate it has created locally. That local climate can powerfully moderate the national climate created by legislation, the actions and voice of the DfEE (ministers and officials), the various quangos, OFSTED and by the media. Some believe that the national climate, which was one of benign neglect for many years until the late 1980s, has turned into what is best likened to a hailstorm of externally imposed change.

This book is punctuated by 'interludes'. They are all accounts drawn from Birmingham's *Education Bulletin*, a journal which is published five or six times a year. It contains news, lists events and there are always a few articles. The 'Tim Talking' series of articles started when the officer responsible for the *Bulletin* asked for an article from the newly appointed CEO by way of an introduction to the whole service. Soon he was asked to contribute a second, and then a third, and so it has become a chance to write repeatedly about particular issues with a common theme in the knowledge that the *Bulletin* will lie on staffroom tables and be read by a few and talked about by others. It is a chance to affect climate. So too are appearances by local politicians, officers, advisers, governors and parents on local newspaper and radio stations.

But writing articles in bulletins and appearing with consistent messages on radio stations and on the television screen is nothing if the prevailing climate is not one of celebrating success, or if the regular transactional purposes of the LEA are conducted in a bureaucratic manner. So circulars need to be colour-coded and each missive needs to make explicit, with a clear summary, whether it is legislatively required or advisory, whether there is a cost involved and whether it is information that a head or governors can

usefully put on one side for future reference or something that requires urgent action. Similarly, handwritten appreciation notes sent to teachers and support staff across a very large schooling system will probably not appear systematic, even when they are, and if they can occasionally reinforce the worth of people, for example, advisers, educational social workers or psychologists who have commented positively on the work of colleagues in schools, then the whole climate turns into one of ‘appreciative enquiry’.

‘Appreciative enquiry’ is a form of management first articulated in a theoretical form in an article about the work of Cooperrider and Srivasta. They compared ‘appreciative enquiry’ with ‘problem solving’ as two possible forms of management. Of course the latter is more familiar, involving a four-stage process as set out below:

Problem Solving

- 1 Identify a problem or a felt need.
- 2 Analyse the causes.
- 3 Brainstorm the solutions.
- 4 Decide on a plan of action.

It seems to us that this model of management is necessarily prevalent in a world of accountability and regulation, where there is frequent inspection and a propensity among those who inspect to identify weaknesses and difficulties. All these, of course, have to be addressed and the four steps of ‘problem solving’ outline in simple form what is essentially a method of avoiding complacency and building on collective review (see [chapter 2](#)). It is a simple, if unremarkable and obvious way of proceeding. Most readers will be familiar with the sequence.

Less well understood, however, is Cooperrider and Srivasta’s model of ‘appreciative enquiry’. This may be represented simply as follows:

Appreciative enquiry

- 1 Appreciate the best of *what is*.
- 2 Ask *what it could be like* if you could only have more of the good things identified.
- 3 Discourse in order to find out *what it should be like*.
- 4 Decide *what it will be like*.

This model has particular attractions for us since it builds on existing strengths, whereas an over-reliance on problem solving might be seen as a deficit model and one, therefore, which saps energy rather than creates it. Typically, elements of ‘appreciative enquiry’ would be manifest in heads of department, subject co-ordinators and headteachers who frequently exclaim on and celebrate good practice, drawing it to the attention of the wider community and thus encouraging speculation about emulating what has been identified. Again, it is a model that can be seen to align simply with the practices of collective review, but with the difference that it is less threatening and there is less danger of the loss of energy which, as we have remarked, is such a vital—if elusive—commodity in school life.

Our point in setting out these two models is to illustrate how climates can be set by managerial styles and by the choice of emphasis within an institution, or by those who affect an institution. Indeed, the climate within a school is often affected, as we have argued, by the institutional stakeholders. We set out earlier ways in which a local education authority, for example, can, for better or worse, affect the likelihood of the internal climate-setting mechanisms of a school being inclined towards the positive or the negative.

Of course there is a third model not found in the literature. We think it is equally valid as a management model, and one which is different from either problem solving or climate setting. We would term that third model 'ensuring compliance'. The equivalent four processes are set out as follows:

Ensuring compliance

- 1 Decide what is right.
- 2 Regulate that the single solution will be implemented by everyone.
- 3 Inspect to ensure that the solution is being followed.
- 4 Publicly punish deviants and inadequates.

We believe that there is a danger that such a model will be the unintentional result of some national actions. This is clearly more likely to happen when, as is now the case, we have Secretaries of State who can exercise an enormous number of powers rather than at a time when the Secretary of State had only three powers to affect the system, as was the case some years ago.

The danger, of course, with this model, even without its fourth step, is that should it be accompanied, as it is, with a thorough model of external inspection, the likelihood is that schools will find their lives dominated by a dangerous combination of 'ensuring compliance' and 'problem solving'. It is in our view, all the more important that the less remarked model of 'appreciative enquiry' is given attention by those who affect the school on a daily basis.

The need for a 'critical friend'

That brings us to the question of a school's need for a 'critical friend'. When we initially discussed the idea, we knew that we were being heavily influenced, as we were in a number of our 'theory-influenced' actions in school improvement, by Michael Fullan. His elaboration of the ideas of 'critical friends', and the 'friendly critics' or 'uncritical friends' attracted us. We would recast them as:

- the '*hostile witness*': someone who so disapproves of the activity of the school that they bring to their involvement in the life of the school a bias towards negativity that is at once condemnatory
- the '*uncritical lover*': someone who is so besotted with what they perceive as the all-embracing success of the school that they could tend to devalue the currency of praise because all their comments are undifferentiatedly positive.
- the '*critical friend*': someone who understands and is sympathetic to the purpose of the school, knows its circumstances very well, is skilled in offering a second opinion, or sometimes a first opinion, about an issue only half perceived by the school itself, or if perceived, seen as impenetrable.

We set out in what follows the characteristics of hostile witnesses, uncritical lovers and critical friends.

Hostile witnesses:

- use 'you' a lot
- tend to tell and judge rather than listen and ask open questions
- bring preferred and singular views of schools and teaching and learning practice which they overlay on their schools
- write, as a matter of course, judgemental notes on schools and teachers which they do not share with the teachers/schools

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- have ready-made answers to a school's problems
- do not discuss evidence for judgements
- are strong on assertion and opinion
- do not become involved (except judgementally) at times of school crisis

Uncritical lovers:

- do not write notes on school visits or teacher exchanges
- identify 'good' practice individually (and have no shared yardstick for its value)
- overdo praise, scattering it indiscriminately and thereby reducing its value
- only ask rhetorical questions to affirm the school's/teacher's position
- spend time at ceremonial events, but rarely go beyond the head's room or assembly-type events
- tend to use time only once
- forget to follow up on promised action
- do not mention articles or papers they have read

Critical friends:

- are immediately accessible at times of school crisis
- ask questions which increasingly focused, but speculative not judgemental
- use 'we' and 'you' (but not 'I' except to promise or take blame) in equal measure
- when giving a view leave sentences or questions half-finished to preserve dignity
- identify personally and equally with a school's successes and its failures
- enable the school to carry out internal self-evaluation and ask after the process, often identifying external witnesses
- see strengths as well as points for development
- balance 'appreciative enquiry' with 'problem solving'
- anticipate schools' sensitive occasions

It will be seen that critical friends, like good teachers and good heads of department or phase heads, are seemingly effortlessly skilled at asking questions. They bring to that questioning task a mastery of inflection and timing, so that questions are never damaging. They speculate aloud so that the development of their thinking is shared, as though with a third party, when they sift the evidence of a possible line of enquiry. When hard messages are necessary, they are often conveyed in the form of half-finished questions. If presented in the form of statements, the liberal use of the first or the third person, rarely the second person, punctuates their remarks.

Critical friends are invaluable to schools. Almost all the case studies in the research (Maden and Hillman's *Success against the odds*, for example) refer to people who, if not described precisely as critical friends, are clearly in that role. References in the case studies to the helpful LEA impact of consultancy refer to either a curriculum or a whole-school adviser who has visited the school and contributed to its renewed sense of direction or purpose. What they never imply is complete satisfaction with all external contacts. We do believe, however, that people external to the school should examine the three possible interpretations of their actions set out in this section. They will then have a better chance of adjusting their contact styles with different schools in order to meet their different needs, with the common purpose of appearing as a critical friends rather than the alternatives of uncritical lovers or hostile witnesses.

A school needs a range of critical friends for different aspects of school life. Every school, even Eton and Harrow, needs a critical friend, or rather a series of critical friends. Each critical friend needs a precise and focused specialism, but also some wider peripheral vision in order to be sure that they are building levels of energy (perhaps through appreciative enquiry). In such a way they look at English, music, art, indeed the whole curricular range of academic subjects. Somebody with a broader brief will look at the school as a whole—its management and its daily life in corridors, staffrooms, staff meetings, in playgrounds, governors' meetings, after-school clubs and societies, as well as its relationships with a wider local community. They will observe attendance patterns of staff and pupils alike, as well as those who arrive early and leave late. There are, of course, internal members of a school community who will bring to discussions the invaluable trait of open-ended questioning. Colleagues can act as evidence collectors so that together they monitor and evaluate the evidence collected, the better to inform their actions in what will be slightly adjusted new directions. These activities are all part of collective review and show the process characteristics of critical friendship, even if they are essentially derived from stakeholders who are insiders too. Practices such as work-shadowing between schools—for example, a teacher work-shadowing and observing another teacher or a head doing the same thing—can develop the opportunity for critical friendship, even if the main purpose in the short term and the original design was to extend knowledge or some aspect of skill or process being practised by another in similar circumstances.

This brings us to the issue of stakeholders.

The main stakeholders in a school—if we define a stakeholder as someone having a stake in the school's success—are of course those who live and work in the school itself. So the pupils have a principal claim to attention. Indeed, the literature of school improvement and effectiveness is replete with encouragement to involve pupils in decisions about their work and the running of the school.

One of the climate-setting articles within our education bulletin describes briefly the practice of a junior school teacher whose school policy involves all the pupils in applying for classroom jobs. The school has a rigorous principle of pupils taking on leadership and management tasks in their 'houses' as well as in their own class and the school as a whole. Secondary schools which have marking policies involving students themselves assessing their own work, to which the teacher responds, are also involving the stakeholder pupils. So too are primary schools which encourage peer mediation and circle time.

Stakeholders, as we have seen, may be described as those who have a stake in a school's success. They often work in partnership with other stakeholders, either as individuals or institutions who combine to improve the likelihood of their success. There are major and minor stakeholders and partners.

Major stakeholders and partners are those who have the most to gain or lose by a particular school's performance. If looked at in that way, it becomes clearer why central government is prepared to adopt a name and blame approach in which those most closely involved in a school will be revolted by its failings.

The nearer the individual or institution is to a school, the greater the stakeholding.

If that principle is accepted, it becomes possible to draw up a pecking order of stakeholders, as follows:

- 1 pupils
- 2 parents
- 3 support staff
- 4 headteacher
- 5 teaching staff
- 6 governors

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- 7 neighbours of the school
- 8 local MPs and councillors
- 9 LEA
- 10 ministers
- 11 government

These classifications are mainly composed of individuals and we have considered most of their interests either directly or indirectly during the course of this book. We have placed support staff ahead of teaching staff because in most areas of the country the support staff are more likely to live and work in the vicinity of the school and have their children attend the school. We accept that is not invariably the case; we are just making the point that the investment of someone working in the school and living close by—certainly if they are a parent too—is greater than that of someone living in a different community altogether.

What the support staff say in their local community affects the school's reputation.

Moreover, the wise school realises that the most powerful messages from adults about a school get carried through the local community by those who work there. So its midday supervisors, the school's secretary, the learning assistant and the meals staff are more likely to carry the reputation of the school than heads of department. This of course has all sorts of implications for staff development as a key process and provisions that are made for support staff in the school more widely.

According to the school's context, stakeholders bring more or less capacity to their task. So Eton and other privately endowed schools have more resources with which to buy more staff and resources. Even history is on their side. More likely than not, all the parents of children at such schools want them to succeed. Even within the state maintained sector, however, there are savage inequalities in a system that ranges from the affluent single-community school where primary school children are dropped off and collected by au pairs at one extreme, through to drab, grey, dilapidated buildings occupied by children from surrounding run-down, half-abandoned estates on the other. In those communities, huge securities set the scene and parents have sometimes given up the unequal struggle of getting themselves or their children to school. Then, of course, there are the schools—the majority of our schools—that lie somewhere in between.

The nearer a school is to poverty, the less likely it is that the children's backgrounds will have that sense of consistent support that gives any child and the school they attend such a head start in unlocking talent and potential. It is as though the stakeholders in such a situation are more loosely and less permanently coupled to the school's purpose: indeed, in such situations turbulence and mobility of pupils is a daily reality. Moreover, in such situations, schools require energy, drive, skill and enthusiasm to a disproportionate degree as they sustain an unrelenting press for pupil achievement. In short, the poorer the context, the more prevalent high unemployment and high crime levels locally, the more important it is for the local school to have as few weak links as possible amongst staff. Sickness amongst staff in such situations can be a severe blow. High turnover rates amongst staff and pupils make sustaining any semblance of school progress a seemingly intractable exercise.

Governors

The relationship of the governing body and a whole-school, through individual members, with the head, other staff and other parents is the most unresearched part of school effectiveness and improvement. Governors have been given a much more powerful position of influence in the school system since the

mid-1980s. They have many powers which were formerly exercised by the LEA, indeed, in the grant maintained sector they now replace LEA functions even more substantially.

In our experience, at any one time there will be one or two per cent of school governing bodies which are at loggerheads with the head and/or some other part of the school's management. Certainly, headteachers who are losing their grip will either seek to magnify the governing body (in order to bolster their position) or seek to keep the governing body in the dark (in order to 'keep the lid' on the situation). The position of staff governors when things go wrong is extremely difficult.

As we have said, though, such cases amount to no more than one or two per cent. In the main, the relationship between the head and the governors is not problematic: perhaps the key in this is to help and encourage governors when things are going well so that their work in its own right can sustain improvement.

Unlike other stakeholders, governors represent not only themselves but also a constituent group such as parents, staff, the LEA or the community. They particularly need to work hard at being the 'critical friend' to the head and the staff: this requires them to be known in the school, otherwise their questions will be seen as hostile or irrelevant.

Governing bodies now have four main tasks:

- to provide a strategic view of where the school is heading and help to decide the school's strategy for improvement so that its pupils learn most effectively and achieve the highest standards
- to monitor and evaluate educational standards and the quality of education provided, asking challenging questions and pressing for improvement
- to assume direct responsibility for oversight of financial management, the recruitment of senior staff and some disciplinary matters
- to act as critical friend to a school, providing the headteacher and staff with support, advice and information, drawing on members' knowledge and experience

In carrying out these targets there needs to be a clear understanding by governors and heads of the difference between management and governance. In practice, most governing bodies work through a series of processes and find themselves to a greater or lesser extent 'advising', 'steering', 'mediating', 'supporting' and 'holding the school to account'. Whilst each governing body will decide for itself *how* it should be involved in the running of a school, like all other partners it should demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement, both in terms of improving the quality of education for the pupils and also in developing its own learning capacity and that of most of the whole-school community. This will mean the setting of a climate in which there is open discussion among governors, the head, staff, parents and sometimes pupils to ensure that there is a shared, common language about roles and responsibilities. As so often in school improvement, the process is the key. Governors also have a vital role in policymaking, development planning and monitoring and evaluation, and will wish to be informed and inform themselves about a school's strengths and weaknesses so that they can work effectively with the head and staff in particular.

A strong school will be made up of various elements of which the governing body is a vital backbone and backstop.

(Sylvia West, *Education Values for School Leadership*, 1993, p. 88)

There are a number of ways in which governors can make a significant contribution to school improvement. The following are a number of suggestions which pick up on the grammar of interventions and processes.

Governors and development planning

Governors can participate fully in development planning if a development planning day for all governors is set aside each year, well in advance. On a development planning day governors work alongside staff in conducting an audit and setting targets (both general and for pupil attainment) for next year's school development plan. The subsequent monitoring of the plan can be helped by giving each sub-committee responsibility for reporting on a key element of the plan. A similar process is necessary when discussing the post-OFSTED inspection plan and integrating this into the school development plan as a whole. The more governors, like staff, can be involved in planning together, the larger the outcome.

Progress reports from departments/phases

The schedule for governing body meetings needs a rolling programme of progress reports. These can cover the work of individual subject departments in the secondary school and particular curriculum areas in the primary school, ideally including both quantifiable and quantitative data. It is also useful to discuss the structure of the termly headteacher's report with the head, so that it enables regular review by all the governing body.

Assigned governors

In some places specific governors are successfully linked to phase/aspect or curriculum leaders in primary and special schools and to heads of department in secondary schools. These governors 'champion' these particular areas and take a direct interest in pedagogy, resources and achievement. They are well placed to help prepare and receive reports to the governing body. Already a 'responsible' governor has a statutory role related to special educational needs in the school, working closely with the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO), but this concept could be widened considerably. Other examples would be a governor given prime responsibility for equal opportunities issues or, similarly, health and safety. Whatever the link role, it is important to draw up a short job description so that everybody is clear about their role.

Governor visits

It is true to say that governors who do not visit the school during the working day will always struggle to have credibility in the school community. Visits, moreover, give governors the chance to evaluate the impact of their plans and policies on the day-to-day operation of the school. However, it is important to have a visiting policy, with a code of practice negotiated with the staff, which lays down the different of circumstances and occasions for visits and criteria for whether there are to be written outcomes reported back to the governing body. Misunderstanding about the purpose of visits is widespread in our experience, especially when they are in the planning stage.

Workshops with parents

Curriculum workshops for parents and the community can provide an opportunity for practical examples of learning which help the dignity of staff. In a primary school that takes governors and parents seriously, the 'literacy' and 'numeracy' hours will provide a great opportunity for workshops which draw the community together within learning. Information and communications technology workshops in any phase are another excellent way of developing a shared understanding, whilst enlarging personal capacity. To the delivering

school these are also a chance to tap the expertise of governors and parents. There is also a particular role for 'link' governors in taking responsibility for particular areas.

Rotation of governor meetings

When governing body meetings are held in different classrooms or areas of the school, and when each meeting begins with a short presentation from the 'host' staff about specific curriculum, teaching and learning issues, the focus of the governors' discussion is being set. For example, a governing body which meets in the nursery/reception area in one of our schools has a way of engaging in debate about the quality of provision in the early years, baseline assessment, links with parents and other related issues. Similarly, a governing body which meets in the arts faculty of a secondary school and as part of its agenda considers more fully the resourcing and provisions of the arts curriculum will persuade the arts faculty that they are taking their concerns seriously. Such meetings can only be 'tasters' before other governing body business but they add considerably to the knowledge and capacity of governing bodies to make key decisions and, if the host staff stay as observers, facilitate good and informed relations between staff and governors.

Governors' communications

Governors need to be 'visible', in the sense that if they are to be the body which is accountable for the school the pupils, the parents, the staff and a wider community need to know of their work and their role. All the usual media will need to be considered to ensure that this happens. These will include newsletters, displaying photographs of the governors in school along with the rest of the staff, regular open sessions or 'surgeries' and participation in school events. In particular, the best governing bodies think imaginatively about how best to use the legal requirement for governing bodies to hold an annual meeting for parents. This can be one of the high points of a school's calendar but sadly it is often written off as a chore and poorly attended. The best governing bodies see it as a real opportunity for governors, head and staff to present their report to parents and seek advice and help on further improvements. Some governing bodies have taken full advantage of this opportunity by including pupil references, using 'witness stands' and video records of the school's work and achievements. Some combine it with a school performance.

Working on specific sub-committees or joint task groups with other partners in the school provides another opportunity for governors to be more widely known. Sub-committees such as finance and resources, premises, personnel and curriculum can help concentrate expertise to the benefit of the school, but specific task groups can also be useful in building effective partnerships with teaching staff, parents and the local community in the production of joint reports to all governors.

Governors' induction and training

Those schools which take governors seriously allocate mentors and provide induction packs and briefings. New and existing governors need key documentation such as existing policies and plans, reports on the school, pupil performance data and basic administration information. Mentors are usually other governors but having additional mentoring from a member of staff is also very beneficial.

Training and accrediting learning for governors are most often arranged through specifically designed programmes, usually from the Governor Training Unit of an LEA, but sometimes through higher education. Governors are entitled to access to training and, like all learners, need to be encouraged and valued, so why not certificate specific training experience, either in the school or at a local centre? Training in topics such

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as understanding school performance data and target setting, monitoring and evaluation, financial management, and personnel issues are the logical next step in developing the governor's role in improving schools. Moreover, the change in standards funding which specifies a percentage of the budget for governor training will facilitate this.

Celebrating success

Celebrating success can be overlooked unless it is carefully planned in the routine of the school. This may consist of the involvement of a rota of governors in the weekly awards assembly or participation in enriched extra-curricular activities such as the performing arts, sport, clubs and societies, residential experiences or celebrating a successful OFSTED report. Certainly, all governors need to be involved in some of the range of experiences and activities provided by the school so that they can feel that they are part of a celebrating community as well as an improving community of learners. They may often be used to present certificates and commendations, but it is important that governors themselves are valued for their contribution, through the imaginative use of awards for significant service.

Good partnerships with governors are essential if school improvement is to be sustained. Governing bodies have a vital role in establishing a collaborative culture that encompasses staff, pupils, parents and the wider community. Governors can make schools better by shaping and guarding the values and vision of the school through its key roles of strategic planning and monitoring and evaluation.

The key characteristic of the effective governing body is its ability to understand and implement the *distinctive* contribution it can make to the management of the school.

(Nigel Gann, *Improving School Governance*, 1998)

We have tried in this chapter to reflect on the importance of climate-setting and the school's need for critical friends. The contribution of stakeholders and partners to school improvement is best done through appreciative enquiry, building on existing strengths through a process of collective review. As critical friends LEAs, parents, governors and other partners are invaluable to schools, in that they ask focused questions such as 'How well are we doing?' 'How do we compare with similar schools?' 'What more should we achieve?' 'What must we do to make it happen?' Stakeholders and partners need to strike a careful balance between pressure and support. If they can do this, working with each other, there will be an increased likelihood of success.

INTERLUDE

'So what', she asked, 'Is your number one priority?'

The person sitting opposite was a new primary adviser due to take up her post in September. 'So what', she asked as she was winding down the hour-long conversation about the difference between teaching, headship and being an adviser, 'is your number one priority?' And seeing the look of thoughtful doubt bordering on panic in my eyes, she decided to fill the silence to give me more time to think. 'You see, I would like to know that at the back of my mind I can take any chance that presents itself to press the issues you think most important in transforming educational standards in the city'

'Only one?' I muttered, still playing for time, but knowing that she was right to avoid such a plethora of priorities that nobody takes any of them at all seriously. (She had, after all, been a successful headteacher who knew the importance of focusing and insisting on a few important shared objectives.) 'Well, I reckon it would