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So You Want to be a Head?

Low Guat Tin

So you want to be a head and you want to be ahead too? Have you considered what you need to be a head? Have you considered what qualities are required for one to be ahead of heads? This is not a research paper, it is one written based on observations and having the observations confirmed with a few practitioners out in the field. (This short paper was written for those who are currently in the Diploma in Education and the Further Professional Diploma in Education programmes.)

Now what do principals need?

First, you need the patience of Job. You will have to work with all sorts of people and you will have lots of people reporting to you. You will have endless interruptions to your work, some so trivial you wish those responsible would grow up and make the necessary decisions.

Then there will be teachers who will send down to your office countless number of children who did not bring their books, did not do their homework and so forth. So part of your job is also to "frighten" the children into being more responsible. Yes, patience, patience to "deal" with myriads of people, patience to "deal" with those who are so slow to move and patience to allow parents and even teachers who come storming into your room to take their frustrations out on you! Patience to be wrongfully accused and yet not hitting out in self-defence. (Of course when tempers have cooled you will then in your wisdom show your accusers the error of their thinking.)

Second, you need a pair of ears because you have to do a lot of listening. Yes, your job is not to talk, yours is to listen. You will have to listen to parents, teachers, non-

teaching staff and to your pupils. Lots will come into your room to complain or to whine about things which are not going right in the school and there will be countless wrong things; to most, their way is THE way. It is also my belief that when you listen and listen carefully you will be spared many management errors. When your teachers feel that they have been heard and have been taken seriously by you, half your battle is won. You will find them rallying behind you.

Third, always have a helicopter view; sometimes I call this the top floor view. When you feel really cramped in and stuck too deep in meaningless paperwork, then climb to the top floor of your school building or better still to the highest floor on your apartment block and look down. You will realise that so many "big" things are really so tiny when you look down from the top and from that height you can see

many things and see them in perspective too. That is why always take time to go to the top and look down, always have the helicopter view and you'll get your blurred, stressed out vision clearer again.

Fourth, know your vision. Often a school's vision is in relation to what you and your staff want from your pupils. For instance, many a head I have talked to told me about what they want their pupils to be at the end of the 6 years in the primary schools or 4-5 years in the secondary schools. If you have a clear picture of what "products" from your school should look like, then bear this in mind for that image of what you want your pupils to be will influence your behaviour, your daily practices and your policies. For instance, if you want your pupils to be well-disciplined, polite and neat, then this vision you have must affect how you and your staff behave, work and dress. It will affect the way you discipline your pupils and a host of other policies. If you want your pupils to enjoy school then your staff and you should show that you enjoy coming to school.

But what is more important is to share your vision with your staff. If your teachers could see beyond teaching, homework and marking and more marking and see the difference they are making to young lives, particularly those whose parents are too busy to care, your teachers will find teaching much more satisfying. When people can see beyond the immediate, when they can see the impact they are making on others, when they grasp what they are all about, when they understand the overall significance of their contribution, it gives a lot of meaning to their work.

What I am today I owe it to my teachers and my principals. Of course my family had an important part to play. But it was at my alma

mater that I was taught a number of important lessons. My principal even wrote on my autograph book, "Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth". The same lady even got a scholarship for me and sent me packing Down Under. Others, teachers in the school "knocked me into some shape". But of course it was from my parents that I learnt how to delay my gratification, how to appreciate the "givens" and from my mother I inherited the stamina to work long and hard.

Fifth, know your mission and do not allow the cares of this world to side track you. Very often we are distracted from our mission and we go off course. There are so many things that we have been gifted with, some of us have boundless energy, others can teach, write, act, cook, fund-raise and a host of others. Often we may know our mission but other equally good activities such as writing, fund-raising could consume our time and these distract us from that mission. So know your mission, stick to it and at times you need to be stubbornly single-minded.

Sixth, I think many of us need to learn to work smarter! I see many of my friends work till they are burnt out and I would say some of them are really not working smart! Why invent the wheel again? There are countless things to do in the school, countless people to meet, countless programmes to monitor. Now work smart. What can you learn from others who have walked the path before you? Fortunately or unfortunately, we are not octopuses so we don't have so many arms to do the numerous tasks. Have you ever thought of empowering others in your school? Have you thought of training others to do the job? On the surface it may look like you are losing control, but you are acutally gaining more power and becoming lots more effective. Your people will

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- Toffler

also become more involved and will also become more enthusiastic about work. In time they will learn the ropes of the trade and will be able to run schools of their own too. In this way you are contributing to the system.

As a result of our "*kiasu*" (fear of losing out) mentality many of us have the buffet syndrome, i.e., "everything also want" so you pile everything on the plate of your teachers! Has it ever crossed your mind that quite a few of your teachers may not be able to digest everything? They can't cope and end up real frustrated. Here in Singapore we are exposed to many ideas. Administrators and teachers attend numerous staff development workshops. Often heads want teachers to share what they've learnt and then all to implement the new way of teaching or a new programme. You hear people talk about colour cards -- red, green, yellow etc and you also want to do the same. Then someone shared about "race horse derbies" and you think it will be a good idea to try that out too. Some programmes may not be suitable for your school. Whilst they may work real well in school A it may not work in your school because of various factors.

Seventh, don't be in a hurry. If you have too many things going it might end up worst. Take one step at a time. You might in the first half of the year attend to discipline problems. Here don't try to eradicate all problems -- work on a couple of problems which are really urgent, when that's taken care of, move on to other issues. In the next half you might want to move on to programmes. Work with your heads of departments. Don't try to do too much at any one time -- you might end up "killing" your teachers. And of what good are "dead" teachers?

And finally I think that heads

need to be open to their staff and to their ideas. I have met many who are so set in their way of thinking (who isn't?) that their mindsets hindered them in their work. It's not much use having an open door policy and when teachers come to give you alternative viewpoints you "pooh pooh" their views (at least at the back of your mind). I have met a head who tells me so many times that I am only seeing from my perspective (an academic in my ivory tower) and from his perspective what I suggested won't work. To him I will say at least cultivate the ability to put aside what he knows so that he can listen to another viewpoint without prejudice. This is what Waitley (*Empires of the Mind*, 1995) calls "portable ignorance". To Waitley "developing portable ignorance is essential to being a self-leader." Remember paradigms can trap us into seeing the world in only one way! Heads really need to be open to new ideas and to keep pace with what's happening in the world. You really can't afford to do more of the same thing or to become better at what you are doing. You will need to do lots of different things. In order to lead others you need to lead yourself.

Thus far the above are some qualities you need for your job but are there some other essentials that you may need to equip yourself with as we move into the next century? I believe that leaders need to learn to focus on the big picture. I am not sure if this is a skill that can be taught or learnt (maybe nurtured is more accurate). So many of us get caught with details and we can't see the big picture. That's why to me teams are so important for team members complement each other. There are those who provide the big picture, others zoom in on the details. As we move into the next

century, we need to learn to work in teams more and more.

You need to learn how to interpret the masses of data churned out by the computer. You can't say we will focus on this area next year -- the issue is on what basis did you come up with such a conclusion? You need to substantiate with facts and figures why this is your area of concern. You may need to come to grips with quantitative tools, for numbers are the fundamental language.

And, in this age of knowledge, you cannot afford not to upgrade and update. You cannot afford to be left behind. Again I quote from Waitley "Those who embrace new information technology today will of course have a crucial head start" Knowledge and information will be the most apt form of capital. And, to Toffler, "The illiterate of the year 2000 will not be the individual who cannot read or write but the one who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn."

Now that you have read through this short note, get yourself prepared. Whatever information you have acquired becomes outdated real fast. What we learn in classrooms have a very short shelf life!

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