

3 tips for leading a school through the Covid-19 crisis

No leadership course could prepare heads for this crisis - but they are stepping up with courage, says Steve Munby.

By Steve Munby
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“My National Professional Qualification for Headship program (NPQH) didn’t prepare me for this,” said a school leader on Twitter this week.

As a leader, I have had to deal with many challenges in my career, including gangsters, the murder of children, and the death of members of staff.

But I cannot think of anything in my whole career that even comes close to requiring the amount of bravery and dedication that I am seeing now from teachers, from school leaders and from others in public service all over the country.

No development program can possibly prepare leaders to help them to deal with the current issues and challenges that they face. We are in uncharted territory. Evidence-based strategies that can tell you which actions are likely to be more effective just don’t apply.

Coronavirus: School leaders are scared and isolated

The impact of coronavirus means that school leaders are being required to make decisions that could save or endanger hundreds of lives, with very little guidance to help them.

Many are feeling scared, isolated, stressed and overwhelmed. But every day they are going to work and showing the leadership that is needed from them.

In 2010, I made a speech on servant leadership. I said that servant leaders don’t ask themselves, “What kind of leader do I want to be?” Instead, they ask themselves: “What kind of leadership is wanted of me?”

They lead with moral purpose. They see it as their fundamental duty to do everything in their power to act in the interests of those they serve – in our case, children, young people and their families.

I have seen this demonstrated over many years, in all kinds of schools and settings. But, in my whole lifetime, I have never in education seen such selflessness, such courage and such service from so many.

At times like this I think we have to do three things:

1. Demonstrate optimism and resilience, even if we are struggling inside

If we appear negative and cynical, or if we come across as a quivering wreck, then that makes it so much harder for those we lead and for those who rely on us. We are the best that we can be because that is what people need us to be.

At times like this, when there is nobody else, the job of leaders is to be there, to get up the next morning and go back to work because nobody else can do this and it is down to us.

There is a story about a wise man who always seemed to know the answer to everything. One day, a young man tried to catch him out. He decided to catch a butterfly and to put it behind his back and then say to the wise man, "If you are so wise, is the butterfly behind my back alive or dead?"

If the wise man said alive, then he would crush it quickly and bring it forward dead. And, if the wise man said dead, he would bring it forward alive. Either way, the wise man would, for once, be wrong.

So, he caught a butterfly and put it behind his back. And he went to the wise man and said: "If you are so wise, tell me: is the butterfly behind my back alive or dead?"

And the wise man said: "It is in your hands."

At this moment, the nation's future is in the hands of health workers, delivery drivers, shop workers, cleaners, social workers, care-home workers, teachers and leaders. These are unsung heroes whose songs we – all of us – should now be singing.

2. Ask for help from others and don't think that we can do this on our own

Nobody has all the answers but talking things through with others or asking for help is essential if we are to get through this.

It has been great to see leaders in the system, such as [Geoff Barton](#), [Leora Cruddas](#), [Paul Whiteman](#), [Alison Peacock](#) and [Michael Pain](#) reaching out, offering help and support and doing all that they can, albeit from afar.

And it has been inspirational to see leaders asking for help on social media and receiving it from colleagues. Most of all right now, we need to ask for and value the support and care from our loved ones and friends.

3. Trust in our instincts

Hold true to our values and make the best choices and decisions that we can, even if we sometimes may get it wrong. What matters most of all in these situations is that we are authentic and true. Leadership is a task with humanity and authenticity at its heart.

Our brave school leaders may have doubts and worries. But, along with leaders and workers in other essential services, they are currently the bearer of the nation's countless hopes and expectations.

None of us was taught how to lead in a pandemic, and it isn't on any NPQH program. But what we can do as leaders is to show up, with optimism and resilience, to reach out and ask for help and, most of all, to do what is right and to stay true.

As one school leader tweeted: "We are solid! We will look after our colleagues, our kids and our communities. We feel privileged to be able to serve."

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