



LEADERSHIP

and dealing with people

In this edition we bring you advice on dealing with people issues we hope you will find useful.

The article on Courageous conversations provides sound advice on the kinds of things that should be avoided when having to engage individuals in conversations about thorny issues that often take place in an atmosphere that is charged with emotion even before a word has been said. The article, which is based on a book by Holly Weeks, identifies nine common mistakes that leaders make in the way in which they prepare for these kinds of conversations and in how they engage with the other party.

One way of reducing the number of Courageous conversations one needs to engage in as a leader is by providing colleagues and subordinates with constant feedback about their performance. Many people consider the term feedback to be synonym of criticism or fault-finding but that is not as it should be. In the article 'Building a feedback-rich culture' we explore some of the skills and processes involved in creating a school culture that encourages positive and constructive feedback and that makes it possible to deal with thorny issues in an atmosphere characterised by openness and trust.

Since the publication of our previous edition we were fortunate to have attended a presentation by Professor Jonathan Jansen, the vice-chancellor of the University of Free State, in which he presented what he described as his seven uncommon lessons of leadership, which we have attempted to weave into the article with the same title. We also carry a review in this edition of the professor's latest book, which he co-authored with American film-maker Molly Blank. We hope this will encourage you to purchase a copy of this thought-provoking book, which includes two CDs with short video clips that are used to illustrate the success stories of the 19 schools that the lessons of the book are drawn from.

Finally there is an article by regular contributor Erich Cloete who writes about what he describes as 'Weather in the classroom' and provides helpful advice and guidance for improved classroom control and better discipline.

We hope you will enjoy the read.

COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS

9 common mistakes that we make

All leaders will from time to time need to engage in 'courageous conversations' with employees and work colleagues. These are conversations that most people would prefer to avoid but that are an essential part of a leader's work; they are the conversations that one must engage in when tension runs high over roles, responsibilities and aspirations, failed projects, goals and expectations, and disagreements about how best to tackle complex problems or large projects. Courageous conversations are courageous and if not handled properly produce outcomes that are all negative including resentment, bruised egos and ongoing tensions that persist over time. Sarah Green,¹ in a slide show based on a book by Holly Weeks, identifies nine common mistakes that leaders make when engaging in what she calls 'difficult conversations'.



MISTAKE 1

WE FALL INTO A COMBAT MENTALITY

Courageous conversations are the kinds of event that most people prefer to avoid because these kinds of conversations are mostly associated with confrontation, conflict, stress and unhappiness. These kinds of emotions are similar to those we experience when our life or well-being is threatened and act as triggers for our fight or flight reflex, so we gear ourselves up as if for a battle we want to win.

This kind of mindset, which views the person or group with whom we will hold the discussion as an enemy that we must overcome rather than as a colleague or associate with whom we need to work, is unlikely to resolve the differences that created the need for the conversation in the first place. There can also be no winners if the conversation becomes combative; there will only be losers. It is therefore important to keep in mind that the real enemy is your combative mentality. Control and defeat it and you will have taken the first step to achieving a successful outcome from your Courageous conversation.



MISTAKE 2

WE TRY TO OVERSIMPLIFY THE PROBLEM

Courageous conversations are almost always a consequence

of differences in perceptions of the nature of complex problems and the kinds of solutions that are best suited to resolving them. Over-simplifying complex problems in a effort to achieve consensus about the best way to resolve them seldom helps because it inevitably avoids dealing with the issues that created the need for the dialogue. Remind yourself that if it was that simple you would not have needed to hold the Courageous conversation in the first place.



MISTAKE 3

WE DON'T BRING ENOUGH RESPECT TO THE CONVERSATION

Respect is vital and it is important for both parties to respect each other and in doing so to acknowledge and respect the nature and complexity of the problem. With respect, solving the problem becomes a shared endeavour with, hopefully, an acknowledgement of the contribution of the other when the issue is finally put to rest.



MISTAKE 4

WE LASH OUT - OR SHUT DOWN

Most people typically respond in one of two ways when faced with Courageous conversations – they attack or they withdraw. Attack in most instances means being more aggressive and abrasive than the other. These attacks often change the direction of the discussion, moving it away from the topic to the personality and weaknesses of one's perceived opponent. Those who choose to withdraw in these circumstances attempt either to smooth things over by conceding their ground or simply close up and refuse to participate in the conversation. Neither of these two approaches helps to resolve the problem and while one may be seething inside, or hurting, focusing on the outcome rather than on one's emotions is key if the underlying issues are to be addressed and resolved.



MISTAKE 5

WE REACT TO THWARTING PLOYS

Thwarting ploys are conversational gambits that are used to close

down the conversation and to bring it to an end. Thwarting ploys can take many forms including lying, threatening, shouting, crying and silence. The best response to these kinds of ploys is to invite the other to explain the reason for their behaviour: 'I don't understand why you are shouting at me?' or 'I am not sure how to interpret your silence?' Patience is required as is a willingness to listen to what the other is not saying.



MISTAKE 6
WE GET 'HOOKED'

We all have weak points and our colleagues may well know the buttons they need to push to touch the weak spots that trigger our emotions. Leaders need to be aware of their personal triggers and must develop mechanisms to control their emotions when these triggers are tested as they inevitably will be when emotions run high.



MISTAKE 7
WE REHEARSE

Most people, when faced with the need to engage in a Courageous conversation, tend to play out the way in which the conversation will unfold in their heads as a way of preparing for it. In rehearsing for the coming engagement we make assumptions about our protagonist and his or her perceptions about the nature of the problem we are attempting to address. The trouble with this approach is that our assumptions may be entirely wrong and our counterarguments therefore of little relevance. More importantly, these assumptions may prevent us from listening for understanding when we begin our engagement. They may also cloud our responses as we try to fit what the other is saying into our own perceptions of what we believed he or she was going to say.



MISTAKE 8
WE MAKE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT OUR COUNTERPART'S INTENTIONS

No one has the ability to see the intentions of another and yet we make assumptions about these all the time. In the case of a Courageous conversation both parties need to appreciate this ambiguity. A good way to deal with this is to invite your counterpart to explain how he or she sees the problem. Use words along the line of 'I am not sure that I fully understand how you see this problem and it will be helpful for you to explain it to me'.



MISTAKE 9
WE LOSE SIGHT OF THE GOAL

There is no point in engaging in a Courageous conversation if you haven't set yourself a clear goal or outcome. The outcome cannot be about winning or losing; it has to be one that is productive and that allows you and your counterpart to retain your collective dignity and an uncluttered, constructive working relationship. Keep that in mind and you will be less likely to become distracted by thwarting ploys and emotions.

NOTE

1. The slide show by Sarah Green is based on *Failure to Communicate: How Conversations Go Wrong and What You Can Do to Right Them* by Holly Weeks. For the slide show go to: <http://hbr.org/web/slideshows/difficult-conversations-nine-common-mistakes/1-slide>



BUILDING
a feedback-rich culture

In a December 2013 blog on HBR Blog Network,¹ Ed Batista, an executive coach and instructor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, makes some suggestions on how to create a feedback-rich culture in an organisation.

If properly used, interpersonal feedback can become a significant motivator and important

driver of quality in any organisation, including schools, but it is a process that requires good interpersonal skills and an ability to read the mood of one's colleagues and co-workers. In his blog Batista makes the point that direct feedback is the most efficient way of gathering information about one's performance and relationships with others and of learning from this, but that it is a process

that can also be fraught with emotional challenges if the circumstances are wrong.

At a most basic level, interpersonal feedback is simply a conversation between two people. The extent to which these kinds of conversation can help build organisations with a strong positive culture depends to a large extent on the ability of the organisation's leaders to create a workplace culture that is conducive to interpersonal feedback and that becomes feedback-rich.

Batista suggests that there are four essential requirements for a feedback-rich culture to thrive.

1 SAFETY AND TRUST

Most people struggle to deal with feedback that is critical of their performance even if it's intended to be constructive. It is therefore important for leaders to encourage the individuals and teams that they work with to invite constructive feedback, and to promote the idea of feedback as part of learning and professional growth. Trust is an essential requirement in this regard. Equally important is the need for leaders to be sensitive to the mood of the individual(s) with whom they are dealing and to provide feedback at a time a place when it is likely to be most readily accepted.

Safety and trust in relationships are strengthened in circumstances where:

- Leaders and team members recognise one another as individuals
- Leaders and team members are willing to talk about emotions and more particularly about their emotional responses to criticism, negative comment and failure
- Leaders and team members accept that there are times when it is appropriate to say 'No' in response to an offer of feedback. The idea is not to refuse feedback but rather to postpone it to a time when the individual concerned is better placed to accept and engage with it constructively.

2 BALANCE

Make sure that you keep a balance between positive and negative feedback with the balance shifted heavily in favour of positive feedback. Experts in this field suggest that the balance between positive and critical feedback should be in the ratio of 5 : 1. Typically the ratio is the other way round with feedback mostly provided in circumstances where there have been shortcomings in the performance of an individual or group.

One of the reasons why leaders avoid giving positive feedback is the mistaken belief that positive comments and feedback acknowledging good performance may be perceived as being insincere.

Batista gives the following advice for establishing a balance:

- **Offer some positive feedback and stop there:** This is advice that all leaders need to take to heart because positive feedback is often used as a precursor to criticism. The positive feedback in this scenario is perceived to be a sop or cushion for the blow that follows with any benefits that may have accrued from the process being lost.
- **Start small:** The best way to encourage positive behaviour and better performance is to praise or at least acknowledge it when you see it. Don't restrict your praise to big events only. Try to find something good to acknowledge every day.
- **Praise effort, not ability:** Evidence from research suggests that praising effort and commitment rather than success, particularly in circumstances where targets may not have been met or goals achieved, helps build resilience and determination. Praising success, on the other hand, can result in risk-aversion with individuals and groups more likely to set goals and tackle tasks that are well within their capability as a way of ensuring success rather than those that will challenge their ability and ingenuity.

3 NORMALCY

For behaviours to become integrated into the operational culture of an organisation they need to be used and practised until they become bedded down to the point where they become habits. 'Normalcy' is a term often used to describe these kinds of practices and daily routines. The failure to practise ideas and new approaches that are presented at workshops or that grow out of brainstorming sessions is the prime reason why most new approaches fail. It is the job of the leader to set the example in this respect and to both use what has been agreed upon and to insist that the other members of the team follow his or her example by practising or implementing what has been decided.

Suggestions for making feedback normal include:

- **Avoid waiting for a special occasion:** Keep it simple and make it happen rather than postponing it and developing it into something that becomes complex and unwieldy.

- **Work in public:** While certain forms of feedback are best done in one-to-one situations, feedback of this nature has little impact on the culture of the organisation. Rather focus on initiating regular feedback that can be provided in the open workplace or in large and small groups as a way of promoting it as an acceptable practice.

4 PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Leaders need to walk the talk and by doing so demonstrate and model the kinds of behaviours that they expect from their workplace colleagues. Staff members will be quick to identify and exploit differences between what we say and what we do and will use these to justify their actions when they underperform. As a leader you are bound to make mistakes, including errors of judgement, but it is not the genuine errors that undermine the legitimacy of a leader, it is the perceived hypocrisy between what the leader says and how he or she acts.

Suggestions for improving personal accountability include:

- **Being transparent:** Talk about the need for feedback and about the emotional challenges that it imposes on people, particularly those individuals who are sensitive to criticism. Encourage discussion about good practice and the importance of focusing on behaviours rather than on personalities. Open discussions of this nature not only help improve the quality of the feedback that will be provided but also help bring the notion of feedback into the everyday vocabulary of the workplace. This familiarity

helps reduce the stigma that many employees attach to it.

- **Ask:** Invite feedback on your own performance from team members and be willing to take it on the chin when necessary. Model appropriate responses to feedback that is critical of your performance by inviting suggestions on how you could have done things better. Develop this dialogue to the point where team members accept that regular feedback, both positive and negative, is in everyone's best interest.

Although Ed Batista's blog was written for business executives, all of the points that he makes are of relevance to principals and teachers at every level in the system. Just as regular feedback is a vital component of good teaching because it helps learners to understand their strengths and weaknesses, it is also an important part of the process of helping teachers, HODs and deputy principals to grow as leaders. Use the model that Batista has proposed in his blog to produce a more feedback-rich culture in your school. Making it work will improve job satisfaction and standards of performance at every level.

REFERENCE

1. Ed Batista, *Building a Feedback-Rich Culture*, December 24, 2013. Downloaded from <http://blogs.hbr.org/2013/12/building-a-feedback-rich-culture/>

7 UNCOMMON LESSONS OF LEADERSHIP

New perspectives on leadership from **Professor Jonathan Jansen, Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Free State.**

We were recently privileged to attend a presentation on leadership by Professor Jonathan Jansen, vice-chancellor of the University of the Free State. Like all good teachers, Professor Jansen has the ability to challenge his audience to think and in doing so to critically examine their own perspectives and beliefs about the matter under discussion. He does this using a mixture of shock and humour interspersed with entertaining and

often controversial anecdotes and stories drawn from his own wide experience as student, teacher, lecturer, dean and vice-chancellor. This presentation was no different: he challenged and debunked some traditional views on leadership, offering as alternatives his own views on the notion of leadership and of the kinds of qualities that leaders must display if they are to succeed.

The title of his presentation, 'Seven uncommon lessons of leadership', aptly summed up its content and mostly reflected a very different perspective of leadership from that of his audience, most of whom were school principals. Prof. Jansen had kindly agreed to address the group who are all currently part of a professional development programme run under the auspices of the Principals Academy Trust, despite the fact that he was on leave at the time. The presentation took place at Luhlaza High School in Khayelitsha.

In introducing the topic, Prof. Jansen noted that for most people the notion of leadership is that of a strong man. Leaders are expected to project strength, not weakness, to be single-minded, decisive and always in control; warriors who lead people into battle. Prof. Jansen's view is that this model of leadership is neither appropriate nor sufficient to cope with the complex, fast-paced and ever-changing nature of the world we live in today. For successful leadership in today's world, he suggests, that leaders require a different set of competencies and that these need to include the following:

1 TO LEAD IS TO KNOW ('KNOW YOURSELF')

It is impossible to be an effective leader if you do not have a good understanding of your own strengths and weaknesses. Good leaders understand and are able to control the triggers that ignite their emotional responses to particular events and circumstances. This is not to suggest that leaders should be emotionally detached but rather that they develop the ability to curtail their outward emotional responses in the interest of resolving conflict or when dealing with volatile situations.

Knowing yourself as a leader also means understanding your role and responsibilities as leader and what the leadership position that you occupy requires of you. Prof. Jansen drove home this point by referring to a scene from the film *The Lion King*¹ in which the young lion Simba, heir to the throne of the Lion kingdom, consumed by doubt in his ability to lead his pride, attempts to escape the responsibilities that this leadership position will impose on him. Like many leaders he becomes fearful when first confronted by the realities of his new position. Then while staring at his own reflection he is challenged by the ghost of his father with the words to 'remember who you are!'² Simba's doubts about his own ability and his fear of failure are emotional responses that are shared by many leaders at the start of their leadership journey.

2 TO LEAD IS TO LISTEN ('SENSORY LEADERSHIP')

While being a good listener is an essential skill for all leaders, Prof. Jansen suggests that being a good listener is not enough and that leaders need to make use all of their senses if they are to properly understand their organisation and its people.

Generally leaders are overly reliant on their sense of sight because our visual observations tend to dominate our other sensory perceptions. Sound and taste together with our senses of smell and touch all provide important sources of information. By making a deliberate effort to take cognisance of all of their senses, leaders can gain a fuller and more nuanced perspective of their organisation, of its people and of particular situations and places. Obvious examples from schools would include such things as the smell of unhygienic toilets or of newly cut grass; the buzz of a working classroom or the raucous laughter of children doing mischief; and the warmth of a hug or handshake from a colleague or parent or a deliberate turning away when eyes should meet.

3 TO LEAD IS TO SUBMIT

Humility and the willingness to place oneself at the service of others is one of the cornerstones of good leadership. Humility does not mean timidity or weakness; rather it is a commitment to placing the interests of the organisation ahead of one's own. It is embraced in the concept of servant-leadership where the leader is the servant of the organisation or group, and is driven by the need to do whatever is necessary to move the organisation towards the achievement of its goals. A willingness to submit includes the willingness to admit to weakness and to acknowledge and accept responsibility for one's own errors and failings, as well as for operational weaknesses and failures within the organisation that one has been charged to lead.



Prof. Jonathan Jansen speaking to principals and guests at Luhlaza High School in Khayelitsha. The principals are all involved in a professional development and support programme established by the Principals Academy Trust (PAT). The Trust sponsors their participation in a purpose-designed post-graduate management development programme at UCT's Graduate School of Business. The principals are also provided with ongoing coaching and mentoring from an experienced retired principal for a period of up to three years.

4 TO LEAD IS TO COME CLOSE

Prof. Jansen considers 'nearness' to be a vital leadership ingredient for those who are involved in 'transformation' work. 'Nearness' is about trust and emotional and spiritual closeness rather than physical proximity. It is about caring and in demonstrating through one's action an

appreciation of the humanity of the other even in times of need, crisis and conflict. His own ability to be near his students is one of the reasons that he has been so successful at transforming the campus of the University of the Free State during his tenure as vice-chancellor. Part of his success in this regard has to do with the manner in which he has allowed his students virtual access to him at all times through social media sites. An example of this was an SMS from a student, not realising that he was in Tokyo at the time, complaining about the lack of hot water in her residence. Despite this he was still able to ensure that the problem was resolved within 30 minutes of being notified of the situation.

To Prof. Jansen this concept of nearness is well illustrated in the following lines of his 'favourite Christian author' C.S. Lewis:³

'Friendship exhibits a glorious nearness by resemblance to Heaven itself where the very multitude of the blessed (which no man can number) increases the fruition which each has of God. For every soul, seeing Him in her own way, doubtless communicates that unique vision to all the rest ... The more we thus share the Heavenly Bread between us, the more we shall have.'

5 TO LEAD IS TO SHOW (DEMONSTRATE)

Good leaders walk the talk rather than talking the walk. Leaders need to model the kinds of behaviour that they expect from those they lead, rather than focussing on issues of policy and compliance. Their behaviour needs to be exemplary, something that is difficult to find in this country's current crop of political and business leaders. The importance of deeds rather than words in promoting exemplary behaviour is well illustrated by the following quote from the teachings of St Francis of Assisi: 'Preach the gospel at all times; use words if you have to'. Principals often underestimate the extent to which they are viewed as role models by their pupils, teachers and the wider community. Scrutiny of their behaviour also doesn't end at the start and end of the school day. What they do and how they conduct themselves outside of school hours, during weekends and school holidays will also be noted and talked about whenever and wherever they come into contact with parents, pupils and teachers and their reputation and integrity as leader will often be defined.

6 TO LEAD IS TO GLOW (OPTIMISM)

Leaders need to show optimism at all times but particularly in times of crisis. The glow of optimism is necessary to create a sense of hope and a belief that an alternative and better future is possible and attainable. The alternative is despair. Where there is hope individuals will work together to achieve a common goal that is of benefit to all. Without hope individuals jealously protect their own interests even where this comes at a cost to others.

Good leaders demonstrate their optimism not only by what they say but also by their manner and their actions. Teachers, Prof. Jansen suggested, frequently undermine the status of their profession by the way in which they portray themselves, their schools and the children that they teach. He cited examples of the differences in the way in which graduating teachers presented themselves in comparison to graduates in the Sciences and in Medicine.

7 TO LEAD IS TO SACRIFICE ('OFFERING UP YOURSELF')

Leaders cannot have it all and will at times need to make sacrifices where this is in the best interests of their organisation and its people. Sacrifices will include things like time, family life and personal interests but may also include their own health and welfare. Making a sacrifice will also include doing things one does not enjoy and that at times may not only be irksome but also be counter to one's own beliefs and values. This is because leaders need to see themselves as the leader of all of their people and not just those with whom they share the same world view. Sacrificial leadership can be a particular challenge to people who hold strong religious views or follow strict cultural practices but who are leaders of organisations that include individuals from diverse backgrounds and belief systems.



We were fortunate to have been on campus at the University of the Free State on their open day on Saturday 5 May and were surprised to discover Prof. Jansen in chef's jacket and hat serving meals to staff members, prospective students and their parents. Much of the time he was surrounded by current and prospective students clamouring to take photographs of themselves with him. The obvious affinity that existed between Prof. Jansen and his students and the relaxed manner in which they engaged with him provided good evidence of his notion of leaders 'being close' to those they lead.

NOTES

1. *The Lion King* is an animated musical adventure film produced by Walt Disney Feature Animation in 1994.
2. To download a YouTube clip of this scene go to: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_OMPrqH4_4. It is worth watching.
3. C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, Harcourt, New York, 1960.

CHANGING THE WEATHER

in our classrooms to gain optimal rapport, engagement, responsiveness and learning

Written by Erich Cloete

The discipline summit hosted by the Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshekga on 7 and 8 March 2014 in Boksburg, near Pretoria, reiterates the department's willingness to seek alternative solutions and strategies to improve discipline in our schools and classrooms. A lot of credit, however, should go to the Federation of Governing Bodies of South African Schools (FEDSAS) who proposed arranging a summit to address the issue of ill-discipline to the National Consultative Forum (NCF) more than four years ago.

Various studies show that disciplinary problems in schools constitute a major threat to the quality of education in South Africa. Research done confirms that teachers are becoming increasingly distressed about disciplinary problems in schools and in classes since corporal punishment has been outlawed. It is also believed that visits to the principal's office, demerits, detention and suspension are not effective enough to correct deviant behaviour. This does not suggest apportioning blame to any individual person or component of the education system but it shows a definite need for the department to review the current disciplinary challenges in our schools.

More and more teachers feel stripped of their dignity, and many feel they are victims of bullying. Disruptive classroom behaviour is one way in which learners seize power in class and use it to distress a teacher. Another is verbal abuse. This is not limited to learners in secondary schools. Even primary school learners are guilty of this. During the discipline summit, Deputy Minister of Basic Education Enver Surty said the fact that learners are told about their rights on a daily basis without the accompanying emphasis on responsibilities, creates a problem in schools. He emphasised that learners come to school with drugs and guns, abuse their classmates and disobey authority. The deputy minister highlighted that what emerged at the summit was the recognition that there was a problem and that discipline should not be seen as the responsibility of teachers only.

Surty said the culture of violence in schools, which often results from acts by bullies and gangs, is a reflection on the society and community that schools serve. Surty, however, emphasised the importance of exploring and finding alternatives.

This was confirmed by Bobby Soobrayan, then director general of the Department of Basic Education, who also stated the importance of school discipline and said that it is a critical matter that requires urgent attention. It is clear from what was discussed at the summit that school discipline is a complex matter that includes much more than just classroom discipline and practice. Due to the complexity and scope it would be very difficult to discuss it here in full. For the purpose of this article the focus is on suitable strategies teachers could use to change the weather in their classrooms, to get the learners under control and to establish a foundation from which learning and teaching can take place, without taking the various disciplinary policies of schools into consideration.

Factors that influence classroom discipline

I have observed a few interesting points over the years that impact on discipline in the classroom and in many instances hinder the effective implementation of classroom practices. These include:

- The ability to enforce discipline consistently and effectively in the classroom is crucial. This is not necessarily governed by the age of the teacher. Both experienced (older) and more inexperienced (younger) teachers struggle to maintain good discipline in their classrooms. However, the reasons why they struggle differ significantly. Teachers beginning their careers need a lot of guidance, support and assistance with classroom management before they are able to manage disciplinary matters effectively. When we expect our novice teachers to perform like the 30-year veteran in the classroom next door we are in all probability setting them up for failure. Where more experienced (older) teachers struggle to maintain effective discipline in their classes it has been found that it is almost always due to their inability to enforce the authority invested in them and not necessarily due to a lack of knowledge.
- It has been observed that teachers find it difficult to enforce discipline consistently. The inconsistent application of discipline is regarded as one of the most influential factors that impacts negatively on learner discipline.

Consistency varies from period to period, day to day and from teacher to teacher. Teachers are not always unaware of this but sometimes just unable to be consistent due to a lack of emotional strength and/or sufficient energy levels.

- Teachers' expectations of how learners will respond and behave in their classrooms are seriously undermining their own actions that are intended to create a positive learning environment. Many teachers perceive their learners to have no interest in their work. Sometimes this is the case, but not always. Frequently learners may appear uninterested, unfocused and undisciplined when they come to class and teachers find it difficult to understand why they behave in this way. Teachers often expect learners, especially younger primary school learners, to automatically show an eager interest in their work and to act this interest out through their behaviour, without any external motivation. When this doesn't happen teachers find it difficult to deal with. It is definitely the case that there are many learners who are not interested in their own learning progress, who disrupt classrooms to the distress of the teacher. It is, however, also true that there are teachers who prefer to blame the parents, the system, large classes, school management, learners' inability or learners' lack of respect for authority for poor school discipline. These teachers are in a negative mindset most of the time. Rather than examining how this mindset and their consequent behaviour impacts on the disciplinary problems they experience in their classrooms, they tend to shy away from it.

QUESTIONS TO CHANGE THE WEATHER IN THE CLASSROOM

It is important for teachers to create a positive climate of learning in their classrooms for a number of reasons, not least being that they should provide an environment that encourages learners to develop a lifelong love of learning.

There are questions that teachers can ask themselves even before entering the classroom to help them change the weather in their classrooms. Teachers could start by asking questions about more constructive ways to address learners' behaviour problems.

Examples of questions are:

- What do those learners always acting out need from me?
- What are these learners thinking, feeling and wanting?

- What is the big picture that I am perhaps missing?
- What is possible at my school and in my class?
- What would work for me?
- To what extent is it necessary to control behaviour for the sake of maintaining order and a sense of safety in the classroom?
- To what extent is my response to the learners' behaviour escalating or de-escalating the crisis in my class?
- Am I listening to them with learner ears or judgemental ears? Learner ears might listen to what is interesting or valuable about what learners are saying. Judgemental ears might focus on the stupid or irrelevant things teachers think learners are saying.
- How might the ability of teachers who listen with judgemental ears to their learners affect their ability to learn? This is not to say that everything will run smoothly if a teacher listens with learner ears but it certainly can help to know whether a judgemental mindset was triggered by something on the outside, such as a learner acting out with no respect, or by something on the inside such as when a teacher is feeling bad about him or herself or challenged by something in his or her private life.
- How are my assumptions about the learners getting in the way of their learning?
- How can I feel more connected with them?
- What can I learn from my learners?

ONCE INSIDE THE CLASSROOM: SLOW DOWN AND GET STARTED

It's important to note that the slow-down strategy is just a starting point, a way to get a class under control. Teachers should be the boss in the classroom. In the absence of power in the classroom, a leader will arise and it will not be the model learner. When confronted with a difficult class – whether this is a class one has had for a while and has lost control of, or one that is seen once a day in a subject area – the best thing teachers can do is to slow things down. Too many teachers have the opposite reaction to undisciplined learners. They get stressed and excitable, and they speed things up. They talk louder, get frustrated, demand, yell and show their anger. Once they have headed down a negative, judgemental road like this, the only way they can regain control of a class is through intimidation: being mean enough and threatening enough to cause learners to relinquish control back to them. If teachers choose this course, every day will be a never-ending battle.

Suggestions as to how to slow down include:

- Start from the beginning. As soon as teachers see their learners, first thing in the morning or when they arrive at the door, they need to stop them and not let them proceed any further until they're quiet and attentive. Even if it takes 10 minutes, so be it. They will get used to it and the time will get shorter.
- Move deliberately. Slowing down has a calming effect on learners. Teachers will also discover that, surprisingly, both they and their learners will become more accomplished.
- Teachers must try to speak more softly and slowly at times. Sometimes learners should have to strain slightly in order to hear what the teacher is saying.
- Very importantly, teachers must decide that, no matter what, they will not talk over their learners or move on with instruction until learners are quiet and attentive.
- Teachers could use short, direct sentences, and offer simple instructions that incrementally get learners to do what they want. For example, place your Maths book in the top corner of your desk and stand up. Increase complexity gradually.
- Pause often and for a beat longer than feels comfortable. This technique has an almost supernatural way of drawing attention to you and what you have to say.
- At any point during the day, if the learners aren't giving exactly what is expected, they must be stopped immediately. Be consistent.
- Teachers can take their time but must never be boring. They can still be happy and enthusiastic in front of their learners while at the same time taking things slowly.
- Once learners are calm and used to the routine and the teacher has established him or herself as the leader of the classroom, teachers must teach their classroom management plan over again, as if it's the first day of school.

THE WHOLE BRAIN TECHNIQUE AS ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY TO GET LEARNERS' ATTENTION

This strategy is becoming more popular in the United States. It entails teachers gaining control over their learners by plugging their brains into the brains of their learners. The prefrontal cortex is nicknamed the CEO by scientists who do research into the human brain. It controls decision making and planning and is also responsible for focusing attention.

This strategy utilises the class-yes instruction, which works as follows. The teacher makes a decision to get the class's attention. To do this the teacher is activating his or her prefrontal cortex by using the decision-making function of that part of the brain. The teacher then says 'class' and the learners respond by saying 'yes' in unison. The learners must say 'yes' in the same tone of voice and in the same way as the teacher says 'class'. This is crucial. So if the teacher says 'class - class' in a high whiny tone the students say 'yes - yes' in a high whiny tone and freeze while looking at the teacher. The learners, by mimicking the tone of the teacher's voice, have now activated their own prefrontal cortexes by using its focusing mechanism. In a very literal sense the teacher's brain is now plugged into the learners' brains. The CEO of the teacher's brain, exercising its decision-making capacity, now has the attention of and is ready to instruct the CEO of the learners' brains, which are utilising their focusing mechanism. To read more about this method of getting learners' attention, visit www.wholebrainteaching.com.

There are no easy answers for managing discipline in the classroom. But it remains the responsibility of the teacher to create the weather in the classroom despite the fact that learners bring their own mindsets, which impact that weather, to the classroom. It is the teacher's response to what happens that will either calm a threatening storm or stir it up to a hurricane. It is also important to remember the old saying that learners don't care how much teachers know until they know how much they care.

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NEWS

DBE TASK TEAM

established to investigate the selling of posts



Education Minister Angie Motshekga

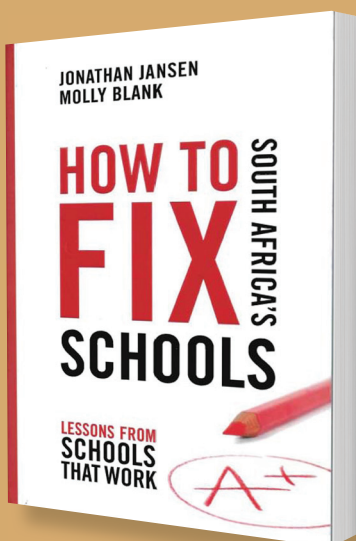
In an 18 May press release, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) announced that it would establish a task team to investigate claims that in some provinces and districts union representatives had colluded with departmental officials and other stakeholders to 'sell' certain posts, including principal's posts. The press release followed a meeting between Minister Angie Motshekga and Union representatives on Friday 16 May. Teacher unions represented at the meeting were the National Teachers' Union (NATU), the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA), the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (Sadtu), the Professional Educators' Union (PEU) and the Suid-Afrikaanse Onderwysersunie (SAOU).

Although the reports of post-selling remain no more than allegations at this stage, the Minister emphasised that she strongly condemned the practice and that if the allegations proved to be true the individuals involved would be charged with corruption as it was against the law.

The Minister's statement indicated that the task team would be an independent body constituted by the Public Service Commission, the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, the Department of Basic Education as well individuals with professional expertise in the fields of education, human resources and the law. The names of the members of the task team will be announced once the terms of reference of the task team have been finalised.

SADTU, some of whose officials were apparently implicated in the allegations, issued a statement on the same day, following a meeting of its National Executive Committee on 15 and 16 May, strongly condemning the practice. The statement included a call to 'all those members and non-members who may have been exposed to such activities to come forward and report these to the relevant authorities'. The NEC statement also indicated that the Union had already referred the matter to the ELRC and SACE for investigation.

BOOKREVIEW



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HOW TO FIX SOUTH AFRICA'S SCHOOLS

Lessons from
schools that
work

By Jonathan Jansen
and Molly Blank

I always look forward to reading education-related material that Jonathan Jansen has written because of his ability to present his unique perspectives and cogent argument in the form of a story, usually one that is entertaining, and that includes a strong message. His commentary and the stories that he tells in this book are no different. I use the term commentary deliberately because the lessons that he draws for this book are largely based on the 19

short video clips that Molly Blank has produced from her visits to the 19 schools that he identified for inclusion in this project.

Molly Blank and Jonathan Jansen, the two authors of this book, make it clear in their introduction that their intention with this project was to produce ‘... a short and simple manual that any community, such as principals, teachers, or parents, can use to “turn around” a dysfunctional or ineffective school’. They also emphasise that the manual ‘draws on research, and the “wisdom of practice” and a good dose of common sense’. I would love to believe that the process of turning around dysfunctional or ineffective schools was as simple a task as following the steps that are set out in a manual, but if that were so ‘fixing’ schools would be a relatively simple task. Unfortunately the reality of the matter is that it is a rather more complex and challenging task than that. Despite this concern, I believe that this is a very useful book and would recommend it to individuals and organisations that are working in this field as it provides a great deal of good advice and useful ideas on the processes that are involved in turning around underperforming and dysfunctional schools. In my view, the people that would most benefit from the advice that it gives are those district officials who work most directly with schools, because too often it is these officials who stymie improvement efforts through the administrative and compliance-related demands that they make on principals and teachers.

The layout of the book allows one to read it at several levels. One can quickly skim through the main narrative chapter by chapter, to gain a good conceptual understanding of the state of our public education system, of the likely consequences if we fail to address its failures, of the mistakes that we have made and of the kinds of interventions and improvement strategies that can be used to fix the schools that are broken. The chapter on ‘What are we doing wrong?’ is a good example of this with each of the eight mistakes that have been identified given its own page. So, for example, mistake number one is ‘We overburden schools and teachers with complex policies and demanding curricula when what is required are very simple things such as enough desks, competent teachers and clear timetables.’ On the facing page is a quote by a Physical Science teacher from one of the 19 schools in which he explains how his principal encourages him and values his ideas. The page-per-idea layout with the associated quote from a teacher, principal or learner from one of the 19 schools is repeated in seven of the eleven sections of the book – the

sections are not listed as numbered chapters but are given headings describing the topic that is covered. The eleven section headings are:

- What to expect from this manual
- Three resources you can use to change a school
- The state of education – nine facts
- What will happen to South Africa if we fail to fix our schools? – seven consequences
- What are we doing wrong? – eight mistakes
- What do we know from research and experience? – seven good practice lessons
- How we chose our Schools that Work
- Five reflections on visiting Schools that Work
- Ten key strategies that can change our schools
- Using the videos for change
- Tools for running a school improvement workshop – five templates

The last two sections ‘Using the videos for change’ and ‘Tools for running school improvement workshops – five templates’, provide useful guidelines on how the videos clips included on two CDs supplied with the manual can be used by schools, district officials and organisations working with schools to help guide the school improvement process. The videos clips add enormously to the value of the book because they bring the stories of the achievements of each of the 19 schools to life. I have had access to one of these video clips, which I obtained from the school, and have used it in workshops that I have run on a number of occasions – the response has always been positive. For struggling schools it provided inspiration for what they could be and for those who are privileged to work in some of this country’s best-performing schools it was an eye-opener bringing home the real challenges that professional colleagues who work in socio-economically deprived communities face and overcome.

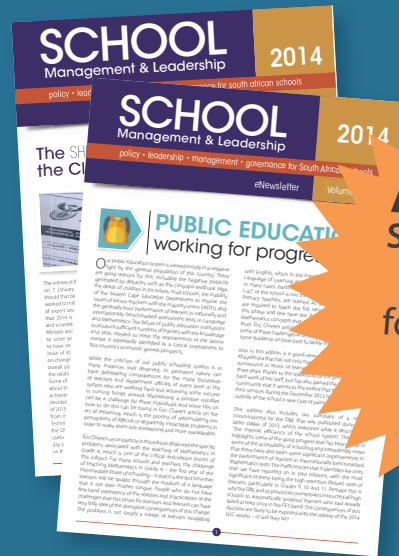
How to Fix South Africa’s Schools makes a valuable contribution to a proper understanding of the crises faced by our public school system but also offers helpful advice about the practical steps that schools, education officials and communities can take to begin the process of healing and repair.

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