THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE:
BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE SMT

DAVID BRAZIER, HEAD TEACHER OF ST JAMES SENIOR BOYS' SCHOOL IN SURREY, SHARES HIS THOUGHTS ON BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE SMT.

On my first day as a teacher some twenty-five years ago, I remember clearly walking out of the door of the school and thinking "this was what I was born for, I am home".

My body, heart and mind suddenly clicked into alignment and all my energy felt like it was moving in the right direction. My previous occupations in retail and then in sales seemed like a pale dream.

Even on that first day I knew I wanted to be a Head Teacher.

Fast forward some twenty-five years and six schools later and I am three years into my second Headship. St James Senior Boys' School in Ashford, Surrey, is a boys' independent school with around four hundred pupils between the ages of 11 and 19. The passion for education still burns bright.

In my role as a Head I spend a fair amount of time reflecting on leadership. There is so much mythology around notions of leadership (one thinks of Churchill in the war years or charismatic leaders like Shackleton) that any understanding of it is conditional and situational.

St James is my second Headship; my first was Long Close School in Slough, Berkshire. This was a small preparatory school with a nursery that I extended to include GCSE level. The school was owned by the venture capitalist group Cognita, and I was interviewed for the position by Sir Chris Woodhead – an experience in itself!

In my eight years at Long Close, pupil numbers increased from 110 to over 310. The senior part of the school was established and we were awarded an outstanding inspection judgement for pupil achievement.

Perhaps the more challenging aspect of both my headships has been forging effective Senior Management Teams. Invariably, these teams are already in place and have a way of working and a culture based on the previous guard. It is rare that a Head has the

opportunity to recruit their own choices as members of this crucial team and he/she must work hard to create a new team dynamic to meet future needs of the school and his/her vision. As my Cognita boss, Jim Hudson OBE used to say, they are your 'Pretorian Guard'.

My leadership approach has something in common with the paradoxical notion of 'in charge but not in control', rather like the director of a dramatic performance. The management of policies and processes are of course essential in any effective school, but the leadership and management of the social actors and their energetic exchanges within the school structures and context is a more subtle art. It is this dynamic that defines a school. The theatre director, Peter Brook, expresses this clearly in his book, *The Empty Space*:

"The director will see that… however much home-work he does, he cannot fully understand a play by himself, Whatever ideas he brings on the first day, must evolve continually, thanks to the process he is going through with the actors…in fact, the director who comes to the first rehearsal with his script prepared with the moves and business etc. noted down is a real deadly theatre man."

This subtle art requires flexibility and the intuitive ability to read people and situations. The management (leadership) group must be understood and blended into a team that understand and support each other, while also being effective. This can sometimes be a messy and inexact process.

Within inherited SMTs the following problems can often occur:

- A lack of recognition of other peoples' skills and experience in the team. Individuals in the team can lack an understanding of each other's values and beliefs in relation to their roles in the organisation.

- Asking for help and collaborative working can be perceived as a sign of weakness within such teams, which leads to a lack of a team dynamic or team culture. This can mean a lack of joined-up thinking and an absence of accountability, so that tasks are not completed and communicated throughout the organisation.

- Senior Team members can sometimes view others' contributions to the team with doubt or suspicion.

- Although many ideas are discussed there can be a lack of movement when it comes to implementing and seeing initiatives through to conclusion.

Many causal factors can generate such problems, including the leadership style and approach of the previous Head Teacher, the historical culture of the school and a lack of values and cultural understanding. In my journey as leader I have looked at many instruments and approaches for developing my SMT. I am an avid reader and there are plenty of leadership books (and models) on the market and courses to attend. I tried Myers Briggs and other psychological and psychometric tests. However, it was not until I was introduced to the science of Axiology or 'Value Science' and Axiometrics that things began to click into place.

Axiometrics™ Profiling is based on the Nobel Prize nominated research of Dr Robert S Hartman. Hartman was a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tennessee and the National University of Mexico. Hartman wrestled with that philosophical notion of how 'Good' is determined and this led him to an understanding of 'values' and how they can be measured and used to determine human behaviour within an organisation. This article is not long enough to detail Hartman's journey or the history of Value Science as a way of understanding people capacity and performance – these can be found on The Axiometrics Partners' website and in Hartman's autobiography, 'Freedom to Live'.

I am naturally critical of any new idea I encounter, and therefore took the online Axiometrics profile which took around 20 minutes. This was followed by a one-to-one feedback session with Axiometrics Analysts at Catapult Solutions Ltd on my Composite Attitude Survey (CAS) and Personal Value Analysis (PVA) reports, generated as a result of my profile responses.

This proved to be a revelation and gave me a real insight into myself and how I operated within the dynamic and culture of Long Close. I then went on to use this process with my whole management team. A dynamic workshop, led by a Catapult Solutions Ltd analyst, enabled the team to have a profound understanding of each other's values and how these effected the way in which they performed their roles. The workshop also involved

designing a 'shield' that represented the current values of the team and where we wanted to be in three years' time. From these conversations I learnt so much about how each member saw the world and what influenced their behaviour.

To provide a couple of practical examples, the profiles showed me that I was the only team member who really valued deadlines. This meant that I could put measures into place to ensure that deadlines were adhered to. I discovered through this process that one team member harboured a deep resentment towards me because their weekly meeting with me was always on a Friday. Because of the usual events that always seem to happen toward the end of a school week this often resulted in this meeting being cancelled. The manager involved would feel angry and under-valued throughout the weekend. This negative situation was easily remedied as the timing of the meeting was changed to a Monday, meaning that a cancelled meeting could be re-scheduled before the end of the week.

Following the success of the intervention at Long Close School, I decided to use the same approach at St James.

This resulted in each Senior Team member taking the online Axiometrics profile followed by one-to-one feedback with analysts. The subsequent workshop included a focus on what the team felt was working and what wasn't; analysis of the senior team dynamic highlighting individual strengths and vulnerabilities and goal-setting and action planning. A follow up workshop to review progress and assess the changes made was also held.

Each team individual is now much more aware of how they are perceived by other team members. Each has awareness of their strengths and vulnerabilities alongside an understanding of how other people work and why they behave like they do. For example, one team member's frustration with a lack of pragmatic solutions and action was voiced and understood in the Team Dynamic workshop. The way his valuing system operates has since been recognised and utilised within the team. This has resulted in him being happier and achieving more, while other team members have acknowledged the balance of thinking that he brings to the team as a strength.

There is now improved confidence and focus. One team member has embarked on a master's degree to move his career forward. There is also better clarity about roles leading to

greater mutual respect and efficiency. For example, one team member previously seen as a 'fix it' man or problem-solver is now seen as an effective project manager and is able to lead pro-actively on whole school initiatives. The self-understanding gained from the profile and feedback has raised the team's awareness of the range of thinking and strategies available to them to deliver more effective results. We are much more end-focused and purposeful in the actions we take and the initiatives we implement. We are more self-evaluative and honest with each other.

I have also used the tool to recruit staff and ascertain the suitability of people for certain roles. My current school is particularly value-led with a unique philosophical ethos and so the alignment of values is crucial for us. Teaching excellence is, of course, vital when recruiting teaching staff, but using Axiometrics as an additional tool, I am able to see the extent to which an individual is likely to fit into my school's unique culture and uphold our values and reputation.

The limits of those old top-down leadership models and the ossified cultures they produce are well known and in the commercial sector the power of deeper 'values' is now being clearly understood. *Axiometrics™ Profiling* is a powerful and reasonably inexpensive tool that can take leadership and understanding to another level.

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