

Lessons from the field...axioms for 2012?

Reflections on leadership in action

By Luke Monahan

Working with school staffs is an ever changing and ever challenging experience – much as I might know the patterns of what I'll meet, I never ever can take for granted the dynamic of each interaction, of each process that I engage in - for if I do, I will suffer as a result! Often the most enjoyable aspect of these sessions is the debriefing chat with principal and deputy afterwards or sometimes at a break during the session! *'Now you see what I have to deal with...'* or often also *'...the vast majority are really great...but what can I do with this small number of individuals?'* It's at these chats that I'll pick up the most valuable pieces of real wisdom, practical guidance and key survival truths. I shamelessly gather these and use them in future sessions – in this article I want to share some of the most useful of these for your consideration. I call these expressions of **upgraded common sense**:

1. Head banging and cement walls: With so little room for manoeuvre in today's educational resource environment, to expect that previously unsuccessful strategies to deal with deep-seated issues will now work is a tad unrealistic. As one deputy put it to me – *'I finally realised that me banging my head against that wall [I think he had a group of staff in mind!!!] and expecting anything other than a severely injured head was crazy!'* The famous TV psychotherapist Dr Phil says to clients who keep on with the same patterns but somehow expecting different results – *'and how's that working for you?'* It is a time for looking at new ways to approach old problems and challenges.

2. Fire, Aim, Ready: I believe this principal borrowed this one from a few sources both educational and corporate – but the lesson is the same.

To make an important strategic move without due preparation is to invite trouble. Put another way – to initiate change **without** clarity of purpose is to generate resistance **with** focus. It is vital to bring strategic realism to a situation so that, yes, people are asked to stretch themselves professionally somewhat but care is taken that in the process people do not snap under the challenge. From so many the advice here is to consult, consult, consult and especially to hear contrary voices and not to unnecessarily demonise these voices. This will greatly help the aim – so that the order can shift back to ready, aim and then fire.

3. Men are from Mars, women are from Venus:

The leader here was talking about how she is reminded again and again about the importance of **how** we do what we do. It is so painfully evident that the room for manoeuvre is so limited in our current economic reality. The challenge is to put the effort into crafting the proposals and the manner of approach to take careful account of the participants. No matter how right your proposals, if you go about it the wrong way then all may be lost. The last few contributions from Curam to the Executive Report talked about the conflict characters we encounter and how we can adjust our approach. So too with any proposal to change, thought needs to be given to how it will be received across as many of the personalities of the staff as possible. This may seem like a tiresome investment of time, but many will attest to the truth that it saves time in the long run.

4. The Haley's Comet syndrome:

My own principal many years ago often called out on the sidelines to us '*...what shade of green are you waiting for - pass the ball...*'. This one is about opportunity and grasping it, not waiting for conditions to be absolutely perfect but having a 'nose' for knowing when you can progress a project, a new curricular innovation or policy implementation. The paralysis that can occur in response to the challenge of change is real for many. The reference to Haley's Comet is the school leader who used this analogy to describe a cohort on his staff that always found a reason to

delay and tried to soften the resistance by saying that at the next round the conditions might be better.

5. Bismark's wee blind spot: a history teacher, now deputy gave me this one. He recognised that his enthusiasm was often way ahead of his practical nature and he fell into the Bismark trap – 'fighting' on too many fronts at the same time! So while Haley's Comet is about getting on with it, Bismark's trap is about prudent action. The wisdom is in knowing the difference!

There are many others that could be explored – Comfort Blankets and Bell Curves for example. The benefit here is 'capturing' this real and practical wisdom - to use that old fashioned word - and to reflect on practice with school leaders. More and more in my work I am asked to work with leaders as they reflect on immediate and long term serious challenges, to bring new perspectives, to strategically and practically chart ways through seemingly intractable problems. The so-called 'Bertie' approach of throwing resources at the issue is no longer possible. Instead we need to build our capacity and confidence to approach multi-layered difficulties in an effective manner that does not result in trench warfare however subtly that 'warfare' might manifest itself. The best approaches in working with others, in educational practices, in finance and governance, in minding oneself, in strategic planning need to be continually made more accessible and relevant to school leaders as they address enormous challenges in the current reality that is Ireland.

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