

The desert island challenge



Picture this...you've washed up on a desert island; the sun washes over you – warming you – sand engulfs your sandaled feet and there's the relaxing sound of waves crashing in the background...and a school bell. Yes, it's a desert island with a school and you're here to make it the best it can be – what eight qualities have you brought with you?

This is the premise for Jeremy Sutcliffe's book, *8 qualities of successful school leaders: The desert island challenge*. You're a school leader, you've washed ashore on a desert island and your mission is to make this school 'outstanding'; what eight leadership qualities do you bring with you?

After extensive research which involved surveying more than 30 school leaders this is a question that Jeremy answers with authority. "The eight are: vision, courage, passion, emotional intelligence, judgement, resilience, persuasion – which is about communication skills – and curiosity, by which I mean successful leaders are outward-looking, curious, good networkers and in-touch."

CAN YOU TALK THE TALK?

While we are always aware of the great and imposing obstacles that stand in our way, it's the less obvious ones that can often have more of an effect. Such issues, continuously overlooked, can root themselves in a school's culture. For Jeremy, poor communication is a key one as it shuts people down – making them less willing. "Communication is a key quality – you must be able to open dialogue between staff, pupils and stakeholders – but listening must not be forgotten either. Communication is a conversation, a two-way thing." As a leader, Jeremy says, if you can be confident, listen to people, accept challenge and find a way forward, you will get others on board with ease. "It's about developing a dialogue, reaching a shared agreement and a shared vision about how you – inclusive – will take the school forward."

On the flipside, closing yourself off to your staff can cause problems. "Whatever role you play on the leadership

team you must be open and approachable in all you do," Jeremy explains, adding that this is an essential element of good leadership, tied to building trusting relationships and dependent on having the courage to be faithful and true to yourself and your own values.

THE CHANGING FACE OF EDUCATION

"The approach to school leadership has changed dramatically in the last decade. It used to be the case that schools were run along authoritarian lines – the idea of the hero head, sat in his study (it usually was a he), who reigned alone and took the weight of decision-making on his shoulders," Jeremy says, before reminding us that, in the most successful schools today, this is far from the truth. Now leadership is spread and shared much more widely and this has changed the dynamic of what good leadership looks like. "To be a school leader is to be involved in the decision-making process; it requires you to be a good listener but also to be prepared to stand up and give your views on matters," Jeremy asserts. This is, no doubt, a pronounced shift for many SBMs who, although school leaders, have been tethered at the edge of SLT inclusion for some time but are now deservedly, taking their rightful place.

However, great leadership cannot be distilled into single units; every leader has a different leadership style and some qualities will be more pronounced than others. For example, some leaders are great risk-takers and have great judgement – while others are terrific with people. There are many qualities that inform good leadership but there are those special, desert island, eight, says Jeremy, that are present in all successful leaders. ■

Jeremy explains two key leadership qualities that are particularly strong

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

This is a key leadership skill – not just in schools, but also in global businesses. Successful school leaders are team builders; they understand the importance of developing relationships and empowering those around them. They show great empathy and understanding for their staff, colleagues, pupils, parents and other stakeholders in the school.

There are five skills within emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. It's about inclusion; drawing people together, building the right teams, developing relationships and trust as well as establishing a shared vision and set of values between stakeholders in the school – the leadership team, staff, pupils, parents and the wider community.

RESILIENCE

Developing resilience is essential. Successful leaders need to be optimistic and resilient, energetic, positive and to remain calm in a crisis. The adverse situation might be due to a failed Ofsted inspection or there might be something going on in the wider community that is impacting the school or, perhaps, just a breakdown of relationships within the school.

The important thing to do in order to develop resilience is to look ahead and not get demoralised when something goes wrong. Spiritual and emotional resilience, positivity and a steely determination are assets but it's also personal, something school business managers, in particular, must remember. Remember your own health as well – think about your work-life balance and stay positive. Try and keep a sense of perspective, believe in yourself and ensure you don't run the risk of burn out.

