



Essentials of leadership: learning from business

Schools, like any organisation, need strong leadership to be successful. **LISA GRIFFIN** speaks to leaders outside of education to explore the similarities and differences between schools and businesses



Archie Smith

Chair of the Education and Charities Committee of Worshipful Company of Shipwrights and school governor

‘A successful leader builds a good team that uses all the individual parts of that team to their best effect’

To what extent should schools be run like businesses?

Running a school like a business is probably not the right question; rather, can business techniques be used to help manage schools better? The answer to that is yes!

Businesses generally have clear measures of success, such as the improvement in shareholder value, so targets and objectives are clear. Schools have different and sometimes conflicting objectives so measuring performance and identifying priorities can be difficult.

Good business practices such as financial management, identifying priorities and establishing clear goals and objectives can assist in both overall performance and in helping to make the process easier. The classic example is of course the ethereal leadership team focused heavily on pupils’ attainment and ignoring the financial and administrative activities of the school.

What makes a successful leader?

A good business leader will ensure a good structure is in place, managing processes and particularly finances – and keeping them under control. This releases time and resources to focus on achieving the overall objectives.

A successful leader builds a good team that uses all the individual parts of that team to their best effect and has them focused on the common objectives. The leader knows when to get in and assist and when to stand back and guide (no easy task!) and, most importantly, how to recognise and reward to motivate.

How do you effectively create a shared vision?

The key word here is ‘shared’ and to do this the leader has to engage with everyone in the team and let them input to the vision.

Sharing objectives also means sharing



Many parts make up a whole when they correctly fit together

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success, otherwise individuals within the team will not get the recognition they need to keep them motivated. Likewise a good leader will be seen to be fair and to do this has, at times, to control more directly those team members that others may perceive as not pulling their weight.

What does visionary leadership mean to you?

Visionary leadership is helping the team see the next steps. It is being part of the team but with a different responsibility than the rest – theirs is to achieve the objectives set now, while the leader needs to be the

pathfinder and the guide for the future.

The visionary leader is also standing by to stop the team going awry. Looking over the horizon is not just looking at the future, but checking what is coming on the flanks that may destabilise the team and knock them off course!



Sophie Burnett
Managing Director,
PA Business Support

‘We are always looking out for new and innovative ways to push to the next level’

What makes a successful leader?

As co-founder and joint MD of PA Business Support Ltd, my leadership skills are something that I have had to hone and develop over the last five years. My background in recruitment gave me the drive to succeed and find the right people for my business and learn to manage, support and develop them.

When I started out as a sole-trader I had a vision of growing a team and building a small empire. This was all possible but my personal development focused on my confidence and learning to listen to my intuition.

A successful leader is always learning, and moving from a small sole-trader business to becoming a joint MD managing a larger team is the perfect learning curve.

My business partner and I have ‘strategy days’ where we share ideas, feed off each other’s strengths and support each other’s weaknesses. As a woman in business I am passionate about supporting individuals to ensure they are performing at their best and that’s our aim with the PA Business Support team. We celebrate their successes and encourage them to share their ideas – they are our best asset and a strong leader should be able to identify that.

What can school leaders learn from the business world?

I was never an academic in school but I thrived on the creativity of drama and English. I have fond memories of specific teachers who encouraged me to build on my strengths and work on my weaknesses.

Schools are academically led, yet emotional intelligence is a key area for

schools too. Learning how to understand and recognise different feelings and relate to people from all aspects of life is invaluable in any business or personal environment.

How do you effectively create a shared vision?

A shared vision for us as a business reflects our beliefs and values; however as a business we are constantly evolving.

We are always looking out for new and innovative ways to push to the next level and the beauty is that we both thrive on the passion we have for our roles. We are lucky that our team visualise where we want to stand in the market and they continually deliver the highest standard of work to our clients.

We have weekly check-ins with our team members to ensure they’re happy and comfortable managing the clients. We operate an ‘open-door’ policy and encourage the team to pick up the phone for a chat or meet for a coffee to discuss any problems.

What does visionary leadership mean to you?

For us as a business it’s about moving forward together and ensuring our team are on-board with our goals.

We feel excited about what the future for PA Business Support Ltd holds and we continually want to inspire our team by sharing our ideas to ensure they feel part of that too.

As businesswomen and leaders we are strategic risk-takers, yet we are responsible for working together and looking for solutions to achieve our goals.



Paul Sample

Managing Director, The Mustard Agency and specialist in school marketing

‘Visionary leaders have an enthusiasm for identifying and mentoring new leaders’

i Look out for more on business leadership essentials in the next issue of *Insight*. Until then, head online and log into my.optimus-education.com/topic/leadership-skills for more resources, articles and webinars focusing on leadership skills.

What makes a successful leader?

Having a clear vision about where they want their organisation to be and the ability to communicate that vision effectively.

The best leaders also need to be introspective from time to time and allow themselves to be critical about their own performance and capable of some serious self-analysis. This requires a mixture of bravery and self-confidence.

Good leaders need to be able to understand where they are strong and the skills that they can deploy to achieve their vision, but they also understand where they need the help and support of others to fill in the gaps.

I attended the Warwick Business School a few years ago as part of a local government leadership programme. We were put through a number of exercises, including the Belbin Team Inventory and a Myers-Briggs assessment, to identify our individual personality types.

I was able to understand what sort of personality I had, the consequences for those around me, and the changes I needed to make to be more effective in my role as a leader. This kind of 360 degree personality assessment commands a premium, but it is worth it and I urge every new leader to take a personality test!

How do you effectively create a shared vision?

A shared vision can only come from a shared understanding. If we use effective consultation as a genuine part of the process it can be a very powerful force for making good decisions.

Shared visions can only be created through the process of genuinely involving people from the very earliest stages. That includes identifying the problems, clarifying our objectives and mapping out the route together.

This is particularly important in my area of school branding, marketing and pupil recruitment. If we involve parents, staff, governors, pupils and the wider community in the consultation at an early

stage, we can make our school marketing messages much more powerful. Brands will be true reflections of the school’s strengths and imagery, photographs, and videos will reflect these truths.

How do you motivate staff to get the best out of your team?

All of us spend far too much time nagging and berating those below us. Sometimes it seems like we haven’t got anything positive to say at all, which is fatal.

Be very clear about what it is that you want your team to do. Be positive and enthusiastic. Recognise that most staff will be ‘doing their jobs right’ a lot of the time. Try to catch them in the act of doing it right!

Set objectives and find opportunities to congratulate them on their achievements and performance. Explain why you are proud of what they have achieved, tell them that’s what you expect and it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

When they fail, as we all do, use the same technique: what was it that we expected from them? What actually happened? What can we do better next time? Re-assure them that we know they can do better than this – and send them on their way knowing that their failure doesn’t make them a bad person!

What does visionary leadership mean to you?

I’ve known one or two visionary school leaders. They have the ability to set clear objectives and a talent for communicating with those around them. They possess an understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses and the ability to find team members to ‘fill in the gaps’.

Visionary leaders have an enthusiasm for identifying and mentoring new leaders, relentless positivism and the ability to take the right route, rather than choosing the easiest thing.

To me a visionary school leader is someone who can answer the question ‘why should I bring my child here?’ in 30 seconds, without using educational jargon, and leaving me with the ‘wow!’ factor. ■