

Resource 20: Leaders are people

School leadership can be one of the most rewarding, satisfying and fulfilling jobs that it's possible to think of. It has the potential for enormous rewards – it can be challenging, creative, stimulating and great fun. At its best, school leadership offers enormous scope for making things happen, being innovative and, most significantly perhaps, making a real and profound difference to the lives of students and colleagues. Over time, school leaders have the opportunity to see real and tangible results for their efforts. The work of educators is often frustrated by a whole range of factors outside their control, but often they know that they have changed a life for the better.

However, even in the best environments, the job of school leader can be challenging and demanding. Every day requires numerous interpersonal transactions – some challenging, some profoundly rewarding and others mind-numbingly tedious and routine. Yet all are significant in some way. There are days of endless negotiations, managing inadequate resources and seeking to mediate negative external forces. And there are times when, in spite of every best effort, it seems that the job is akin to that of Sisyphus – condemned to spend each day pushing a rock to the top of the hill only to see it roll down and having to repeat the task the following day.

In reality, the lives of most school leaders fall between these extremes. There are the routines and the established patterns and rhythms of school life; there are the daily rewards of observing the brilliantly taught lesson, the unexpected letter of thanks and the opportunity to get to change a life. What remains constant is the disproportionate impact that the language, values and behaviour of school leaders have on their school. We know from work done on new headteachers and changes in the leadership of schools in challenging circumstances that leadership can have an impact, which is directly attributable to the leadership style of one individual. It's both a strength and a weakness of our education system that so much influence is vested in one individual. This raises the question of 'Who cares for the carer?'; 'Who coaches the coach?'; 'Who counsels the counsellor?' How is leadership sustained?

One of the dominant characteristics of highly effective leaders is their personal authenticity – their personal and professional integrity, the sense that they are working because of personal values and conviction. The credibility of leaders is often directly related to their perceived consistency. The combination of all these factors places a significant burden on leaders – just how do they keep going and what enables them to remain creative? We know that school leadership has a real cost. However rewarding the job, it requires enormous reserves of personal, emotional, physical and intellectual stamina to keep going day after day, term after term, year after year. Like all true professionals, school leaders recognise that there's an altruistic dimension to their work. School leadership at its most effective is demanding and draining. In essence, there has to be a balance between demands and returns, between the positive and negative and, perhaps, we need to see this as at least as significant a factor as any other component of effective leadership.

For a host of cultural and historical reasons we've tended to neglect the inner-self of leaders. It has always been seen as 'too personal' to make public but, I would argue, we continue to neglect it at our peril. The sustainability, resilience, effectiveness and well-being of leaders is directly related to the health of the 'inner-self'. Personal authenticity, moral confidence and professional courage are direct indicators of personal wholeness.