

## **Chapter 16: Leadership for wellbeing**

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### **Aims**

This chapter considers wellbeing among school workforces and the key role leadership can play. It explores challenges faced by school leaders, analysing workload, wellbeing, stress, the role of leadership in leading healthy organizations, resilience and motivation and the link between wellbeing and learning. It recognises having a human resource strategy is essential for schools, playing a critical role in organizational viability and relative performance (Boxall and Purcell, 2011). More specifically, it

- emphasizes the links between workload and wellbeing
- indicates the negative effects of work overload and poor wellbeing
- shows how workload, wellbeing and resilience for the school workforce can be improved
- emphasizes the role of, and styles of, leadership in healthy or non-toxic organizations.

Operating in a high stakes accountability landscape, increasingly seen across many educational systems worldwide, leaders are asking how to act with integrity.. There are schools that do this effectively with positive impact and where lessons can be learned (see Vignette).

### **Issues of workload and wellbeing**

Not only is work-life balance desirable, it is increasingly clear working long hours can damage health. In a meta-review analysis of twenty-five studies in Europe, the USA and Australia

involving over half a million participants, those spending 55+ hours working per week were at greater risk of strokes than those working a standard week of 35-40 hours (Kivimaki et al., 2015).

While a feature of healthy dynamic organizations is a degree of staff turnover, too much is detrimental to staff performance and results in increased financial cost in recruitment and interim and supply staff (Conley and You, 2009). The pressures from increased emphasis on school and staff performance and accountability across many educational systems are seen in increasing levels of individual stress and stress-related illnesses. School leaders are required to meet performance expectations but also to attract, retain and motivate staff when increasing numbers are leaving the profession (Education Support Network, 2015a). Senior leaders, feeling the pressure to deliver the best possible outcomes, can cause additional pressures on teachers (see Chapter 17 on toxic leadership).

Managing staff turnover is a key leadership responsibility and a hallmark of a well-managed, sustainable organization. Education systems are facing a daunting challenge in both recruiting high-quality graduates as teachers, particularly in shortage areas, and retaining them once they are hired (Schleicher, 2012).

A large scale study of 3,500 Dutch workers comparing burn-out rates between those in social professions (such as education and social work), found emotional exhaustion was strongly linked to both low time control and work overload. It concluded teachers face a higher risk of burn-out, compared with other social professions (De Heus and Diekstra, 1999).

Smithers and Robinson (2003) cite a number of reasons for teachers leaving the profession, including heavy workload, stress, poor behaviour, feeling undervalued, and a desire for change or new challenges. The quality of leadership and management was also a

factor. From research conducted in 2014 in the UK with a sample of teachers across all levels of experience, one-third (34%) stated they planned to leave the profession in one to five years' time (Education Support Network, 2015b). Factors included excessive workloads (40%), unreasonable demands from line managers (24%), rapid pace of organizational change (18%) and student behaviour (13%). A Finnish survey of 2,310 secondary teachers indicates exhaustion and bullying are significant in teacher turnover (Pyhältö et al., 2015).

England's school leaders have had to implement many policy changes in the last decade or so, the result of which has been increased pressure and workload. In October 2014, the Department for Education launched a workload challenge survey (DfE, 2015a) to which more than 44,000 teachers shared experiences, ideas and solutions on their 'unnecessary and unproductive' workload. Following this, a series of commitments were published (DfE, 2015b) including the setting up of three review groups exploring improving work life balance and wellbeing around issues of marking, planning and resources and data management.

## **Wellbeing**

Wellbeing is a subjective term but an occupational definition relevant to the entire school workforce states 'Well-being expresses a positive emotional state, which is the result of harmony between the sum of specific environmental factors on the one hand and the personal needs and expectations of teachers on the other hand (Aelterman et al., 2007, cited in Day and Gu, 2014:31).

Wellbeing for some is about quality of life; for others it is a symptom of work-life balance, for others a measure of stress is desirable to be high performing (Bingham 2013a). Wellbeing is important in its own right in obviating negative functioning of individuals, shown in such indicators as levels of stress. It is diminished through bullying and harassment, and it

is important for organizational performance, in what can be termed 'high reliability organisations' (Lekka, 2011).

Wellbeing is both personal and societal. The first relates to a satisfying life and positive functioning, with positive feelings, while the second relates to supportive relationships, trust and belonging (Day and Gu, 2014). Subjective wellbeing that promotes a reported satisfying life and psychological wellbeing influences longevity, extending it between four to ten years (DoH, 2014).

### **Stress**

Reliable and objective definitions of stress are elusive as stress affects individuals in different ways (Bingham, 2013b). It includes mental health and is created through external and internal factors. A distinction can be made between good stress (eustress) and bad stress (distress). The latter being 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed on them' (HSE, 2008:1). As stress is felt individually, what is stressful to one person may reflect in a positive reaction from another, making it difficult for leaders to implement one-size fits all school wellbeing policies.

Wellbeing, or lack of it, is strongly related to work (dis)stress - a key characteristic in employee absence. However, although connected, stress and wellbeing are different. As humans, we search for patterns to predict the future, posing a challenge in educational environments subject to political intervention and constant change. Individually stress will present itself through emotional and mental symptoms and changes in normal behaviour (HSE, 2014a). Other stress arises from internal factors including emotional demands made on teachers and other school staff throughout the working day.

In schools, stress may arise from external factors, such as changing demands and numerous government initiatives. However, by far the most important internal factor is having control over the working environment. While having personal control over your life is critical for positive mental health, having a degree of control over decision-making, and able to control the environment is also positively associated with psychological wellbeing and eustress. De Heus and Diekstra (1999) reveal teachers have less time control, lower participation in decision-making and less collegial support than in other social professions. Teaching can be a lonely experience. Signs of a (dis)stress problem can be seen in an organization experiencing higher levels of sickness, absence, disputes and disaffection, complaints and grievances, reports of stress, poor performance and difficulties in attracting new staff (HSE, 2014).

### **Leading for healthy schools**

We turn now to what leaders can do to reduce feelings of stress and promote a sense of wellbeing. Leaders play an undoubted role in avoiding schools and cultures becoming toxic. School principals exert an indirect but measurable influence on pupil outcomes through their key role in shaping teachers' working lives (OECD, 2013). Leaders play a significant role in defining and sustaining, a school's culture and teachers' perceptions of their working conditions are important factors in retention, motivation levels and wellbeing. A good leader will align the values of the organization so they can be visible and seen to run through the school as a thread (see also Chapter 8 on vision and values).

School leaders and governors play a role in overseeing wellbeing and workload issues. Leaders should provide governors with management information required by the governing body to monitor different aspects of life in the school throughout the year. This typically

includes staff absence, recruitment, retention, morale and performance. In some countries, legal requirements and responsibilities are in place safeguarding the health and safety of workers, such as the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) in the UK. Therefore, part of the role of the governors is to keep abreast of legislation. In some countries, national support networks exist to advocate for teachers and support staff. In the UK, unions are both advocates and policy drivers for improved working conditions for the school workforce. The charity, the Education Support Partnership (previously the Teacher Support Network), champions and undertakes research across the education sector. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE), a governmental body, plays a role in regulating workplace safety and conditions and minimising risks of stress-related illness or injury to employees (HSE, 2014).

Poor workplace conditions can cause stress and exacerbate poor mental health, thus limiting the benefits of working. For organizations, securing employee wellbeing is an important contributor to quality, performance and productivity, and key to reducing sickness absence and high staff turnover. It can act positively or negatively on related concepts such as morale and motivation. Some solutions to work-life balance and wellbeing lie in coping strategies, both individual and organizational. The Foresight report (2008) contains recommendations for employers to help foster work environments conducive to good mental wellbeing and enhancement of 'mental capital'. A strategic approach starts with recognition and commitment on the part of the senior leadership: effective leaders understand the short and long term, think systemically but act practically. They are able to manage change effectively, also they thrive on change as long as it is seen as leading to improvement (Bubb and Earley, 2004).

At its essence, leaders need to place their actions in the context of promoting greater sustainability, to include the wellbeing of their workforce. Robertson and Cooper (2011)

propose a framework to support leading organizational wellbeing and workplace wellness. Divided between organizational outcomes; individual outcomes, psychological wellbeing and six other elements of job conditions (work relationships, job security and change, balanced workload, control and resources and communication), it offers a targeted approach to improving psychological workplace wellbeing.

Too often teachers and schools are caught in an acceleration trap; having to exert the same amount of effort all year round in perpetual loading and no chance to rejuvenate and recover until the summer vacation. Frequently, there appears to be no strategic focus over what the priorities are other than ‘to raise standards’. To combat the problem, some governments are responding to the challenge. As noted earlier, as part of the national teaching Workload Challenge (DfE, 2015b), the DfE in England is consulting on three main pinch points seen in teaching, in an effort to reduce workload. Part of the response is through changing culture, in understanding innovation and the emotional effect of change. Supportive ways to deal with change include building in time and planning for reflection, alternating high energy and long hours with low energy to produce sustainable high performance.

The key aspect in leading healthy schools is related to culture and how an educational organization is led and managed. The influence of school culture on wellbeing is very important. Culture is derived from norms, values and behaviours that constitute an organization, often referred to ‘as the way we do things round here’. Signs of unhealthy schools or toxic organizations include:

- excessive working time and workload
- internal politics
- excessive bureaucracy
- poor communication

- low morale
- resistance to change or excessive change
- a blame culture.

In contrast, healthy organizations manage toxicity and minimise human and financial losses.

Dunham states 'there is often an inverse relationship between management skills and staff stress; good management brings less stress but poor management results in more stress' (1995:141). The HSE proposes six Management Standards which should be embedded into everyday custom and practice:

- Demands: workload, work patterns, and the work environment
- Control: How much say the person has in the way they do their work
- Support: encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organization, line management and colleagues
- Relationships: promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour
- Role: Whether people understand their role within the organization and whether the organization ensures that they do not have conflicting roles
- Change: How organizational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organization.

These represent a set of conditions that, if present, reflect a high level of health, wellbeing and organizational performance and cover the primary sources of workplace stress.

Skills need to be constantly updated and developed, so what happens in the workplace is critical. Leadership plays a key role in giving control and affording participation in decision-making. Research suggests effective and supportive leadership is the major contributor to



reducing education job strain in helping individuals and organizations to cope with the increased responsibilities and external pressures. Initial research findings from the UK's Education Support Partnership and Birkbeck, University of London (2016a), using data collected across the entire UK school workforce between 2007 and 2013, from 27,000 responses (including 10,000 teachers and 667 schools), show a link between job strain and effect on job performance. Although difficult to infer causality, the research suggests professional growth, control and autonomy, meaningful communication and decision-making opportunities and having meaning in the work undertaken are all important in wellbeing, but only when combined with effective leadership support. The findings are similar for headteachers in the support that they require from governing bodies, local authorities or academy chains.

### **Leadership promoting wellbeing**

Leaders of healthy schools pay attention to the type of leadership promoting wellbeing. In a Danish study of 274 elderly care employees in the healthcare sector, transformational or 'inspiring' leadership was found to be associated with both job satisfaction and wellbeing (Nielsen et al., 2009). Phillips and Sen (2011:188) consider there is a need for a large national study (similar to Cooper and Kelly, 1993) to assess the current situation and in particular identify 'whether particular leadership styles, training and qualifications make a difference to stress and satisfaction' and further suggest a comparison with independent schools. The limited research available suggests supporting school leaders and managers to adopt a transformational style, that is in establishing shared vision through which leaders provide a meaningful and creative basis from which change is brought about, should be encouraged.

Where learning-centred leadership can help to promote wellbeing is through its emphasis on modelling (see Chapter 9). Modelling is about the power of example but if leaders do not 'walk the talk' in a consistent manner, then there is little possibility of others following. Leaders should act as good role models to model improved behaviours, including managing workload and work-life balance, showing you can achieve high performance with recovery time given. Seeing leadership, especially headship as a rewarding but essentially do-able job, will also have positive implications for recruitment (Future Leaders Trust, 2016).

Leaders should adopt a whole school approach to stress reduction through appropriate strategies, to involve wide decision-making and consultation. Physical surroundings impact on stress levels so leaders should take this into account. In Norway, for instance, all teachers have their own desk in a study room so that they do not have to work at children's tables in classrooms, as many UK primary teachers do. Effort is spent on making the staffroom a pleasant place to be; working conditions are important.

### **Vignette: school-led improvement in New Zealand**

Shocked by the number of colleagues suffering from stress, Ian Vickers, the Assistant Principal at Sancta Maria College in Auckland, New Zealand, launched a teacher wellbeing programme at his school in 2012. To help focus on wellbeing, he designed a 'Good New Habits Book' which contains a theme for each working week such as 'Drink Water', 'Stop for Lunch', 'No E-mails', 'Go Home Early'. It had a clear impact with a reduction in sickness rates, better exam results and reduced staff turnover. Word spread of this wellbeing programme across New Zealand and the world with many schools using the latest edition of *'The Good New Habits Book'* and the *'Teacher Wellbeing NZ'* Facebook group and YouTube channel have ideas and videos. The

first 'Wellbeing in Schools' conference was held in October 2015 and illustrates the power of school-led system-wide improvement.

### **Resilience and motivation**

The term *resilience* has come to the fore in planning for workforce wellbeing and stress. Definitions of resilience are contested. One definition is the 'the level of inner grit you have to handle situations that require drive, focus and resolution and it is linked to achieving goals, getting things done and achieving personal potential' (Pryce-Jones, 2010:74). Resilience can be learned and having high levels is linked to wellbeing (Mowbray, 2013). A resilient attitude is heavily influenced by the environment in which people work, especially the style, approach and behaviours of leaders and managers, which brings in the role of leaders and managers in the resilience of others.

There are links between motivation and job efficacy, and related to this, morale (Bubb and Earley, 2004). Wellbeing is important for the concept of perceived self-efficacy; that is a person's belief in being able to perform a task successfully. Self-efficacy beliefs 'determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave' (Bandura, 1994:71). Leaders can boost self-efficacy through professional development and coaching, goal setting, reward for improvement and supportive leadership (Lunenburg, 2011).

There is a strong association between wellbeing and motivation at work. It is claimed those who are most happy at work are in the region of 50 per cent more motivated and 47 per cent more productive than their colleagues. Data collected between 1984 and 2010 on happiness over the long-term, from 79 countries, indicates happiness is linked to productivity. Through statistical modelling, asking people what percentage of time was focused on their work tasks and linking answers to ratings of happiness, provided a happiness-productivity link

which when tested showed that in the workplace, the happier you are the more productive you tend to be (Pryce-Jones, 2010).

'Flow' too is linked to motivation. Key attributes of flow are in clear goals, continuous and unambiguous feedback about progress and opportunities to use fully personal capacity. Thus 'being in the flow' results in intense concentration and focus, a sense of time passing swiftly, and seeing that activity as rewarding in and of itself, and is experienced in a loss of self-consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003), supporting productivity and a sense of wellbeing in the workplace. However, as motivation is individual and in the long term intrinsic, motivating whole schools – or at least preventing demotivation - is a challenge. One way to do this is in the provision of opportunities for development and career progression, emphasizing the role of learning organizations.

Employers increasingly recognise the need to provide employees with good work-life balance and opportunities to combine work with family responsibilities and other activities. Some countries allow part-time and flexible teaching, job shares, extended unpaid leave or sabbaticals, or job exchanges for increasing skills and experience. Such costs need to be set against lower staff turnover, improved motivation and morale, and the introduction of new knowledge into schools. A work-time audit can be a valuable tool in checking efficiency and effectiveness, with a follow-up action plan to help change practice and enhance resilience, motivation and wellbeing (Bubb and Earley, 2004).

### **Being a learning organization**

It is known that teacher effectiveness is the single most important within-school factor in determining student outcomes (see Chapter 9). A widespread review of the literature on the health and wellbeing of teachers and student outcomes suggests a linkage between teachers'

health and wellbeing and exam results, but so far there is little direct evidence suggesting a causal relationship (Bajorek and Gulliford, 2014). Briner and Dewberry (2007) present significant positive associations for how teachers feel about their work (expressed through satisfaction, stress and attitudes towards their jobs) and pupil performance, but are unable to prove a causal link. There is a need for large-scale studies to be conducted. This relationship is important as one of the key drivers of educational achievement and staff satisfaction and overall wellbeing is an input to school functioning (Dinham, 2008).

Although the link between wellbeing and professional learning and development is hard to establish directly, having good mental and physical health is a pre-requisite to learning and acts as a barrier if absent. Professional learning is key to improving student outcomes and it improves the quality of teachers (Barber and Mourshed, 2007). Workplace stress can be mitigated by developing a supportive learning culture where learning creates positively valued outcomes (Huysman, 1999). So making time for learning will enhance wellbeing for staff. Leaders have a role to play where effective learning-centred leadership can contribute significantly to student outcomes through establishing goals and expectations; strategic resourcing; planning; teacher and curriculum evaluation; promoting professional development and offering a supportive and well managed environment (Timperley and Robertson, 2011).

### **Summary**

Having a work-life balance for staff is critical in maintaining motivation, developing resilience and in managing workload. Well-run healthy schools pay attention to and strategically plan for wellbeing. Through their culture and styles of leadership, they avoid the worst excesses of toxic organizations, recognizing the key to sustainability is in a thriving school workplace for

all staff. Indeed some schools have appointed staff and student wellbeing coordinators. We need a greater appreciation of the impact of how people feel, such as their confidence levels and their self-belief, in order to have an impact on pupil progress and outcomes.