

Speech to New Heads Conference. November 2007

I am delighted on behalf of the National College for School Leadership to welcome you all to this very important conference.

You are the future of school leadership in this country and we now have the best group of school leaders that we have ever had. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, Christine Gilbert, in her annual report published last month, stated that leadership has improved in each phase of education over the past year. You are already part of a success story of improvement in school leadership in this country. What you have achieved as deputies and as assistant heads and, indeed, as teachers has helped to make our schools better led than they have ever been and our school leaders the envy of many other countries in terms of their quality and talent. Now you have all achieved the pinnacle of your profession – you are in charge of the whole organisation.

As we saw on the video, being a headteacher is challenging but also it is a great job and it is a privilege to be able to make a difference to the lives of children, staff and indeed the local community through school leadership.

As Chief Executive of the National College for School Leadership I make it my business to visit many, many schools and to understand what the issues are for school leaders. I want to base my speech to you this morning on the very effective and in some cases absolutely outstanding and inspirational leadership I have seen as I have visited schools over the past 18 months. There are seven themes that I want to discuss this morning.

1. Love the pupils, parents and staff.

I know that this is a strange word to use –you might think I am being too soppy. But I do think that to be successful you as school leaders need to have a deep affection for the children, for their parents, for the community in which the school is based and for the staff with which you work. If you don't – if you are in fact barely tolerating them; if you secretly long to be in another school with a different set of children or in a different catchment area or with a different staff then they will soon suss you out.

This notion of service and the moral purpose that underpins it is at the heart of what we are about as leaders in schools and in public services. The NCSL is here to serve you as school leaders – that is the College's core business, it is why we exist. We can't pick and choose and just work with the schools and school leaders that are particularly friendly towards the

college. Nor would I want to do so. Because right at the heart of what we are about as a college is **all** schools and **all** school leaders. I emphatically believe in school leaders – their expertise and their commitment and their ability to transform lives - I wouldn't have taken the job if I didn't. In the same way excellent school leaders care about every child and parent and the community that the school serves.

As we all know, there are now greater expectations placed upon schools to engage with parents and the community, to develop extended provision, to personalise provision for children and young people and to be part of a wider children's services strategy. These are tough challenges but the fact is that many, many schools are doing very well on this agenda. They are truly growing tomorrow's citizens and working collaboratively with parents and the community to do so.

At a primary school in Derbyshire I saw children as young as 7 running a TV and radio studio and being in charge of a shop. I saw pupils running a museum in the same school and I saw a curriculum genuinely being co-developed and co-constructed between pupils and staff.

I went into a first school in Harrow and saw very young children helping to develop the school improvement plan and generating ideas to make the

school better. They told me that the key aims of the school for the next period should be:

- to make the place look beautiful
- to ensure that everyone had the right resources to learn and teach well and
- that the grown ups felt valued and enjoyed their work so that they would stay at the school.

The children also told me that what was so great about the headteacher and one of them said: “she makes everything in the school have a sparkle of joy”

By the way a colleague tells me of a time when he went into a Year 1 class and asked one of the girls what she could do. She said she could write and read and do sums and ride a bike and swim. He said that is excellent and moved on to the boy next to her and began to ask him the same question. At that moment the first girl tugged at his sleeve and said “You know I said that I could swim?” “Yes”, he said. “Well I can swim, but not just yet” Now that is confidence!

The excellent leaders I have visited during the past year believe passionately in the children in their school, they give the children the hope and the confidence to push themselves further than they ever thought

they could do. They help to raise their aspirations. But they also believe in the parents and the community too.

I went to a primary school in Manchester – where 62% of children were on free school meals and where in just 6 years the same headteacher had moved it from special measures to outstanding according to OFSTED. I was immediately impressed by the unusually rich curriculum and by the number of parents and members of the community in the school. I asked the head what was the most important things that she had done to change the culture in the school. She said that perhaps the most important was engaging the community in the life of the school – particularly through the use of volunteers and support staff who then acted as champions not only in the school but outside in the community too.

I have seen many outstanding school leaders who identify with the school's community, engage with that community and respect that community. They actively seek ways to bring the community into the school, they help the community to develop ownership of the school and they believe that they are a better school as a result. They love their pupils, they love their parents and they love their community.

The best school leaders love their staff too. Now I will talk later about dealing with difficult staff and doing hard things when there is consistently poor performance. But I believe that creating an environment where students and staff can work effectively is the first prerequisite for school leadership.

As a young manager I think I wanted to be liked too much but I learned from observing other good and poor managers that the drive to be liked was not a good one as a manager. However, as a more experienced manager and having learned not to be driven by the need to be liked, I was challenged strongly a few years ago when I read Goleman's work on 6 leadership styles:

Coercive –do what I tell you

Authoritative- come with me

Affiliative. Harmony. People come first.

Democratic. Consensus through participation. What do you think?

Pacesetting. Setting high standards for performance. Do as I do, now.

Coaching. Developing people for the future. How about if you..?

The 2 styles that do not prove effective are coercive and pacesetter. I have not been accused much of being coercive but I do think I have a tendency

to have the pacesetter style. There are times when I think my style has been too pacey and too challenging and too focused on delivery without taking enough time to ensure that people came with me.

“The leader sets extremely high performance standards and exemplifies them himself. He is obsessive about doing things better and faster, and he asks the same of everyone around him. He quickly pinpoints poor performers and demands more from them. If they don’t rise to the occasion, he replaces them with people who can. You would think such an approach would improve results, but it doesn’t. In fact, the pacesetting style destroys climate. Many employees feel overwhelmed by the pacesetter’s demands for excellence, and their morale drops – guidelines for working may be clear in the leader’s head, but she does not state them clearly: she expects people to know what to do.”

Goleman, D., Leadership that Gets Results, 2000

I felt really challenged by that? I had a period of deep self-examination. As leaders we mustn’t compromise or lower our standards to accommodate complacency but we have to take the majority of people with us.

People need to **want** you as their leader and want to be led by you.
Without followership, you won't have leadership.

There are some short cuts to success but if you don't love and invest in your staff you might be successful in the short term but not in the long term.

Enron was one of the biggest, most successful companies in the world but in the end its leaders ended up going to prison for fraud. They were successful in the short-term and were strong on innovation and on ideas but in the end they got found out.

Enron “was awarded the Most Innovative Company in the world by Fortune for six straight years in the 1990s.....but Enron leaders were not team players and valued neither their employees nor their customers. Time wounds all heels” (Fullan, 2007)

Great leaders connect with their staff and show an understanding of the challenges that their staff face. They know that everyone on their team has their own personal challenges at home and at work and that few people live easy uncomplicated lives.

“Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle”

Plato

Just as an aside, developing an effective relationship with the governing body in general and with the chair of governors in particular is absolutely essential for new heads. In my experience, many new heads do not prioritise that crucial relationship as much as they ought to do. I suppose what I am saying is: “love your chair of governors too”!

2. Share leadership and accountability.

What I am worried about generally is the expectations that society now has of public service leaders. And by that I mean people in local authorities and in public service organisations such as the National College, as well as schools.

As Deborah Ancona and colleagues have said we have come to expect huge things from our senior leaders in complex public service organisations:

- The intellectual capacity to make sense of hugely complex and often potentially conflicting issues
- The wisdom to be able to read the broader local, national and political environment,

- The creativity to develop a compelling vision which will move the organisation forward and which will generate enthusiasm and commitment,
- The operational understanding of strategies that will turn the vision into real action that will make a difference,
- The financial expertise to ensure that resources and public money are used efficiently and effectively
- The managerial competence and flexibility to deal with the wide range of day-to-day challenging problems and external requirements that arise in the job,
- The toughness to challenge poor performance and to take strong and decisive action where it is needed,
- The counselling and negotiation skills to deal with difficult and challenging parents and members of the community and
- The interpersonal skills to motivate staff and take people with you.

In addition, the public service leader is highly accountable for everything in the organisation.

Frankly I think it is time that we accepted the fact that believing one person can and should be this type of leader is not realistic. It makes the

job feel too hard and threatens work-life balance, it fails to attract people to want to become leaders and, most important of all, it ultimately does not serve the public best - in our case children and young people and their parents.

I support Local Management of Schools. We have better leadership in schools as a result. But the expectations on heads from government and from society have increased dramatically since the late 1980s. Inspection systems, performance tables, the Every Child Matters agenda, the nutritional standards of school meals, safeguarding and child protection, equality and disability policies. The list is endless.

What I don't think we can expect under any government is the pace of change to slow down. In an increasingly globalised world that is just not realistic. As the PWC report on school leadership stated:

“longing for that mythical period of calm and stability is to misunderstand the nature of the world and of leadership”

We have to get better at managing that change and in doing so I think we have to challenge our fundamental concept of the headteacher as the person who is accountable for everything.

Our own **leadership literature and research** encourages participation and distributed leadership but our **culture** glorifies the charismatic leader who everyone admires. And many of those around the school - staff, parents, governors, local authorities, NCSL, DCSF, still seem to insist on having dealings with the headteacher. Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. No one person could possibly stay on top of everything but the fear of appearing incompetent makes many of us try to cling on to the model and exhaust ourselves in the process. The argument goes something like this – and it is an easy trap to fall into - I am accountable for everything in the organisation and if anything goes wrong it will be my responsibility. Therefore I cannot afford to let anything slip therefore I must attempt to make all the decisions. Moreover my staff already work too hard and have enough on their plates –it will be quicker if I take responsibility myself.

Colleagues, this is hard. Your deputy may not do the task as well as you might do it. But he or she can learn and you can coach them. The other possibility of course can be equally hard for some leaders- your deputy may do it **better** than you can and people may wonder why they need you as head when they have such an excellent deputy!

As Pfeffer and Sutton say:

“The mindset...entails being willing to let go and let other people perform, develop, learn and make mistakes. It is hard to build a system where others can succeed if the leader believes he or she needs to make every important decision, and knows better than anyone else what to do and how to do it. It is in finding the balance between guidance and listening, between directing and learning, that those in leadership roles can make their most useful contributions to organisation performance” Pfeffer and Sutton

One of the crucial things that needs to change – and it still hasn’t happened sufficiently in every school is for leaders to delegate strategic responsibility and accountability as well as management and operational responsibility. Increasingly now, heads are choosing which bits they are going to lead and be accountable for and which bits others in the team are going to lead and be accountable for and, indeed, which bits others will report upon directly to governors.

Now as new heads you may feel that you do not yet have the key staff that you can trust to allocate key leadership responsibilities at this time. I can fully understand that. But your aim should still be to get there.

This brings me onto a particular issue as far as distributed leadership is concerned.

In independent schools the second most important person in the school is the School Business Manager who handles all the HR, Finance, Site management, health and safety and internal operational aspects of the organisation. I see highly effective business management in many state maintained schools but in others the head is expected to manage the budget, take lead responsibility for a capital programme, write bids for funding and even conduct water testing and count dinner money!

Most maintained secondary schools and almost half of all primaries say they have school business manager support but only 60 per cent of secondaries have someone on their leadership team with responsibilities similar to those you would see in an independent school. In primaries that figure is under 13 per cent.

One of my many enjoyable tasks as Chief Executive at NCSL is to present awards at our School Business Managers' graduation ceremonies. They are talented people but not enough schools have access to their expertise or, indeed, are using them as well as they could.

Our research suggests that if school business manager support were to be available to all schools then heads could cut their workload by up to a

third – leading to better work-life balance and giving them more time to concentrate on making a difference to children's lives.

Our findings also show that school business managers tend to identify significant savings in school budgets and bring more income into the school. Even very small schools, through jointly employing school business expertise across more than one school, could benefit from the purchasing of services and equipment at a greater scale. Research shows that this approach can go a long way towards funding access to expert school business management. In other words, this has the potential to pay for itself.

We provided advice to the Secretary of State about the future of primary school leadership in August of this year and we received the response from ministers last month. You can read our advice on our web site. One of the things that we proposed was to move all primary schools towards gaining access to strategic school business management expertise. I am delighted to say that the Secretary of State has endorsed these proposals. You will hear more about this later this morning.

Starting in early 2008, we will run 'demonstration projects' at 24 locations around England to explore the potential of new school business manager

roles – Advanced School Business Manager and School Business Director. These roles which will operate across small and large groups of primary schools (such as a federations, a cluster of two or three small schools or trust) or in a single large primary school. These roles will normally be accountable to the headteacher in each school. In the case of a trust or a hard federation they may be accountable to the chief executive. We believe this initiative has the potential to make a significant difference to the quality of school leadership in this country. We have begun to remodel the workforce. Now it is time to remodel school leadership.

Whether you are a head of a small rural primary school, a large urban primary school, a special school, a PRU or a secondary school I am clear that the only way to ensure that you lead well in the long run is through building a team with the right expertise and through distributing the leadership.

3. Have a deep understanding of your context.

Why is it that some heads are great in one school but prove to be unsuccessful in another? Often because they have not thought themselves carefully enough into their new context. They have assumed that what works in one school will work in another.

As I have visited school leaders around the country they have spoken passionately to me about the importance of understanding the context in which they found themselves and how rather than going in with all guns blazing, they have thought carefully about the context before assuming that what worked elsewhere would work here.

A good leader tunes into the context.

“.. we have been witness to countless uncomfortable examples of executives who feel that the art of leadership is to give unfettered expression to their true selves in bold, take it or leave it fashion. They typically find that others choose to leave it.

Leadership is not achieved by riding into town – cowboy fashion - and shooting it up. Skilful leaders, to continue the analogy, need to get a sense of the town and to conform enough so that they are seen to be acting in the best interests of the townspeople, so they can lead change without being shot early in the proceedings.”

“Why should anyone be led by you” Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones

You may already have found that going on and on about what you did in your last school does not go down well in your new school and with your

new colleagues. The same may be true of strategies and techniques that worked elsewhere. If you have techniques that worked in your previous school that may be great but beware of context. It is not always a like for like exchange. Even very good strategies tend to need sensitive introduction and careful adaptation. As Michael Fullan says, strategies and techniques that travel well are laced with nuance.

4. Be courageous and confront the brutal facts.

My wife and I bought a house 4 years ago and we immediately made a list of all the things that needed to be improved. We set about doing it all and in the first year we got about three quarters of the way down the list. After that we just stopped. Not because we ran out of money –though that was relevant – but also because we stopped noticing that it needed to change. We just got used to things the way they were. The effective leaders maintain the high expectations even after the first 6 months or year or two years. They carry on challenging and carry on wanting the best. They understand the culture but they don't go native. Many of the school leaders I have visited this year have consistently for many years absolutely driven a culture of excellence, even in one case in Redbridge, when the head had been in the same school for 22 years!

The second law of thermodynamics says: “when you put a hot property next to a cold property they soon become a uniform heat” The effective leader remains a “hot property” and carries on challenging.

Great leaders are honest and realistic about what the organisation’s strengths and weaknesses are. They use the data. They compare their school with the best performing schools in similar circumstances and ask themselves why aren’t we doing that? How can we get to be as good as that? They look hard at variation **within** their school and ask the same question. They also confront the hard issues in their own school..

Most of the leaders I have visited in their schools this year have had to do very hard things. They have had to hold very difficult conversations with staff. Good leaders, like the head of a secondary school in Wakefield show kindness and sensitivity but they will confront the tough issues head on if they need to. They avoid “slow nos”- if they mean no, they say no and they make it clear that it is unacceptable.

The hard issues don’t go away if you ignore them. The poor performer, the person who is always late, the person who behaves badly towards somebody else, the person who doesn’t prepare lessons properly, the person who takes too many days off work.

I have two rules on this:

1. Never react to bad situations hastily, especially if you are cross. Always wait at least 24 hours.
2. Don't put them off because early intervention is usually the best strategy.

Do your staff know that you mean business and does everyone have confidence that you won't give up half-way through and do they therefore have confidence in the management and leadership of the organisation? . Are you up for managing the turbulence that always comes with change or do you reverse the decision when some staff are finding the change difficult?

There is an ancient Chinese proverb that says:

If you are going to stand then stand, if you are going to sit then sit but don't wobble"

As leaders, once we have thought carefully and made our decision, we need to see through some of the tough implications of that decision rather than changing our mind again when there are complaints from some staff.

One of the biggest weaknesses in otherwise good leaders is that they don't do the hard things, they settle for an easy life, they won't confront colleagues or take strong action even if it is needed

Let me put it bluntly: If you do not seriously believe that the children in your school can improve their learning significantly then frankly you are in the wrong job. There is no place in our schools for leaders who do not have high expectations of their staff and do not believe that pupils' learning can and will improve. And if you do have very high expectations of the young people in your school or in your local area but all around you there is a different culture then you will have major challenges to face. The culture of the organisation will always align itself to the strongest voice. As leaders we have to become that strongest voice and establish a new norm at a higher level.

5. Be authentic

As the head on the video said, the best leaders are aware of their strengths and weaknesses and don't try to be perfect at everything. – they understand what they are good at and what they are not good at. They look for people who will compensate for their weaknesses so that they can play to their strengths, they look to create a perfect and complete team

rather than to be the perfect and complete individual leader. They admit their weaknesses and are honest about who they are.

Today I want to speak in praise of the imperfect and incomplete leader.

Many of the heads I have met this year have been quick to acknowledge their weaknesses, keen to tell me it was the team not so much them that has made the difference. They have told me how others joining them with different skills and expertise were turning points for the school. They have talked about their own learning journey and how they are often embarrassed by some of the mistakes that they made in the first year or two of headship.

Let me be even more blunt and honest:

My name is Steve Munby and I am an imperfect and incomplete leader.

Frankly, it is unlikely that we will be able to inspire, excite or motivate people unless we show them who we are, what we stand for and what we can and cannot do.

If we are to be authentic in a school leadership context then we need to be passionate learners. Because learning is what schools are about.

That brings me on to the role of NCSL.

As the film earlier showed, your first year in headship will be relentless. You may well find yourself struggling to get any sense of work-life balance and the last thing you may prioritise is your own development, except though learning on the job. **Mistake.** The relentlessness makes it even more important that you build in reflection and development time. As Heifitz and Linsky say, good leaders spend time on the balcony as well as on the dance floor. You must build in opportunities to step back and to stand on the balcony. You will also need advice and support from trusted colleagues.

Let me just mention a couple of things that the National College can do for you.

First of all it can link you into the Leadership Network. That network had 400 school leaders in it 2 years ago – it now has 3,600 - and is growing rapidly. There will be leaders in your area or region who are in the network. It provides opportunities to meet with other leaders in safe environments and to talk through issues and hear about good practice.

Further details about how we can support you over the first three years of your headship career can be found within your welcome pack.

You are also – as someone in your first headship in a maintained school-entitled to free access to New Visions - a programme that brings new

heads together to explore the leadership challenges in their schools.

Moreover, the college gives a grant of £1,300 to each new head in their first headship in maintained schools. This grant can be used very flexibly to support your own personal learning and development so please use it. Many don't and at the end of three years the money is lost. In particular please consider whether you wish to use it to get yourself a mentor. I think high quality mentors make a huge difference, especially in your first few years in a leadership role. I have been chief executive of NCSL for nearly 3 years and I have 5 mentors!

If I may also say that our annual conference last year was stunningly good and I expect this year's to be just as good. It is in June in Birmingham.

6. Demonstrate contagious optimism

Knowsley GCSE story

If you do not have inspired, optimistic teachers how can you hope to have inspired, optimistic students?

I visited a school in North Tyneside a few months ago where the head was an absolute inspiration. The job that she had inherited was almost un-doable. The building she inherited was more like a toilet than a school. The quality of the teaching was very poor, aspirations were low. It was

about as bad as a school can be. Through absolute sheer resilience, determination and optimism that school has now become an outstanding school. It was her indomitable spirit, her passionate leadership, her ability to bounce back after every bad day that made the difference.

So let's be clear, good leadership is not about never having a bad day – we are human and we all have bad days – it is about when you have a bad day, getting up again and starting all over again. Because that's what leaders do!

“The greatest glory in living lies not in never failing, but in rising every time we fail.”

Martin Luther King

Before I go on to my last point, I want to emphasise that everything that I have been saying this morning about effective leadership is equally relevant to the leadership of NCSL. As a National College we have to be continually focused on our users- namely schools leaders –so that it can truly be “your college”. We also as a leadership group and in my own personal leadership - need to demonstrate courage and authenticity, imbued with moral purpose.

7. Develop future leaders.

As you probably know, we have an ageing workforce and many heads and school leaders will be retiring over the next few years. Moreover many middle leaders and deputy heads say that they don't want to be heads – stating reasons like the workload, or less contact with children or too much accountability or too much bureaucracy as the reason. However the good news is that more now seem to be expressing an interest in headship again. The latest headship index – conducted this month - shows that 39% of teachers aged between 30 and 44 want to become headteachers.

That's good news. When we ask heads what they think of headship they say largely positive things:

“The majority of headteachers are positive about their leadership role; nine in ten say they feel confident in what they do and enjoy it (91%).”

Follow-Up Research into the State of School Leadership in England

MORI Social Research Institute (2005)

For all of the leaders whose schools I visited this year, the job is tough and sometimes relentless but it is also richly rewarding.

As the prize-winning author and broadcaster Studs Terkel says:

“Work is about daily meaning as well as daily bread; for recognition as well as cash; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying... We have the right to ask of work that it include meaning, recognition, astonishment and life.” Studs Terkel. Working

The complexity and the challenge of school leadership combined with the joy of working with children and with people provide it with deep meaning and life too. Headship is just not boring!

But the best leaders don't just distribute leadership and empower others, they develop and coach them.

Being a teacher is about helping students to learn. Being a headteacher is about helping students and adults to learn.

“Talent isn't fixed – unless you believe it is.....talent depends on how a person is managed or led” (Pfeffer and Sutton 2007)

In many, many schools that I have visited this year I have seen leaders who are doing fantastic work in growing future leaders. They regard it as one of their core responsibilities to develop others and they take a sense of pride in the number of people in their school who have been promoted internally to senior leadership or who have gone on to be leaders in other schools.

You don't have to do this alone.

In every part of the country we are working with local authorities and networks of schools to help develop local solutions to the succession challenge. You can be part of that. If you want to find out more get in touch with us through the Tomorrow's Leaders Today section of our website.

The fact is that as leaders we cast a shadow over our organisations, for good or ill. The longer we lead an organisation, the more it begins to mirror our own leadership style and behaviours. If we moan, then the staff in the organisation are more likely to moan, if we look too busy to listen then they will look too busy to listen, if we look in a panic they are more likely to look in a panic. If we inspire they will inspire, if we demonstrate emotional intelligence and kindness, they will develop that too, if we challenge poor performance fairly but relentlessly then they will

also. If we don't take ourselves too seriously then they will do the same. If they find working with us stimulating and challenging and they feel valued and they respect us then they are more likely to want to become leaders themselves and to have the skills to be good in the role.

Whenever someone leaves a role in order to go into a different role, they are usually leaving something they are very good at in order to do something that they don't know if they are going to be good at. For that you need confidence. That is why the good leaders build confidence in others to enable them to step up, they believe in the potential of their staff and they grow future leaders.

We are all in leadership roles because someone believed in us and encouraged us to be leaders. That is certainly true of me. The biggest challenge is not to go on to be a hero headteacher that puts people off leadership but to help others to believe that they too can go on to become school leaders. To identify the potential leaders in your school and give them real and structured opportunities to develop and grow – even if that means that they leave your school and become a leader somewhere else. Your legacy can be to develop other leaders who will help to transform the

lives of many, many children and who will regard you as their inspiration and role model.

As heads you are part of a great profession. There have been outstanding heads in the past. Now they have passed the torch to you. I am asking you to keep the torch burning; to become the truly great school leader that you can be and, in doing so, to be an inspiration to your staff and to your colleagues. It's a torch worth bearing.