

[Laura Hyde gave this Keynote Speech at a conference entitled ‘WOMEN INTO LEADERSHIP’ which was held at a leading school in Nottingham, The Elizabethan Academy on 22nd February 2016. This conference was aimed at middle leaders aspiring to headship.]

LEADING A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL

Christine Horrocks, colleagues, it is a real pleasure and an honour to be invited to be with you this morning, thank you. The subject of our conference could not be more important or indeed crucial: communities of all kinds, no matter how large or small, depend for their welfare upon the quality of leadership which guides them.

This morning I will share some thoughts with you on how leadership can provide the circumstances in which human beings may truly flourish and why it is that women have a special contribution to make in this context. First, we will examine how a leader’s vision can inspire and transform a school community. Secondly, I will suggest some essential practices which help to maintain the highest ideals of leadership and finally I will consider a whole-school approach to character education and well-being.

The world is facing a multitude of problems not least of which is a loss of cohesion at all levels of society; division and hostility between ever-increasing factions, be they political, social, cultural or religious are escalating at an alarming rate. Within our own country we have been witnessing a severe decline in mental and emotional health with an increase in levels of fear, isolation and anger. Loss of trust in and respect for our political and religious institutions is opening a dangerous vacuum in which insecurity is fanning the flames of anarchy, aggression and despair.

It has always been understood that the condition of any society arises from the quality of care given to the emerging generation for whom the defining influences are family and education. For this reason, educational leadership is a wonderful responsibility with huge potential to enhance the human condition.

School leaders of real calibre are called to education first and foremost because they have a natural love for their fellow human being; secondly, because during the course of their own lives they have caught sight of the awe and wonder of some aspect of the universe which has caused them to study a particular subject in depth and to wish to pass on their enthusiasm to others.

An inspirational leader is one who has been inspired. The deeper their inspiration, the more powerful is their vision. People will express this vision differently, but essentially their hearts see the inner beauty that lies at the very core of a human being and they see that same beauty in everyone; it is a constant and remains so regardless of the various types of behaviour which human nature exhibits. This is the true equality which exists as the very essence of our humanity. Seeing in this way, what arises is simple: instinctively there is a desire to allow that beauty which makes up the essence of each and every person to flourish fully.

I will never forget a conversation I had years ago with a Detective Chief Inspector who was in charge of youth crime in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. He had received a CBE for his services and was near to retirement. During his career he had dealt with some of the most difficult young offenders one can imagine but as his stories unfolded (and in his most self-effacing manner) I began to learn just how remarkably successful he had been in turning around the lives of some truly deprived teenagers. In many ways he acted as a father-figure. At one point he remarked wistfully, ‘The difficulty is getting my younger colleagues in the police force to understand that in order to touch these young people, you have to see beyond the criminal’. This was the profound secret to his success and the inspirational vision that motivated his life-long career.

As we journey through life, and especially when we are young, we depend upon those around us to see our best selves – who we really are. If we are fortunate to have teachers or mentors like this, it gives us the confidence and faith to be able to work towards our own development. In later years, people whose youth was fraught with difficulties of one kind or another will often attribute their success in life to that one teacher who saw his or her real self. He ‘believed in me’ they say, and that made everything possible.

The very meaning of the word ‘education’ is to ‘lead out’, to draw forth; it is the unlimited beauty which is being drawn out. The big question is how to provide the circumstances in which this flourishing may take place. The challenge for leaders of schools is how to translate this vision into a practical reality within a highly demanding and complex social and educational environment.

It might be helpful at this juncture to make it clear that the term ‘successful school’ in this context, means a school in which human flourishing, physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually, is really taking place. For the purposes of our conversation, we will take it as read that we are not satisfied with mere repetition of the desirable jargon of school prospectuses, but are seeking to realise the ‘real thing’. It also goes without saying that to be described as ‘successful’, exam outcomes must indicate that a school delivers not only high levels of progress and achievement for its pupils, but that it also understands how to develop good character. Without good character education, as it is presently termed, little else is really possible or worthwhile. We will return later to consider how a leader might make this happen.

It is inevitable that a leader’s vision, whatever it is, as well as his or her character, flow into the very life blood of the organisation they lead. The quality of the organisation and the condition of its employees reflect what the leader has poured into it. This indicates the enormous influence of leadership and the responsibility that is incumbent upon it. There are three aspects to consider here: the greatest source of influence is, as described earlier, the quality of the vision which inspires the leader and the ability to communicate it; secondly, the extent to which her behaviour models the principles and vision she espouses; and thirdly, her capacity for honest self-reflection and readiness to learn, especially through feed-back from the community she serves.

So to return to the content of a propitious vision: first and foremost it would be focussed on the beauty of the human spirit which is equal and the same in everyone. Secondly, in this vision, the leader's love for those she cares for is unconditional and from this love grows a harmonious and unified community whose quality is essentially empathetic. Lastly, a spirit of service and generosity would flow through the heart of all endeavours.

This last aspect of the vision is of enormous importance because it is founded on the understanding that human well-being, happiness and fulfilment is enhanced through giving. As the great philosopher Seneca wrote in AD 63, *"No one can live happily who has regard for himself alone and transforms everything into a question of his own utility."* (p.236-7 *Thrive AH*). And as Ariana Huffington wrote in her book entitled 'Thrive':

'Modern Science has overwhelmingly confirmed the wisdom of those early philosophers and religious traditions. Empathy, compassion and giving ...are the molecular building blocks of our being. With them we expand and thrive; without them we wither.' (p.237 'Thrive' AH)

Aspiration and happiness in our young is greatly enhanced by cultivating a spirit of generosity and service. This can begin within the school community and proceed to expand to seeing the needs of the wider world whilst also giving pupils the confidence to discover how their talents might be developed to meet those needs. Inspiring the love in their own hearts is the most powerful motivator to a young person's endeavour. In this regard, the late Victor Frankl, holocaust survivor and professor of neurology and psychiatry, advised his students in Asia and Europe as follows:

'Don't aim at success – the more you aim at it and make it a target the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as a by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself....' (p.12 'Man's Search for Meaning' VF).

Now to turn to the second aspect of the leadership responsibility: the ability to 'walk the talk', to model what is espoused, is every good leader's aim. How is this ideal realised and what are the obstacles we can expect to encounter? Perhaps the first point worthy of note is that the third pre-requisite to good leadership, the ability to self-reflect or self-examine, is intrinsically related to the quality of her conduct as a leader. Without self-awareness we simply do not notice what we are doing or saying and the impact this has on others. There is no doubt that the regular practice of mindfulness or meditation directly enhances a person's capacity to be aware of themselves and what is going on around them. Without the keen sensitivity and perception which arise through greater awareness we are easily blind to what is really going on. A good leader is self-aware, as well as perceptive and sensitive to the condition of others. This is one of the benefits of meditative practices.

There are various natural and very human tendencies which act as obstructions to our being able to practice the highest altruistic ideals. Most of these stem from fears associated with an

insecure sense of our own worth. However, this intrinsic and common human vulnerability is a rather hydra-headed monster and produces such features as envy, an excessive desire to control or dominate, pride, arrogance, being overly critical or judgemental of others and aggressive competitiveness - to name but a few! Without wishing to be too contentious, I am sure we recognise that, as women, we are only too familiar with the strangulating tendency in our natures to be overly self-critical. Self-criticism has the effect of paralysing the flow of the very best attributes of our natures, our huge capacity for love, devotion, empathy, courage, resilience, creativity and insight. However, we must be aware of the equally stultifying effect of insuring against this by going to the other extreme which is a blind and rather brusque tendency to be pushy and overly self-confident.

In truth, reflective self-awareness, which is enhanced through practices such as meditation, can teach the capacity to be watchful of what is taking place within us. From this greater field of observation it is possible to learn how our nature operates and how to navigate gently through its pushes and pulls. In this way, a leader can retain balance and discover more space and freedom to choose how to act in any situation. This allows her a greater strength to enact those ideals which are dear to her heart and known through her deepest insight.

This matter of maintaining balance through awareness is especially valuable in regard to her emotional and mental well-being. It goes without saying that the whole school community feels the effect of the leader's mood or state of mind at any given moment. Whilst it would be ridiculous not to accept error and human frailty, we have to learn how to maintain emotional balance so that we can offer the best of ourselves to those who depend upon us.

I would suggest that one of our strengths as women is that the emotional centre of our beings is where our power lies. We feel things very fully; events and people's conditions have a significant impact upon our hearts. This is a strength in that it lends power to our actions and allows us a ready capacity for empathy, but the downside is that we can easily become over-loaded emotionally. It is noticeable that some leaders decide that the best way to avoid emotional 'over-load' is to assume a kind of synthetic 'hard shell' which is unfortunately brittle. This is a pity for it undermines the power of the heart which has a huge amount to offer the welfare of others. However, it is possible to learn the art of 'letting go' of the emotional impact of events so as to avoid the accumulation of a burden. This is an 'inner discipline' which a well-balanced leader can adopt. This capacity is undoubtedly enhanced by the regular practice of mindfulness and meditation.

If a leader manages to cultivate this art of inner balance through regular access to a deep quiet within herself, she naturally enhances two vital functions: the capacity for sustained attention and the ability to make good decisions. The well-being of the school community depends entirely upon both of these capabilities.

It is probably stating the obvious to say that everything prospers or disintegrates according to the quality of attention it is given. This is equally true in relation to the condition of our physical environment, as it is to the well-being of people. In a distracted or weak state of attention it is amazing how much is missed. A really outstanding leader is extremely attentive

to every detail of the school and she teaches this art by her example. Human beings are also nourished by the quality of attention we give each other; again, we are so easily blind to each other's needs. The teachers and pupils in our care utterly depend upon the quality of attention we give.

A pupil's physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual development rests upon a teacher's capacity to see the deepest potential of the person as well as their present need. This requires simple, sustained attention that is free from 'blockers' such as criticism, prejudice, or judgements related to past misdemeanours or failures, but to see the pupil freshly in the present moment. As women we have a natural capacity to perceive a person's condition deeply and to speak from our heart to the heart of another. This kind of attention has a liberating effect on human potential.

Any organisation thrives or withers according to the quality of decision making of its leaders. Good decisions arise from an uncluttered, quiet state of mind which is capable of weighing all dimensions of a question with full information and coming to a view without bias or fear.

When a leader sets high standards for herself because she desires above all not to allow a discrepancy between what she espouses and how she acts, there are one or two common pitfalls. First, the setting of high personal standards can be accompanied by a tendency to be overly harsh on oneself in the face of failure. This not only creates an unhealthy pressure on oneself but also, unintentionally on the school community as a whole. The atmosphere can all too easily become a 'blame culture' – the very opposite of what was intended. The second pitfall is less obvious; high standards of behaviour, professionally or morally may all too easily be accompanied by pride. This also has the effect of making others feel inadequate and discourages them from aspiring to the values which the leader espouses. Colleagues can easily feel belittled and at worst, demoralized. Therefore, it is all important that the leader embraces her own human imperfections with kindness and forgiveness. This will allow her to be honest, accept criticism as an opportunity to learn, and most importantly, to apologise when necessary. This behaviour and attitude generates a 'learning environment' where failure is embraced with gladness when it is accompanied by honesty and a willingness to develop. Her only priority is that her colleagues and pupils may find fulfilment in all dimensions of their lives.

Returning to the subject of good character education: today it is widely recognised that this is vital if we are to address the plethora of needs which are arising in our pupils. The term 'values education' is widely used to describe an approach which encourages the development of what we might call the virtues inherent in human nature and upon which a civilized and harmonious society depend. The key for educationists is that unless these virtues are deliberately encouraged through intelligent focus in the curriculum and within the school as a whole, they will not grow. It is observable that where a school has virtues education at its heart, the pupils behave accordingly. Such qualities or virtues as truth, generosity, compassion, forgiveness, courage, perseverance and harmlessness, to name but a few, are natural to human beings but unless they are actively encouraged, the opposite tendencies of selfishness, dishonesty, prejudice, divisiveness and intolerance tend to prevail.

The best practice in schools is where a period a week is devoted to virtues education. In these lessons, one virtue will be adopted as the theme for a half-term duration, first having been presented by the head in a school assembly. The weekly lesson will provide opportunities to consider a variety of theme-related quotations and stories from our wisdom traditions - religious and philosophical. Once pupils have understood something of the real meaning of such texts, they are invited to test the virtue in the practice of their daily lives, sharing their findings with each other.

This approach has two key benefits. First and foremost, as pupils practice the virtues in their everyday lives their conduct begins to be transformed accordingly; secondly, by drawing on a variety of traditions, pupils who are from a cross section of religious traditions and none get a sense of a common thread running through the teachings of the various great spiritual traditions. This naturally enhances respect and understanding for each other's wisdom traditions whilst also emphasising the unity of the human spirit. This helps to diminish the tendency to assume that religious identity must create separation. In a world which is riven with religious hostility, this message is of huge importance when offered to an emerging generation in this manner.

In summary, when we consider the great leaders in our history, one common feature stands out: in differing ways, their greatness rests in their desire to seek justice, freedom, harmony and well-being for all. The reason they are loved and admired the world over is because their vision is calling for unity, not hatred and division. Our young people will need to be inspired by a desire to offer themselves to the service of their communities, understanding what it means to be honest, hard-working citizens whose influence brings people together rather than drives them apart. Education can point them in this direction and offer them the strength and wisdom to realise the vision of their own hearts.

It is the greatest privilege to be given the opportunity to devote the fullness of intelligence, love and creativity to the welfare of others. As women, we have the power to transform, in abundance.
