

The David Brent Factor

I've been pleased and relieved, with the reflective response to my recent article about disruptive teachers. The teaching profession must be maturing and not just getting older! A common criticism however has been that it didn't mention disruptive head teachers. Given the critical role of heads and the current focus on new management structures in our schools, the issue of disruptive managers clearly merits consideration. The comedy in David Brent's portrayal of a demoralising manager in *The Office* came from the fact that many people could identify with his staff.

We know the effective school is one where the head is seen as trustworthy and approachable and sets an empowering structure. Teaching staff know where the school is going. They feel they share power with management and have some autonomy within their areas of responsibility. Giving staff at all levels responsibilities in accordance with their skills and remit fosters a culture of leadership.

A central factor that separates supportive from disruptive heads is their contrasting motives for control. All of us want to control our lives. Some of us are keen to control others. Some high control people have positive self-esteem and feel capable and optimistic. They will have successfully managed to control important life events which will have contributed to their feelings of competency. This could be termed autonomous control. For others, exercising control is a way of combating feelings of chaos or helplessness or of protecting their fragile self-esteem. They fight their feelings by striving to exercise control over other aspects of their lives. This could be called chaos-avoidance control.

Many people seek to satisfy their high need for control through promotion. The management style of such people will be shaped by how their desire for control has developed throughout their lives.

Those whose leadership drive is based on a healthy self-esteem and autonomous control show confidence, trust and respect in their working relationships. They adopt a flexible and resonant style. Their transformational leadership is based on principles of equity and collegiality. Such heads help colleagues see how their work fits into the big picture and so give clarity of goals and a keen sense of purpose. They are good at delegating and distributing tasks that stretch colleagues. Such leaders give a clear vision and sense of direction and distribute and share as much information as possible. They transform the school culture by taking everyone along with them at every stage. They encourage staff to go on training courses and embrace the knowledge they bring back. Their empathic style means they listen to colleagues before giving feedback and encourage a two-way sharing of thoughts and feelings.

In contrast, those whose desire for control is based on chaos avoidance or driven by a fragile or volatile esteem have a tendency towards a more rigid, dissonant and manipulative style. Difficulty with trusting people combined with a high desire for control may not be that

uncommon. A link has been found between desire for control and suspiciousness. An excessive need for power over others has been found to have the same effect as being highly stressed. Such people, especially those who are highly competitive are drawn, like moths to a flame, to the top posts.

This particular set of attitudes will be downloaded to their staff through a bullying or interfering management style. They may scapegoat and marginalise anyone who disagrees with them while showing favouritism to others. They may 'dump' unachievable tasks on colleagues or remove responsibilities from others. They don't encourage staff to attend courses, ridicule anyone paying for themselves and belittle colleagues who return knowing more than they do, e.g. excluding them from working groups. Those attracted to management primarily to meet their own needs rather than apply their leadership skills, allow their needs to take priority over everyone else's. The enhancement of their personal status becomes their guiding principle. Their interactions with colleagues are geared to achieve their own agenda rather than support colleagues to meet their goals. They need to be centre stage and can't put their ego to one side long enough to work for the common cause. While teachers tell pupils not to interrupt, some head teachers expect an instant response from the teacher in front of the class.

Such transactional leaders tend to be stuck in the hierarchical control mentality and hold on to their power, driven by a fear of losing what little power they have. Their management is characterised by deals that seek loyalty in return for favours. Their volatile feelings of worth have a tenuous (and tedious!) quality. Such leaders are driven by their feelings that ebb and flow with their successes and failures. Their unstable confidence leads to favourable reactions to success but to a blame throwing response to problems. Their esteem is a precious commodity that must be continually promoted and this makes them vulnerable to challenge and criticism that in turn creates defensiveness or self-aggrandisement. Consequently, such managers have a tendency to invest too much of their ego in and over identify with the job. The trouble is the more one's self-esteem is based in one area, the more vulnerable it becomes.

Head teachers' attitudes and behaviour towards staff reflect and shape the quality of a school's inclusive ethos. Just as teachers download their attitudes to pupils via their classroom practice, so school managers at the top of the 'motivation chain', download their values to their staff. Their management style also has an influence on teachers' ability to control their classes. Any disruptive influence in the staff room must in part be a reflection of what support the management team has offered. The power entrusted in head teachers needs to be exercised with sensitivity and respect. Maybe 360 degrees feedback would help maintain the self awareness essential for this tough job. Pupil-centred teaching needs teacher-centred management and all senior staff need to treat teachers the same way they rightly expect class teachers to treat their students. Who muttered something about directors of education?

