

## LEADERSHIP

# Keys to empowering staff

Passion and improvement are the lifeblood of leadership, so leaders must first empower themselves and then empower staff in order to work together to build the learning power of children and young people



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Leadership is taking a group of people somewhere better – and not necessarily somewhere where they yet want to go. It is about owning, communicating and pursuing a moral vision to fulfil the core purpose of your organisation more deeply and effectively. Passion and improvement are the lifeblood of leadership. If we're not doing that, it's just glorified management. So we can't talk about "empowering staff" unless we are first clear on exactly what we're empowering them to do and why.

The Learning Power Approach is an emerging school of thought, born of dozens of research groups and practitioners worldwide, about the purpose and practice of youth work of all kinds. We start from the assumption that our job is to build young people's capacity and appetite for learning. If you have curiosity, an adventurous spirit, determination, imagination, flexibility and sociability, you can go far. Our job is to coach and cultivate that mindset with a focus on the most vulnerable children and young people. First leaders must empower themselves, then empower staff and then we can all work together to build the learning power of the young.

Our new book, *Powering Up Your School*, draws out lessons from the experiences of a

group of school leaders who have been conspicuously successful at developing this culture of learning and empowerment in their organisations. The book contains detailed stories from the frontline and descriptions of a wide range of different strategies that have worked – as well as some cautionary tales about what hasn't. Here are five of the key lessons.

## 1 Leaders must have a clear vision before they attempt to involve others.

As leaders in children's services and schools, we must build our own knowledge about the nature, demands and feasibility of our moral purpose. Before anything, we have to feed and consolidate our own sense of hope, direction and action. It is important that we are secure in – and keep deepening – our own understanding and commitment before we start recruiting others. I believe the most successful leaders read a lot.

## 2 Encourage debate and listen to staff.

Once we have established our own conviction, we can set about inspiring others, setting clear goals and explaining the practical steps staff can take to achieve those goals. During this process, it is vital to create time for critical discussion – and to listen to what is being said. The tricky part is balancing our determination with practicalities. Wherever possible we should get a mandate from staff. It is also important to identify champions within your organisations and delegate responsibility.

## 3 Strengthen your organisational culture of learning.

We need to strive towards a culture of continuous improvement by all staff. Having got substantial buy-in and a clear sense of what "better" will look and feel like, we need everyone to be constantly looking for what British cycling coach Sir David Brailsford called those "marginal gains". We need to get people talking and sharing suggestions, and make sure there is fast dissemination of small, smart ideas. Ideas can be shared quickly digitally via staff emails and newsletters or through a "what works" board in the staff room or at your organisation's main office.

## 4 Stay focused on what is important.

Everyone in your organisation needs to be clear on the fundamental improvement priority. We need single-mindedness. Everything should stem from that core purpose and no decisions should be taken without referring back to it. Make sure every meeting has a "vision watchdog" – someone who keeps the focus on what really matters. Leaders in children's services need to commit publicly to protecting staff from being bombarded with new initiatives and constant change. It is important to ditch initiatives and projects that no longer fit with your core purpose to clear space and time for what is important.

## 5 Distribute responsibility and avoid tokenistic efforts to empower staff.

High staff turnover is often a problem, so it is important to "person-proof" your vision so it can continue after key staff members have left. All too often we see hard-won progress fizzle out when staff move on. We need to invest in succession planning for the ongoing strength of the organisation. Look at ways you can delegate discrete areas of work with the aim of developing leadership confidence and capacity across the organisation.

Managers often like the idea of staff empowerment in theory but, according to leading US business theorist Chris Argyris, "the command-and-control model" is often what they trust and know best. "For their part, employees are often ambivalent about empowerment—it is great as long as they are not held personally accountable," he wrote 20 years ago. He also warned of the dangers of and discontent among staff caused by top-level managers "espousing empowerment too glibly". Unless we put in the hard work to win hearts and minds, we might be better off not bothering.

● Professor Guy Claxton holds professorial appointments at the universities of Bristol and Winchester and King's College London. He is the originator of the Building Learning Power approach and lead author of a linked series of books, which include *Powering Up Your School: The Learning Power Approach to School Leadership*, published by Crown House in 2020