

Keeping the Fleas Motivated

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A school's culture and philosophy affects the way in which staff behave and they in turn affect the way in which students behave. This may appear to be common sense to most educators, but it is poorly understood in many of our schools. Using Charles Handy's analogy of the elephant, as the school, and the fleas as the innovators within our schools; this article explores ways of keeping the fleas motivated so that they can challenge us to change and innovate.

Charles Handy, in his book *The Elephant and the Flea* (2002) refers to elephants as established organisations, in this case schools. Schools have a formalised way of doing things, providing rules and routines which strive to be efficient and predictable. They often get bigger to safeguard themselves because size is seen as best in a turbulent world. Handy believes that all elephants need fleas to keep them alive and to grow. Fleas are the creative individuals or groups within our schools - the innovators or non-conformists. They are not always boss compatible because they are independent, preferring to live on top of elephants, not in their bloodstreams. If they get caught up in the bureaucracy they run the risk of being slowly suffocated, until they lose their passion and drive, or leave the profession. Yet these are the very people our schools need in order to change.

For fleas, promises of future wealth are not the chief motivator – passion, a cause to commit to, space for independence and opportunity to make a difference are more important. As a school principal I want our school to be one which sees itself as ‘a natural home for fleas’.

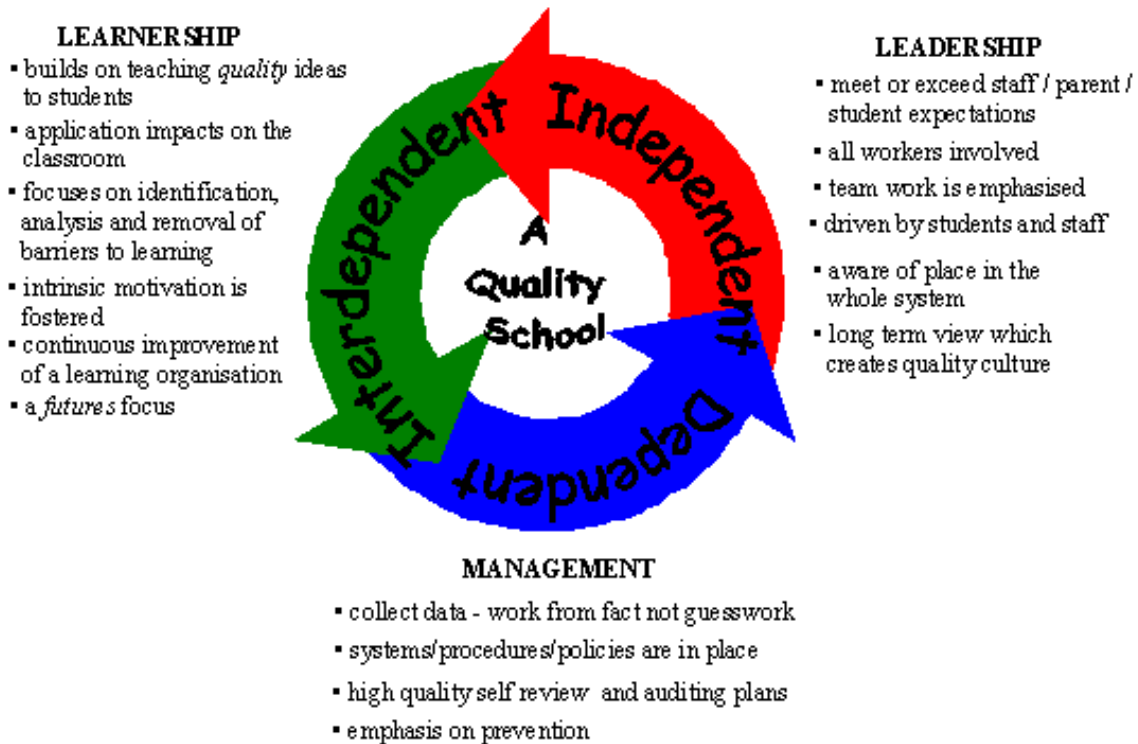
The development of a schoolwide way of doing things is a powerful form of motivation which can lead to the creation of an exciting and innovative school – a flea

friendly environment. If a school works on its values and beliefs in an holistic way, and focuses on aligning these with its practices, people will feel more empowered and willing to innovate. Common features of an innovative organisation, as identified by Clark and Clegg (1998) are as follows:

- a culture of creativity is nurtured;
- the organisation is organic, free flowing and flexible;
- employees feel empowered;
- there are few rules; and
- there is an emphasis on bottom up innovation.

It is no surprise that these features are ones that focus on motivating individuals to take control for themselves. This is the essence of the approach to motivation that we should be taking in our schools – with our staff and with our students. In order to achieve high levels of innovation in our schools we must provide opportunities to grow our community, to develop a learning organisation. One way of developing this is to use a quality schools focus – moving from the structures that can help innovation to grow, through to providing opportunities for leadership and finally, creating an understanding of ourselves as learners. The model shown in Figure One is the model I use to explain how we might produce a quality school.

Figure 1: A model of quality (Doig, 2000)



Management

Good management will provide empowerment not freedom, providing flexibility within structure. This means having clear guidelines for people to follow, but ensuring that these guidelines allow for ‘fleas’ to be creative and exhibit their professional expertise.

Two examples of systems that are discussed in my book (Doig, 2000) show how the emphasis must be on clarity and fairness when developing systems:

Negotiable/non-negotiable:

While we want to give students/staff/parents more say in the school, there has to be the understanding that some things are negotiable and some things aren't. These need to be transparent and fair. As an example school rules are not negotiable. They were

developed collaboratively and they are there to keep people safe and happy. You will not find a 'steps' system operating in our school. Problems are noted in our Behaviour Book or on Bullying Forms. A leaflet explicitly explains 'how we do things around here'. Part of this approach is to look at every case individually and to respect that consequences may vary from student to student. If we are to develop our community into self motivated learners we need to value their diversity and have flexibility to treat people according to their differing needs. This does not mean having a soft approach to behaviour, but it does mean celebrating difference and not imposing silly rules because that's the way we have always done it.

My job/your job

The focus on individual behaviour can also be illustrated by determining who has responsibility for what in the school setting. In the classroom, teachers work on MY JOB/ YOUR JOB, MY JOB IS NOT/YOUR JOB IS NOT. This places ownership with students - they have a clearer understanding of their roles. It also outlines limitations, roles and responsibilities. This is important for teachers and students to be reinforcing with parents too. Comments like "such and such told them to do it", "x is a bad influence", "y hit him first" are lessened when we concentrate on individual behaviour.

Leadership

In order for 'fleas' to thrive, they need to feel empowered and able to take risks. Do people in your organisation feel able to do this? How can you ensure that innovation grows and that people feel in control of what they do? One simple exercise is to focus on what you can change, categorising ideas under the headings shown in Figure 2, and then giving time and energy into the things you can change or influence. It is the feeling of powerlessness that leads to frustration, road blocking and lack of motivation.

Figure 2 What can I control?

WHAT I CANNOT CONTROL	WHAT I CAN PERSUADE OR INFLUENCE	WHAT I CAN CONTROL
Eg weather, the past, birth defects due to genetic causes	Eg being on time, my environment, local government, school programmes	Eg what I say, my attitude, whether or not I take risks, what I do with my day

The implications are two-fold, with leadership being necessary at the individual and the organisational levels.

1. Personal Responsibility –

The exercise shown in Figure 2 makes it clear that we can only control ourselves. It is almost impossible to get anyone to do something they don't want to do. There is a real emphasis on self development, rather than a blame mentality. At the same time there has to be responsibility to the group, in that responsibility includes the willingness and ability of people to follow standards and rules, and to ultimately set their own, without infringing on the rights of others. This is an area which needs major emphasis in our society if our adolescent population, in particular our young men, are going to be able to cope with the increasingly complex world of change (see the information on resiliency under the *Learnership* heading).

2. Organisational Responsibility

None of us see the world in the same way - we have our own picture in our head, our own quality world. The focus in our schools needs to be on getting into the quality worlds of others, by really knowing the people that make up our school community. The school must provide an environment in which people feel they have some control over what happens to them. A focus should be placed on providing opportunities for all to:

- experience leadership;
- have the courage to be different and feel valued for their diversity;
- belong to a forgiveness culture, where mistakes are supported and used as an opportunity to grow; and

- experience and contribute to feedback – through portfolios, peer assessment, questionnaires to students, parents, staff; parent interviews and workshops; data collection or research eg postbox exercises, focus groups.

Learnership

A quality school can only happen effectively when teachers have made changes themselves, when they model intrinsic motivation, goal setting and continuous improvement. If we are living the habit of continuous self and school renewal, then we can start teaching students how to do it for themselves. Our words and actions must be congruent for this to take place.

In developing learnership within our schools we need to provide opportunities for staff to be exposed to a wide range of ideas, to discuss teaching and learning on a regular basis and to study research. One example of research that has a major impact on motivation in our schools is in the area of resiliency, with a focus on the importance of community, of people and of belonging. Milstein and Henry (2000) describe resiliency as "the capacity to meet challenges and become more capable as a result of these experiences" (p.11). They outline six key factors that make up resiliency:

- *Prosocial bonding* - healthy relationships and connections.
- *Clear and consistent boundaries* - defined and agreed-on expectations which are enforced regularly and fairly.
- *Life skills* - the development of the essential skills of the NZ Curriculum Framework.
- *Caring and Support* - unconditional positive regard, trust and encouragement.
- *High expectations* - achievement of goals based on ability and potential.

These six factors are important for our schools to understand if we are going to improve outcomes for all members of our school community. And yet many of our

schools persist with the notion that professional development means merely keeping up with the latest curriculum changes and Ministry of Education requirements. To do so is a disservice to the teaching profession and results in inhibiting learnership within our schools. If we are to produce children who think for themselves and are motivated to learn, we first need to do it ourselves.

So what are some of the factors that motivate and promote learnership in our schools?

1. Defocussing on extrinsic rewards and internal competition. Refocussing on intrinsic motivation, self improvement and team work. Most children do not need stickers and token rewards – these simply cost money, take time and feed a culture of dependency. What we need to do is foster learnership, develop the skills needed to be independent and mediate the learning of students.

Example: This term our schoolwide theme has been on ‘best performance’. It has included inquiries into leadership, improving performance, competition and co-operation, coping with failure, following school rules, wearing our uniform with pride, and teamwork.

2. Using an inquiry learning approach to foster individual and groups learning. This allows students to follow individual pathways.

Example: Fendalton School uses an inquiry model developed by the staff to reflect the culture of the school’s learning. This MAD on learning model (Make a Difference Learning) focuses on the future of the individual and society.

3. Fostering a climate of self reflection as a way of constantly improving. Even from an early age students should be evaluating what they do, setting their own goals and helping develop criteria for assessment. This includes the establishment of rubrics, standards and exemplars. Teachers can model this by talking about their own evaluations and modelling self evaluation through the use of reflective journals.

Example: Teachers at Fendalton School meet together in quality learning circles to set goals and reflect on pedagogical issues. They share information, meet in each other's classrooms and support each other to grow.

Conclusions

Change that is imposed leaves people feeling powerless. It is very clear that change needs to be driven by those in the organisation if it is to have a long lasting effect on school culture. For external agencies working in our schools it is important to look for the uniqueness of each school and use this as a starting point from which to work. The culture in each school is different and this implies that they will not have the same needs. It also means that a formula cannot be applied to working in schools.

The ultimate difference you can make is by valuing the fleas who ask "but why not?" or who do things differently. Asking questions, debating and creativity are more likely to result in growth than sitting placidly and accepting whatever is put in front of us. When we look to ourselves and our own abilities and want to be the best we can be, we have the ultimate motivation to succeed. Live with attitude.

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