



# How successful head teachers survive and thrive –

**FOUR PHASES OF HEADSHIP,  
FIVE USES OF TIME,  
SIX ESSENTIAL TASKS AND  
SEVEN WAYS TO HOLD ON TO YOUR SANITY**

By Professor Tim Brighouse

# About RM



Once again, we have the privilege of being able to publish a book by Tim Brighouse on the art of teaching and good school management. Last year, we helped Tim

publish *The Jigsaw of a Successful School*, where he identified 15 characteristics of a successful school. In this, his latest book, Tim is imparting his knowledge on what makes a successful head teacher.

Education is at the heart of everything we do. That is why we have key educational thinkers like Tim Brighouse and Mike Tomlinson on the RM board – to advise and steer us and to make sure our educational thinking is sound. I find myself repeatedly humbled by their wealth of knowledge, experience and good ideas.

At the top of Tim's list of characteristics of a successful school are shared values, a vision of the future and the ability to tell stories. These are characteristics that apply as much to a successful business as they do to a successful school. And at RM we aim to share our values and a vision of the future. Our vision is about helping teachers to teach and learners to learn; our values are about being a moral and purposeful organisation.

While education standards are probably higher than they've ever been, policymakers, education managers and classroom teachers remain committed to improving them further. It's a moral duty – as Tim

Brighouse would say. You can't have a free society without educated people – but it's a pragmatic duty too. Economic success in the 21st century will require a highly educated workforce that is comfortable with technology.

The UK has pioneered the effective use of ICT in the classroom and RM is proud to be part of that tradition. But things don't stand still, especially in the world of technology.

Things like social networking and blogging will soon find a role in education too. As Professor Stephen Heppell said recently, "Whatever kids come to school with in their pockets, we mustn't expect them to power-down to get on with their learning." And that is how we think at RM. Technology has the potential to transform teaching and learning, but only when it's part of a larger and successful education vision.

We printed and distributed Tim's last book free of charge and suggested that anyone wanting to show their appreciation could make a donation to the Ted Wragg Foundation. This raised over £2,000. We'd like this book to do the same, so again if you would like to make a donation, you can do so via our Web site at [www.rm.com](http://www.rm.com)

I hope you find Tim's wisdom and experience as inspiring as I do.

Tim Pearson, RM.

# Contents

**Preface .....4**

**Introduction .....7**

**The six tasks of headship .....9**

**The four stages of headship.....12**

**Uses of time .....15**

**The five time expenditures .....19**

**Delegation .....26**

**Work-life balance .....28**

**About the author .....35**

# Preface

**My booklet “Essential pieces: the jigsaw of a successful school” (also available [www.rm.com](http://www.rm.com)) provoked interesting and useful debate. I hope this follow-up will do the same.**

The qualities of head teachers and how they deploy their competencies are widely acknowledged to be the key ingredients to school success. Without the right combination of them, researchers agree that they’ve never come across a truly successful school.

A vivid experience in Oxfordshire in the 1980s brought this home to me. We suddenly started getting complaints about what we thought was one of our best primary schools. The staff were the same, except for the head teacher, whose hapless unsuitability must have been instantly evident to the staff, who soon lost energy and pride. What followed was an all too familiar and painful exercise: trying, at arm’s length, to change the leadership of the school before too much damage was done.

***A head needs a certain competence across a range of management and leadership skills.***

Personal qualities, especially in the area of what we now call ‘emotional intelligence’ are necessary. But alone they aren’t enough. A head teacher needs a certain competence across a range of management and leadership skills. Three of these have always struck me as key: –USE OF TIME; DELEGATION; and the CAPACITY TO MANAGE AND LEAD CHANGE.

This booklet addresses the first of these in depth and the second to the extent that’s useful. The third was covered very briefly in the booklet: ‘Essential Pieces: the jigsaw of a successful school,’ and anyone keen to grapple with the subtleties of leading and managing change could do no better than read some of Michael Fullan’s short and accessible books.

Xenophon described the required qualities of the elected general as:

*‘ingenious, energetic, careful, full of stamina and presence of mind...loving and tough, straightforward and crafty, ready to gamble everything and wishing to have everything, generous and greedy, trusting and suspicious.’*

The military is perhaps an inappropriate analogy for headship. Would Napoleon, both decisive and prepared to add to and modify plans if somebody came along with a better idea, have made a good head? The point is that heads have to handle 'ambiguity': once they are comfortable with that, they will relax into the job – not, as some people say a lonely one, but full of relationship building and maintenance...and so busy, that there's no time to feel alone.

As I was completing this piece, the DfES published the valuable independent study into Headship carried out by PricewaterhouseCooper. The National College, too, have just published an intriguingly, titled piece of work entitled: 'A life in the day of a head teacher – a study of practice and wellbeing'.

Both of these will be worth reading.... but this booklet is intended for the overly-busy school leader, who needs something short and easy to read. It's written with practical intent, just as the first booklet was too.

Enjoy.

Tim Brighouse

# How successful head teachers survive and thrive –

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# Introduction

One person, wise in long years of valuable experience, commented that the major omission in my booklet, 'Essential pieces: a jigsaw of a successful school,' was the importance of the head teacher. "Surely," she said "once you've got that right all the rest will follow?" Of course, I acknowledged her point and, in my defence, argued that it was so well known that it scarcely seemed necessary to mention explicitly.

But the exchange set me thinking once again about an elusive issue, that has always intrigued me: that if we could simply observe and write about what truly successful head teachers do – how they spend their time, how they do what they do, what time they spend on different tasks – we would have discovered yet more in our search for the secrets of school success. In fact, there has been no major research....and very little has been written on the subject.

So how have the really successful heads spent their time? Are there common elements? If so, what are they?

Well, I believe the answer is 'yes'.

## **The changing challenge of context**

There are common elements, but of course they are performed in very different ways according to the personality of a head teacher; the context of the school which they are leading; and the length of time they've

been there. These are important variables - and must act as a health warning on what follows.

## **Quality relationships – especially with staff**

Among the many stakeholder groups – parents, students, government, staff, community leaders – all the very successful heads I've known have confessed to giving absolute priority to staff. "After all," said one, "I have 200 members of staff, teachers, teaching assistants and other supporting staff. The time, and the quality of the time, each of them gives to the students is what makes a difference. I can do only so much, of course. I model behaviour I'd want them to copy.

"So I do believe passionately that every student can succeed and that staff know that. And I make my assemblies and the teaching I do (which is inevitably precious little) as rivetingly good as I can make it. But in the end, it's the teachers, who in five lessons a day provide the important experience for the pupils. So it's the quality of 1300 lessons a week in my five form entry school which makes the difference. Along, of course, with how students interact with all staff in the corridors, the office, the playground and on their way in and out of school. Students follow the model set by the staff."

This head's comment underlines that enviable time when the head clearly trusts the staff. Mutual trust is a constant feature of successful schools.

*Leaders will regard crisis as the norm and complexity as fun. They will experience a lot of both.*

### **Energy, enthusiasm, hope**

Whether one's leading in a classroom, in a faculty or the whole school, it's essential to have 'energy enthusiasm and hope'. We use hope not optimism, because there is the promise of delivery: it's a matter of determination not opinion. When someone said that teachers and head teachers needed 'unwarranted optimism,' that's what they were getting at. Leaders will regard crisis as the norm and complexity as fun. They will experience a lot of both. They need an endless well of intellectual curiosity to feed speculation about what's possible, to keep asking questions rather than continually providing the answers. This is stimulated by their listening, reading and writing habits: neglect any and you are putting your leadership standards at risk. Finally, they need a complete absence of paranoia and self-pity.

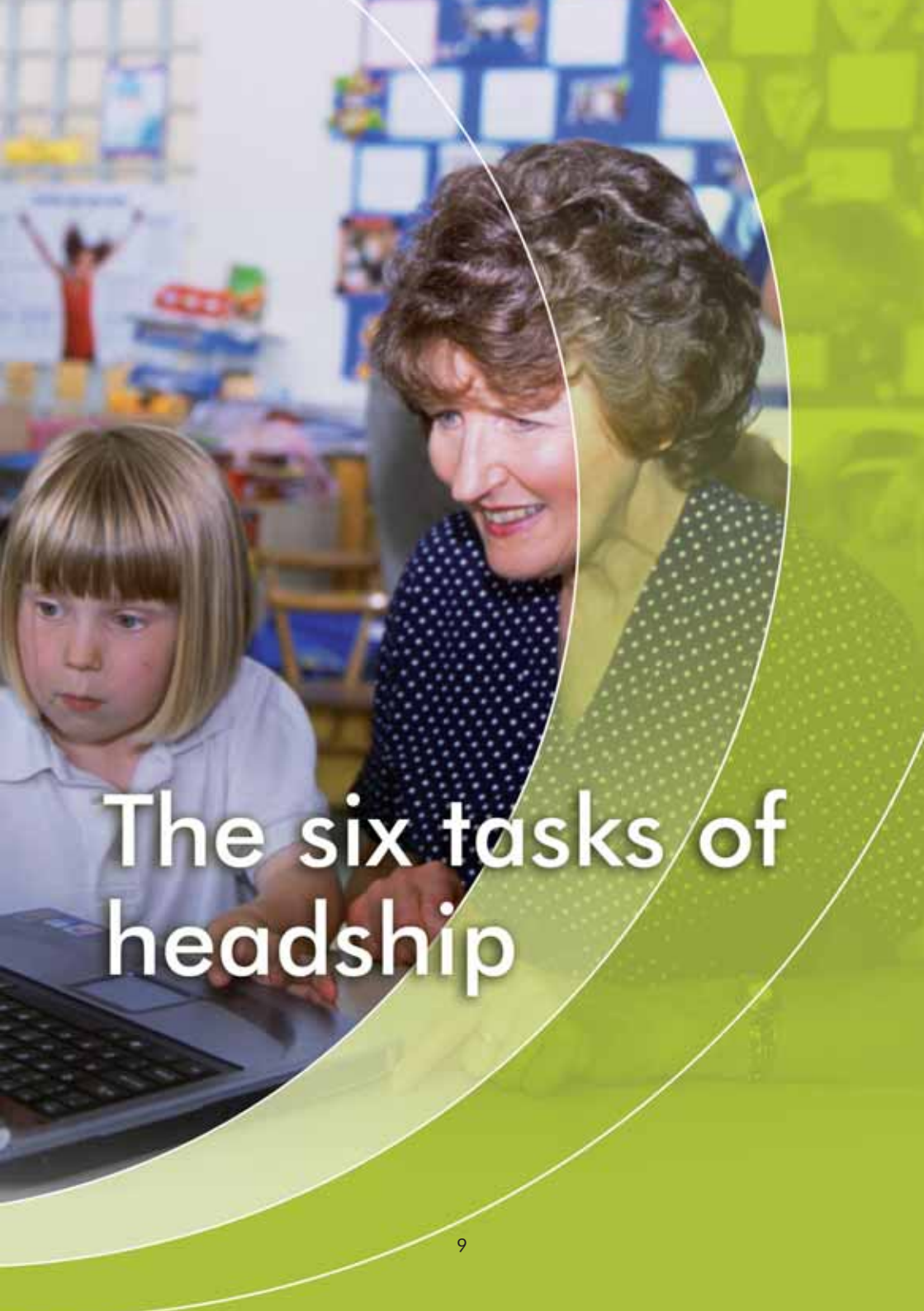
### **Making coherence**

As a leader, whether of maths or the whole school, you are credited with seeing further and wider on that topic than others. You make coherence. To make coherence of the leaders of maths or English etc, a head needs to listen. They need to put their expert

knowledge about maths or English together in a coherent whole, while simultaneously making sense of the context – the local community, the national changes, the turnover of staff and pupils, the availability of resources. Vitaly, they fit this into a view of the future, that translates into a collective vision for the school community.

Inevitably – however much the process is shared, as it should be – the leader in a large organisation cannot be in continuous touch with the various stakeholders. They will make regular systematic contact – replete with acts of unexpected kindness and thoughtfulness – but the contact cannot be constant. It is essentially important, that at times of crisis, the leader digs deep into determination and doesn't fall prey to self-pity. So, without more ado, let's proceed to the six key tasks of headship.





# The six tasks of headship

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## One: create energy

A head's own example – what they say, how they behave, who they are – is one of indomitable will and a passion for success. They don't talk about staff. They ask 'what if' speculative questions. They are fussy about appointments, taking care not to fritter time with 'energy consumers'. Because they are full of hope they look for optimists – those who say "how we could" rather than "why we can't." They show interest in every aspect of school life.

## Two: build capacity

Heads set an example. They teach themselves and are observed by staff doing so; or they take over a class to let others observe somebody else's practice. They rotate the chairing of meetings to grow the skill of others. They ensure young staff members are involved in a 'school improvement group' and act on their suggestions. They have a programme for staff development, that considers the better future of individuals, as well as of the school. They know and cherish all the interests of all staff – especially those which the staff used to do in previous jobs or in the world beyond school. They use the collective first person pronoun "we" rather than the singular "I". They take the blame when it's not their fault and they are generous with praise to others for collective success. They set an example of learning, for example, by adopting an annual learning plan. They

read and share articles, and encourage others to do the same.

## Three: meet and minimise crisis

At a time of genuine crisis, they find cause for optimism and hope, for points of learning. They stay calm. They acknowledge their own mistakes. They are 'pogo-stick' players: they can simultaneously be in the thick of things, yet still be seeing the wider picture. A present crisis is the source for vital learning and future improvement. They themselves show willing to be a 'utility player' – one who 'in extremis' will turn their hand to any task.

## Four: secure and enhance the environment

They ensure classroom teaching and learning materials are well-organised and in plentiful supply. They make sure the management arrangements are seen by staff as 'fit for purpose' – right in detail and serving the needs of staff and pupils alike. For example they often review meetings to ensure that 'transactional' or 'business' meetings are minimised. The staff handbook is repeatedly updated. The computer system works and provides a useful database for staff, each of whom have laptops. Students and parents have access to lesson plans, homework tasks, reports and progress grades, both at school and remotely, by the Internet. They improve the staffroom and the whole environment of school – visually and aurally.

## *Heads themselves*

*use comparative benchmarking, comparing data from their own and other schools. They are keen on 'benchmarking,' but they do it in a climate of encouraging risk.*

### **Five: seek and chart improvement**

Heads themselves use comparative benchmarking, comparing data from their own and other schools. They are keen on 'benchmarking,' but they do it in a climate of encouraging risk.

They ensure there is a proper mix of 'appreciative enquiry' and 'problem solving'. Appreciative enquiry involves finding and celebrating what's good and engaging on a search for what's outstanding – by visiting other practitioners and finding out what research tells us – before deciding on a plan of action to deliver excellence. This is a process of 'energy creation'! Problem solving, on the other hand, concerns staff with barriers and problems that have cropped up. They require analysis and the creation of possible solutions, before deciding on a plan of action. This is a frequently necessary process – but it consumes energy, more in some people than in others. So the successful leader, conscious of this, seeks to create a climate of much appreciative enquiry to handle the energy consumption – of necessary problem solving.

## **Genuine success**

Those who seek and put improvement celebrate genuine (it must be genuine) success. And they know the best of 'genuine' is an improvement on past practice – whether individual or collective. But they celebrate other social events too – creating the climate in which energy, capacity and ultimate success depend. So governors and staff meetings, awards ceremonies and briefings are crucial to that.

They are, above all, good at 'collective' as opposed to 'individual' monitoring.

### **Six: extend the vision of what's possible**

Clearly, this involves being both historian and futurologist. Any leader wishing to extend the vision of what's possible is deeply aware of this double requirement: the present dominates so much of school life. And if sometimes that present seems overwhelming, the energy levels drop. So telling stories which remind people of past success and keeping predecessors and the school happy are both things wise leaders do. But they are also forecasters of the weather and describers of future possibilities: they confidently describe a path from the present to the future. They are good listeners and readers. They write 'future' pieces for their community. They ask "why not" aloud and "why" silently in their heads.

# The four stages of headship



# The four stages of headship

These six tasks have to be carried out at whatever stage of headship you happen to be in. I believe there are four:

## One: Initiation

First is the INITIATION stage. The newcomer is trying to establish, with each and every one of their stakeholder groups, that 'what they say', 'what they do' and 'who they are' match up. People always want early proof about the first two – and none more so than pupils and staff, who have very well-tuned antennae for the bogus or the uncertain of purpose.

Increasingly, nowadays, there are important other stakeholders, that new heads need to persuade of their trustworthiness, not least governors, parents and the wider community interests. Initial contacts are crucial...the first staff meeting, the assembly and the tone of the introductory letter to parents. For the deputy promoted internally, there are other challenges – not least proving that you can carry off the subtly different role with colleagues who knew you as deputy. Despite the differences, the process is the same. The INITIATION stage will last for different times with different stakeholder groups – although each will be telling others of their impressions.

Tragically, some heads never get beyond the INITIATION stage, because they don't establish themselves. That is the prelude for a very painful period, as their mismatch with the school they have joined becomes apparent to all. Some – thankfully few – people leave headship with a bitter taste in their mouth.

## Two: Development

Second is the DEVELOPMENTAL stage: when the head is known and when the defining nature of the head's chapter can proceed with certainty of sufficient support to have a fair chance of carrying it to a successful outcome.

All stages of headship have their hazards but none more so than the third. The first five to seven years have seen the completion of the initial aims; a plateau is reached where there's the need to take stock and pause to draw breath.

## Three: Stall

Here, then, is the risk of the STALL – where it's all too tempting to think that you can allow the school to run on autopilot. Peter Mortimore's research evidence is that heads are at their best between the third and seventh years. That doesn't mean to say that they can't then change gear and start another DEVELOPMENTAL stage – indeed many do – simply that it's easy not to do so. In this third period bad habits can creep in.

You stop giving time within the school and can become too pre-occupied with matters outside.

#### **Four: Decline**

Finally, there is the DECLINE: you have announced you're leaving and the 'lame duck' period beckons. Best to make this short, rather than telegraph it over a long period.

In all these four periods, however, the six tasks I outlined earlier have to be attended to – that requires the careful expenditure of that precious commodity, time.

What follows, then, is a brief and sketchy analysis of how heads use time.



## Metaphors

A simile is a figure of speech which likens one thing to another using words as or like.

is really a comparison of  
The writer does not  
like something  
anything else.

and  
verb  
smile  
me

# Uses of time

# Uses of time

*"It's all very well to look at Belbin and Myers Briggs," my colleague remarked ominously one day, "but I think the infant teacher could teach us a thing or two about what to look for in a leadership team. After all she assesses her charges' progress in 'listening', 'speaking', 'reading' and 'writing' and while they are doing it, she looks to see whether they are thinking and learning. If we could get that right in our team." she concluded with a smile, "we would be doing all right."*

She was referring to our practice of putting every new member of staff through the Myers Briggs profile of preferred leadership operational styles, and then inviting an external coach to talk to us about ways in which we could improve our collective efforts. Nothing too unusual in that: most school leadership teams do something similar. They use coaches, assess the profile of preferred operational styles of leadership and work at the gaps. They rotate chairing of meetings and encourage departments to do the same. It's standard practice.

But I never quite forgot my colleague's remarks. The more I thought about them, the more sense they made and I realised how easy it was to neglect one or the other of the four activities of 'listening', 'speaking', 'reading' and 'writing'. It certainly provides a very useful compass in looking at how successful head teachers spend that precious commodity... time.

## Time to think

### Think about it

First, there's the obvious point about the much misunderstood 'time to think'. As one head, dismissively told me:

*"I do my thinking all the time. It occupies every waking moment. When I want to focus the sum total of my thinking, I spend an evening writing or" he added, "speak with a group of colleagues. Out of that comes my own or our collective refreshed direction or the solution to a problem."*

Secondly, if you analyse what you do each day, it can be broken down into 'listening', 'speaking', 'reading' and 'writing'. Most forms of human activity, apart from sleeping, usually involve one or more of these four.



Thirdly – and this is surely the key for the successful head teacher – you can only read and write in isolation, whereas you need people to listen and talk. That’s presumably why another successful head said to me forcefully:

*“I never look at my computer – the e-mail or whatever – between eight in the morning and half past five in the evening. Nor do I do any paperwork then either. I can do all of that before and afterwards, because I do that alone. The time the school’s in session is precious. The whole community is there. And it’s therefore time for the pupils, the staff, governors and other members of the wider community.”*

She went on to say that if she ever found herself inadvertently backing away from that guiding principle and staying in her office, she knew she was on a very slippery slope.

### **So precious**

Time is so precious, that some people say that learning to use time wisely and to best effect is the key skill for a head teacher to master. That’s why the ‘listening,’ ‘speaking’ ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ overlay on the use of a head’s time is so useful – it helps them to guard against wasting time by being alone during the school day. Indeed, it has led more than one head, I know to share an office with deputies, so that when they are in the same place together, they are also sharing ideas (or for that matter agreeing) an approach to a difficult immediate issue. They claim there’s never a problem about a room to themselves for a private meeting. “Schools are places where there can never be too much of the senior team being around the place and lending a hand.”

*Schools are places where there can never be too much of the senior team being around the place and lending a hand.*

So what do successful heads do?

### **Two cautions and a health warning**

Well, just before embarking on a brief description of the five main forms of activity which use up their time, I should add two points of caution and a health warning.

The first is pretty obvious: namely that head teachers, whether they are successful or not, are deeply conscious of the fragmented nature of their days: they flit from one activity to another, sometimes spending very short time spans on any one activity before moving on to another. The successful heads know this to be a tendency, but guard against life becoming ad hoc: they know that over a day, they may not achieve the allocation of time to plan that they want, but that over a week or a term, they can and will. Distraction is inevitable – but in the long run, it can be defeated.

Secondly, you will find that when we add the time spent on the five they add up to more than 100%, whatever the notional total of hours. That’s because the key starting point is that successful leaders use time twice or three times over. They have mastered the skill of doing things simultaneously rather than sequentially – not in everything, of course, but in many tasks. While they are doing their regular ‘daily round’ of the classrooms, they may also be doing business with a visitor, or reinforcing a

'singing from the same song sheet' message with staff. There are legion possibilities and I shall return to some later. Quantitative surveys of the use of time, of which there are many, may serve solicitors, architects and accountants for cost allocation to charge clients.... but they are a dangerously misleading way of measuring head teachers' time.

And that brings me to my health warning. I used the words 'dangerously misleading,' because the great problem with successful head teachers is that they are so committed. They worry that if only they had devoted more time to this or that person or activity, then the outcome in their private and unvoiced opinion would have been better. They, too, will quickly feel guilt regarding the contested issue of how they use their time. Indeed, as an antidote to guilt, it is probably as well to say that whatever the pattern of their time, successful head teachers need time off – not particularly to think, but to draw breath and recharge. That won't be on a daily or weekly basis, but it will be taken in dollops every now and then.

So here are the five time expenditures.

A photograph of a man in a light blue shirt and dark jacket, smiling and looking towards the camera. In the background, a young boy in a white shirt is looking at a smartphone. The scene is outdoors, possibly a schoolyard, with other children and trees visible in the distance. The image is overlaid with a large green circular graphic on the right side.

# The five time expenditures

# The five time expenditures

## **One: 'They sit on the wall not the fence'**

The morning is important in any organisation. Nowhere more so than in schools, where the teacher's every move can affect a child's disposition to learn. You have a personal crisis? The shopping needs to be done? The car's on the blink? Your own child's off-colour? Despite all this, the good teacher forces herself to find time to greet colleagues and pupils cheerfully in the walk from the bus stop or car park to the school buildings. She knows that how she is with her class or tutor group is going to influence the day for many of her youngsters. So avoiding a pre-occupied – or worse still, a grumpy or even hostile – appearance is a priority for the teacher.

It's no different with heads. The morning habit of many a primary head teacher is to sit on the wall or stand at the school gate, where they can be seen having a cheery word with all and sundry as they run into school.

*"It's the chance for parents to nobble me too, and," she added reflectively, "how the majority do that helps to set the tone for the awkward few parents, who otherwise could storm into school to vent their own frustration with life on me. Either I or the deputy does the same at the end of the day too."*

A successful south London secondary head in a large school does something similar when he stands everyday in the entrance foyer for half an hour from about a quarter past eight, so that entering staff can buttonhole him and ask for a word later in the day.

*"And I'll always make sure that I get back to them the same day. It's my interpretation of an 'open door' practice, because I am never in my office except for meetings"*

Another head, can be seen on the City Road in Birmingham of an afternoon supervising bus queues and waving to parents in cars picking up their children.

Such heads are deeply conscious of their need to be accessible to all the school community, if not at once, at least at some point during the day. The head knows only too well, that the less time spent in the office the better.

## **The school walk**

**In the same spirit, therefore, of being accessible, the practice of the 'daily school walk' is key.** It means visiting all (and not avoiding some) phase or faculty areas, talking with kitchen or catering staff and having a word with cleaners, as well as all the other school staff – learning mentors, teaching assistants, ground staff, and the back-up administrative staff – who comprise the management engine of the school.

When using the word daily, I am not implying that all of these 'people

interactions' happen every day, but that time is built-in, so that they do happen with planned regularity. Another successful head has devised what I would call a variant on this, by engaging in 'pupil tracking' – that is accompanying a couple of pupils throughout a school day – at least once a term. "You can learn a lot in a day about what is worrying kids – and, of course, it reduces the need to do as much formal monitoring of lessons that way."

'Sitting on the wall' also symbolises the need for the head to be at the edge of the organisation – as it were, the main conduit to the world beyond the school. So lunchtime patrols of the local community, the shops, the streets, enable the head and leadership colleagues to take the pulse of what is happening, as well as visit fellow workers in the local health clinic, neighbourhood office or advice bureau.

**'Not sitting on the fence' is a caution not to equivocate or procrastinate too often.** Schools are places where people are quick to detect whether a delay to give due consideration to a difficult issue or to secure consensus about something is genuine or merely a device to conceal a head's lack of moral backbone and failure to be consistent. It's as well not to dwell too much on the negative, so it's probably not sensible to provide examples. All of us can bring them to mind.

But the head who becomes 'invisible' to the community, by spending too much time in the office or outside the school, is in danger of not sitting on the wall often enough and thereby forfeiting the confidence of staff.

Sitting on the wall in its many manifestations – school walks, lunchtime tours of the local area, pupil pursuits – can take up 25-30 hours a week.

### **Two: 'They are 'skalds' not 'scolds'**

The word 'skald' is reserved in Scandinavian folklore for the poets who told stories to warriors before battle. The stories were always positive and reminded people of past great deeds, as well as impending future triumphs. I suppose in our culture Shakespeare's construction of Harry's speech before Agincourt is an equivalence. It's the same with heads. There is a touch of the 'skaldic' about all the successful ones. They use awards days to reflect out loud that:

"Last summer's results at GCSE were the best ever however you look at them. But this year's year 11, who are with us tonight, are the best year group we have ever had, so we know that next summer will be better still. And when I look at last summer's Key Stage 3 results and talk with the head of year 10 we know this trend will continue"

*The art of the head teacher, as skald or story teller, encompasses imagery, metaphor, simile, analogy and an unerring sense of timing and occasion.*

Assemblies are the same with tales of sporting and other success achieved and impending. And staff briefings are occasions to tell of the brilliant way a member of staff dealt with a pupil in the corridor and followed by a low-key apology for mentioning it "because I know it's

something that all of you do...but I was just reminded of the quality of our staff when I saw it.” **The art of the head teacher, as skald or story teller, encompasses imagery, metaphor, simile, analogy and an unerring sense of timing and occasion.**

### **Key opportunities**

Assemblies, staff meetings, parents’ evenings, concerts, plays and major occasions are all key opportunities not to be easily passed up. Outside the school, too, the canny head repeats some of the best stories as, in an accumulating received wisdom, do other members of staff. They know that the perception of more good things than bad things happening is one of the vital factors in school success.

### **The good outweighs the bad**

The dictionary definition of ‘scold’ is “to use undignified vehemence or persistence in reproof or fault-finding”. It is a quick and certain way to lose goodwill to emphasise the negative on public occasions. That way failure is at your elbow in no time at all. Yet heads can so easily fall victim to the habit. They are stretched and pulled every which way and, of course, they are often dealing with crisis or instances when ‘singing from the same song sheet’ has become discordant or totally ignored. That’s the time to remember that more good than bad things are happening, or if they are not, that a positive ‘can do’ spirit will ensure they do. In ‘The jigsaw of the successful school,’ we referred to the need to heavily overbalance in favour of what we described as ‘appreciative enquiry’...i.e. finding what is good in ‘what is’. If the head isn’t an

energy creator in their interactions, then nobody else can fully compensate.

Being a ‘skald’ probably takes up three/four hours each week:...and not being a ‘scold’ a lot longer! It should not be confused with talking which happens all the time – but it does embrace both speaking to large and small groups and telling stories.

### **Three: ‘They teach, learn and assess for most of their time’**

The PricewaterhouseCoopers study into school leadership envisages a time when principals of schools or groups of schools will not have had teaching experience. That seems to me an improbable recipe for success: after all, even Education Officers in local authorities were expected to have done some teaching. Certainly, it’s the perception of those heads who have been very successful – and of their staff – that part of their credibility comes from their expert interest in teaching and, of course, from learning and assessment. “If I’m not seen as a reasonable practitioner, I’m simply not credible in the staffroom,” is how one head put it, as we reflected on the desirability of being seen to do playground duty or take over the teaching of a year 9 class on a Friday afternoon. There are many ways of demonstrating their interest in teaching.

### **Regular teaching?**

How they demonstrate their teaching is a different matter. Probably it’s not sensible for the head to have a regular teaching slot. (Mind you: ask any head of a two or three teacher primary school and while they might agree, they will comment that “chance would be a fine thing!”) In a large school

however, apart from anything else, the head will get dragged away too often to be fair to the pupils. Of course, school assemblies need to be stunningly brilliant occasions in the very successful school and the head must be seen as a good performer and to take their part in circulating to every tutor group, where there is a difficult issue to talk out with pupils and where the intimacy of the tutor group is the right vehicle for doing it.

My preference for how to demonstrate an interest and competence in teaching lies with the example of the head who, with her deputies, earmarked three Tuesdays and Wednesdays each term and 'gave' them in rotation to faculties. Members of staff could pursue lesson observations, either within the school or in visits to comparable schools with known interesting practice. As the head observed, it had the added benefit of enabling the leadership team to compare notes and discuss issues afterwards, so that faculty reviews were better informed. Another always does a short course with year 7 in order "that I can get to know their names quickly and ensure they know the 'legacy' of the school, which, they are inheriting and to which in due course, they will contribute".

### From pupils to adults

Teaching pupils is one thing; teaching adults another. Yet like the good teacher, the successful head teacher, by the use of 'appreciative enquiry', is an excellent coach. Conversations with staff seek to identify what's good in their practice and how it might be extended, by supporting the member of staff's assumed ambition for excellence. So they facilitate visits and show

interest in the outcomes. They encourage teachers to have videos of their own practice. They celebrate the faculty, which has created a bank of videoed key lessons, so that pupils who miss lessons – or understanding the point at the time – can refer to them later. In their teaching, they know that they have to model excellent explanation and story telling and high quality questioning. **Indeed, it's worth adding as an aside, that they are better at asking the right questions, than in hurrying to provide answers, tempting though it is to do so.**

But 'questioning' raises the issue of the heads themselves providing an example of being a learner. Respecting the expert knowledge, of the subject specialist is the obvious everyday way of doing so. It's the head's job to bring all this expert knowledge together so, coupled with their own greater understanding of what is happening beyond the school, they can make for a greater sense of the whole. In that sense they are what Michael Fullan has called 'knowledge creators'. They may even have a research project of their own and they certainly encourage further study among their staff. They find articles to share with individual staff. They rotate the role of 'chair' in meetings of the senior team and encourage faculty leaders to do the same. Informally, they ask speculative and genuinely enquiring questions and formally they may even have a shared 'learning plan' for the year. Their interest in assessment shows not merely in their regular 360 degree feedback exercises, but in their often demonstrated commitment to improving on their own previous best. They

are interested in the changes in external assessments and, of course, keep abreast of OFSTED changes in inspection practices. It's worth commenting here that a recent OFSTED inspection of a London secondary school rested almost entirely on the HMI observing a head's observation and debrief of a randomly-chosen member of staff's lesson! So successful heads practise 'formative' assessment for staff and are active in the review of pupils' progress, which is at the heart of 'assessment for learning'.

These activities can take up anything from two to ten hours in a week.

**Four: 'They spend their evenings weekends and holidays.... working.... socialising and being member of a family'**

If reading and writing are best done alone, it follows that they will happen outside school days and terms. The arrival of e-mail is a sore test of that. Add to that the avalanche of promised change in paper form and through Web site access, and it means that any head, needs some system to keep on top of the task of 'seeing wider and further,' while dealing with the sheer volume of 'day-to-day' business.

**That's why one head, who has claimed never to use her computer during school hours, explains how she makes it happen.** She has an agreement with her PA and office manager to spend 15 minutes each morning after they are first in, with an equivalent session each evening, in picking up her folder of items and post. The post

that they have sifted is dealt with either at home or before everyone arrives the next morning. "My selected e-mails are marked as unread and the urgent ones in red and I deal with them on my laptop out of school hours".

But that does mean that successful heads get up and arrive early and leave and go to bed late. They know that those are the times when they wrestle with the strategic and with downright boring or painful chores. Intricate personal, legal and budgetary matters can be incredibly time consuming. Judicious and skilled delegation will take you so far and needs to be mastered. Indeed, in many matters of appeal, they are essential and, in the end, there's no avoiding a lot of apparently unproductive time.

Governors' meetings are outside school time, as are the many school sporting fixtures, musical events and celebratory occasions.

*"Showing interest in something I was not originally or naturally much interested in is one of the first unexpected things which I discovered in headship"* was how one head who had overcome a lifetime's lack of interest in sport, put it.

It's in the evenings – well those that are free of school engagements – while the family are watching television, that heads read articles, or alternatively, in the early mornings before the rest of the house is awake.

Eating either at working breakfasts or in restaurants in the evening can often also be part of the rhythm of the heads of larger



schools. Taking on the tradition of the 19th century legends like Arnold, their families will sometimes be ensnared in school, related activity. Some parts of the holiday are not sacrosanct either. One successful head spent at least half her three weeks in France last summer putting together a very impressive "So you want one day to be a head?" course, she then ran for 17 volunteers from the staff on Friday afternoons.

Time outside school on these sorts of task will vary widely. Sometimes it's very heavy: at others it's blissfully peaceful.

### **Five: 'They spend two hours a week in acts of unexpected kindness'**

One of the most overlooked aspects of successful leadership involves what might be called the 'personal touch' – not just remembering people's personal concerns, but in acts of unexpected kindness. Before examining these in particular, it's perhaps worth remarking, that the present concern with 'personalisation' must involve the modelling of it from the head. Unless you know people, you are lost. It's why it's much more difficult to be a successful head in your early days, when you don't know people.

That's also why those destined to be successful heads spend the months before taking up appointment with photos and the personal files of staff, so that when they arrive they have a flying start. I know one head who took this to the lengths of looking at the photos of year 7 and year 9 pupils "since they are the ones who, when I arrive, are going to make the most difference to how my early influence on the school is

perceived". One may disagree with her selection or even her motivation, but it is hard to fault her reasoning, intentions or commitment.

### **Feeling special**

This last and most important element of 'expenditure of time' derives from a head's commitment to people and realising that everyone needs to feel special. So birthdays are remembered and emergencies in staff private lives catered for. Privacy is respected: so the hand-written note, or the word in the corridor expressing thanks for some small contribution made by a member of staff, provide the energy which sustains collective spirit. One head told me she keeps loads of cards for birthdays and other events and doesn't leave on Fridays without sitting down and reviewing the week. Even an email will sometimes do! Most successful heads confess to practice like this and most will say that, however spontaneous it may seem to recipients, it requires a system - not least in order to avoid the impression that there are 'favourites' and 'outcasts'.

So, if those are the five main definitions of expenditure of headteacherly time, what of the other key skills that enable them to survive with some semblance of sanity and what is now called 'work/life' balance?

First, the need for delegation.

A photograph of a man and a woman in an office setting, both smiling and looking at a computer screen. The man is on the left, leaning forward, and the woman is on the right. The image is framed by a large, light green circular graphic that overlaps the photo. The word "Delegation" is written in white, bold, sans-serif font across the middle of the image.

# Delegation

# Delegation

## Nine levels of delegation

- 1 Look into this problem. Give me all the facts. I will decide what to do.
- 2 Let me know the options available with the pros and cons of each. I will decide what to select.
- 3 Let me know the criteria for your recommendation, which alternatives you have identified and which one appears best to you with any risk identified. I will make the decision.
- 4 Recommend a course of action for my approval.
- 5 Let me know what you intend to do. Delay action until I approve.
- 6 Let me know what you intend to do. Do it unless I say not to.
- 7 Take action. Let me know what you did. Let me know how it turns out.
- 8 Take action. Communicate with me only if action is unsuccessful.
- 9 Take action. No further communication with me is necessary.

The list sets out possible positions when determining how and when to delegate. Clearly, as we relax or revert to type, we will all have our preferred stance, but will have learnt the skill of deliberately deciding where to be on the spectrum. So you may feel that someone new in a job will require some support as they adjust to new surroundings, but later be capable of deciding that they are at, for example, number 7, 8 or 9 for most things. Indeed, you'd be bothered if you needed to be at 2, 3 or 4 –

and desperate if you needed to be at 1!

Being consciously aware of this spectrum is therefore a helpful guide to the need for extended professional development for others – or oneself.

One final word of caution about delegation.

The surest way of consuming energy and demoralising and disempowering staff is to tell them you are at number 7 in the box but at the height of a crisis or external matters regard it too late and tell them subsequently you were really at number 5!

Finally, these days it's necessary to consider work/life balance. I confess at once to leading conversations with the heads, whose practices have led to the writing of this pamphlet. I have prejudices! I can remember being alarmed, when the voluntary body with which I was connected, appointed a new chief executive who, at the first meeting, presented a paper setting out his values and practices. Included in it was the phrase, "I work to live, not live to work and expect staff to do the same." Alarm bells rang about his commitment. My initial misgivings turned out to be justified, so my prejudices are even stronger now. It isn't that I haven't sympathy with the idea and need for work/life balance; after all, there are times when family must take precedence. But there are also times when the reverse is true. Handling that tension is one of the challenges of headship and this short pamphlet has, I hope, contributed to discussion about how both needs might be met.



# Work-life balance

# Work-life balance

There are seven ways of holding on to your sanity when all around you are losing theirs:

## **One: Manage your diary**

There is little chance of surviving – let alone being successful – as head with all these competing demands made upon you without diary management. This can be achieved in more than one way. But to those new to headship it will often be a new experience if, as is often the case, the lesson bell and timetable have dictated the use of time for you.

Whatever method chosen, the role of the PA is vital. She or he must know your every move. Whether you carry your own diary or deliberately don't – and both seem legitimate methods if the views and practices of successful heads are accepted – the PA must have the master copy, so she can protect your time. In order to survive, most experienced heads build into their diaries 'down time' when they can choose what in their judgement they need to do to. In doing so, they stop themselves becoming prisoners to events. Such practice requires a code shared with the PA, so that others don't look over the shoulder and see a blank space which they think they can fill.

Build 'lungs' of time into your diary once a fortnight. Make sure that every half term you use one of these lungs to go off site and talk with another friend or acquaintance doing a similar job.

## **Two: Find allies**

If you do things as a loner you have to run the risk of losing followers. So make sure you have enough allies in and out of school. In any case, friends and acquaintances among other heads help you have a better chance of making sense of the external agenda of change - as well, of course, as getting the chance to talk in complete trust with someone else running a school.

## **Three: Have a 7-10 year service!**

After 7-10 years either:

- have a half term or term off with the purpose of coming back refreshed, seeing the school with new eyes and setting off on another chapter of development or:
- leave and move on perhaps to a second or third headship, when you can start all over again with not such an impossibly extended stakeholder group. (After all, there will be the chance to build that up more gradually)

**Four: Stop doing one of your regular tasks for a term to allow someone else to do them. Keep out of their hair and review things once at half term and then at the end of term.**

### **Five: Remember to be the 'Jack' or 'Jill' of all trades and master of none.**

You need to be the utility player, who can fill in to do a leadership task in an emergency and you need to grow that capacity in others. Being the 'expert' can be very disabling for others and exhausting for yourself.

### **Six: Become an expert 'driller' and a lepidopterist**

Once a year, drill right down on a particular issue, that will allow you to see the whole operation of the school from different vantage points. It's amazing how when you do, you can find the things which cause irritation and loss of energy, both for you and others. As for being a lepidopterist, that's a reference to the 'butterfly effect' – the need to be able to spot small things that make a disproportionate difference – what David Hargreaves calls 'high leverage and low effort' practices, which help the school a lot. (The annual 'drilling' of course should expose the reverse – 'high effort and low leverage' practices, which you might be able to abandon.)

### **Seven: Collect hyacinths**

Find your 'hyacinth'. It's necessary to explain this by recalling the story, which Alec Clegg, the Education Officer of the West Riding used to tell as justification for getting proper balance in the curriculum. As a teenager, he would visit his aunt in Grantham, where the young Margaret Roberts (later Thatcher)

would take her private extra language lessons. On the wall was a sampler which read as follows:-

*'If of fortune thou be bereft,  
And of thine earthly store have left  
Two loaves, sell one and with the dole  
Buy hyacinths to feed the soul.'*

Successful heads avoid stress and burn-out in themselves and their staff by being keenly aware of their hyacinths and ensuring they have enough of them.

Most successful heads, like their staff, relate to the following quotation from George Bernard Shaw:

*'This is the one true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognised by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy....  
I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.  
I want to be thoroughly used up when I die for the more I work the more I live.  
I rejoice in life for its own sake.  
Life is no brief candle to me it is a splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.'*

The second and last sentences seem to resonate with the very successful head teachers whom I have met and whose observations and examples have led to this publication. And when you are next ground down by an interminable and complicated appeal or suffer some other unfair blow which might tempt you to ask “Is it all worth it?” remember the piece by Shaw – perhaps have it framed on the wall – and resolve to find your hyacinth at once.

### Finally

A final word....successful heads have to vary the above according to whether they are new, or in their developmental phase, or pausing for breath on a plateau before the next phase. It will vary too according to size and situation. And of course once they have been around a long time, they are a trusted bit of the furniture and can afford to be absent more – though not too often. Otherwise the plateau will appear to be stall. And that way, as we have seen, disaster lies! That would be a pity, for to be a school head teacher is one of the most important jobs in the world.





# About the author



Professor Tim Brighouse is Chief Advisor to London Schools and Visiting Professor for Institute of Education. One of the UK's most respected educationalists, Tim has probably observed every aspect of teaching practice during his 46-year career to date. An expert voice on school improvement, Tim is regularly on radio and television and has spoken at many national and international conferences.



Once again, RM has the privilege of being able to publish a book by Tim Brighouse on the art of teaching and good school management. This is the follow up to 'Essential pieces – the jigsaw of a successful school.' Inside Tim imparts his knowledge on what makes a successful head teacher.