Dear Supporter of Quality Education

Politically, this is the year when 'the little people' are speaking their mind. In the USA it's the presidential race. Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are the last two serious nominees standing. In the United Kingdom, David Cameron – to use his own words – campaigned with his head, heart and soul to avoid BREXIT from the European Union. When he lost the referendum, he honourably resigned as prime minister of the (dis)United Kingdom. Here in South Africa, we're having turbulent August municipal elections.

All these campaigns have been vociferous and raised noteworthy issues. Sadly, they've also been violent too. Each country has had the tragedy of various campaign supporters being verbally trashed, physically attacked and even murdered.

Freedom of expression is a cornerstone of every democratic country, organisation and school. It dare not be suppressed. We need to give encouragement and freedom from fear of reprisals to those who wish to express themselves. The leaders need to be good listeners. They need to fully understand what is being told to them.

Schools are microcosms of the society in which they are situated. There is the need to listen to the voices of the children, their parents and the staff. This newsletter looks at what school leaders can do to ensure that they get the accurate, open and honest feedback from their followers. By so doing, leaders are better able to create quality schools that are high-achieving and happy places for everyone.

Sincerely

Richard Hayward

Do we feel free to speak openly?

Ask 21st century principals to describe their leadership style and they proclaim that it's an 'open-door' style. The principals will state that their office doors are open to all – figuratively and literally. Please bring us your complaints, suggestions and recommendations. The principals' intentions are praiseworthy and progressive. Yet in the real world of the best-intentioned school leaders, do long queues form outside their offices where people wait to give advice on how to further improve the schools?

In so many schools, the answer in a single word is: No.

This reality applies in other professions and businesses too. No matter how well-intentioned leaders are, employees are reluctant to step up and speak out. James Detert and Ethan Burris (Detert 2016: 81- 87) did research on this aspect of organisational leadership. They found two core reasons that explain why employees are reluctant. Although their research is based on findings outside education, I would suggest that there are undeniable parallels in our schools too.

The authors state two reasons for people's reluctance to openly speak out. The first is the Fear Factor and the second, the Futility Factor. Deal with these two issues and the authors claim that a far more open, honest school climate will be created. When such a climate is created, benefits such as these follow: staff retention is likely to be better, smart ideas see the light of day and mistakes as well as bad decisions are minimised.

What are the Fear Factors? Three identified are:

Fear Factor 1: Relying on anonymous feedback

Schools traditionally invite anonymous feedback through having suggestion boxes and questionnaires. There are even schools that will pay attention to anonymous emails and phone calls from disgruntled parents who would describe themselves as 'Concerned parents'. The value of such input can often be toxic because:

- When people are allowed to remain unidentified, it reinforces the risks of speaking up and their fears. The inference is that it's not safe to speak your mind in this school so we've found another way to get the information that we want.
- Anonymity can set off a witch hunt. Instead of the focus being on the issue raised, leadership can get pre-occupied as to who made the comment and do they have an unfair axe to grind?
- Most importantly, it can make a serious allegation (for example, racism) against someone which could be cruelly unfair where the accused person doesn't have the basic legal right to protect their good name. The legal right of *Audi alterem partem* (Let the other side be heard) is denied them because the accuser is anonymous.

> If a school claims that it's a place of openness and freedom of speech, why does it need a Suggestion Box that encourages anonymity?

Fear Factor 2: Giving general invitations to come forward

The principal might genuinely welcome input from everyone. Yet often at a practical level it's quite difficult to speak to that person. The bigger the number of children and staff at a school, the harder it is to make direct contact. Sometimes it's simply impossible to walk unannounced through an open-door to meet the intended person. Bookings have to be made in advance with the principal's secretary or a member of the administrative staff. Quite unintentionally (but also sometimes deliberately!), these staff members are gate keepers. They keep certain people away from the leaders. Another practical problem is caused by our security-conscious schools of today. How often are senior management team offices situated in a separate section of the school complete with pin-code access, security cameras and gates?!

Fear Factor 3: Sending signals that you're in charge

I remember having a meeting with a very senior official in an education department head office. The opulent reception lounge could have comfortably seated thirty adults. I was ushered into the official's office. The silk curtaining and hand-crafted mahogany furniture were obviously the recommendations of a gifted interior designer. It took me a few seconds to get over my awe before we moved on to the matters of the moment.

Leaders need to be not only be welcoming in their manner but also to make visitors feel comfortable. Sitting in a beautiful leather high-back swivel chair behind a magnificent oak desk might make the leader look impressive but what impact does it have on the visitor? Does the visitor feel at ease to enter into free-flowing discussion?

There are leaders who are sensitive to this reality. A number of principals often sit on the same side of the table as the person with whom they're having a discussion. It's less threatening. Others, have a separate round table where visitors are invited to sit at, thereby creating a more relaxed atmosphere for discussion.

Detert and Burris describe their Futility Factors that make frank and open discussion more difficult. They are:

Futility Factor 1: Failing to model free expression

If you're in a leadership position and you would like others to be open and to raise concerns, you need to lead the way. Be open and freely express your own concerns too. Be the role model. If others sense that you encourage discussion and are willing to raise issues – no matter how tender or tough – you give them the cue to do likewise.

In contrast, if followers see you as simply being only a good listener but not being part of lively interaction, there's a likelihood that they could hold back. If the leader, for example, senses a general reluctance by others to verbally engage, he has to start the conversation.

Futility Factor 2: Being unclear about the input wanted

Effective leaders are often by nature highly focussed. They've goals and objectives; they keep their eye on the ball. So far so good but there can be a downside when asking others for input. Their goals and objectives could be significantly different to others in the room.

An example would be the principal who wants to improve the enrolment figures for the next year. Ideas and suggestions are needed. However, staff members might be more concerned about the high stress levels caused by heavy workloads.

Often the principal chairs such a meeting where both items mentioned above, are raised. There's a need to avoid falling into the trap of 'pseudo-participation'. Here the leader will listen to the matters raised by staff members but is more interested in discussing her own agenda. There's a greater focus on the principal's main concern. Staff can feel that their input is a futile exercise when they sense that the leader has other pre-occupations.

Futility Factor 3: Providing no resources to address concerns

"What's the point of complaining? Nothing gets done about it!" is a refrain often heard by those who are reluctant to raise their concerns. This cynical refrain can have truth. Sometimes it's not the principal's fault. There could be a lack of funding for an agreed-on project or education department policy doesn't permit introducing a new way of dealing with a professional challenge.

Yet it's still important to raise the issues even if there are huge boulders on the road to implementation. The starting point is a good idea. An idea percolates and in time, solutions often surface. Extra funding eventually becomes available to build a computer centre or refurbish a staffroom; a psychologist is appointed on to the staff to help children with behavioural problems.

As the one-liner wisely states: *The impossible just takes that much longer to make possible!*

How can we encourage others to speak freely?

So, what can be done to encourage the speechless to speak? From Detert and Burris's research, they recommend a number of best practices. Five simple yet powerful techniques are:

1 Have frequent feedback meetings

Make feedback meetings a regular occurrence. The more frequent the meetings, the less intimidated folk are to raise concerns and make suggestions. If, for example, you have a weekly staff meeting, you might like to always have an agenda item titled, 'General'. At this point in the meeting, staff are welcome to raise issues not previously discussed at the meeting.

The first brave souls who speak are to be thanked and every effort should be made to try and deal with their requests. Others in the room will sense that by speaking up it isn't a waste of time. They will pluck up the courage to speak in the future. Those who raise issues need to know that they are not expected to give the solutions.

2 Be transparent

Be transparent about the feedback process. If an issue is raised at a meeting, there should be an understanding as to when there will be a 'report back' on progress made. The quicker the turn-around time, the better. Obviously certain issues raised might need investigation and referral to others such as the Governing Body. Try to give time-frames as to when matters will receive attention.

3 Reach out

If you really want to know what people think, simply ask them. Chat to colleagues in the staffroom; talk to children as you walk along the corridors or have conversations with parents on the side of the sports field while they're watching matches. Most teachers are very comfortable talking to someone who pops into their own classroom. When you visit the teacher in her classroom, you give her home ground advantage. The likelihood of a free-flowing conversation increases. Talk to that same person in the principal's office and the conversation could be less relaxed and open.

Many leaders in the business and manufacturing world believe in MBWA (management by walking around). When visiting a company, they avoid the 'dog and pony' show of the guided tour.

Instead, they go off the beaten track and talk to workers at their desks or on the assembly line. These unscheduled, natural conversations can be mines of information and real-world insights.

> **If you want the truth from below, play down your position of power.**

4 Speak up for them

Teachers realise that all their requests cannot be met. Yet it's important for them to know how hard the leader tried for them. The leader needs to tell staff what he tried to do as regards their recommendations. If, for example, a staffroom recommendation was turned down at Governing Body level, there's a need to give the reasons. Staff can see that the leader is fighting for their cause.

Also, let staff see that you 'fight' for causes that they might not have seen themselves. Let them see that you are an advocate for their interests. Get a reputation for being courageous and unafraid to speak out. That will give others the courage to also speak up.
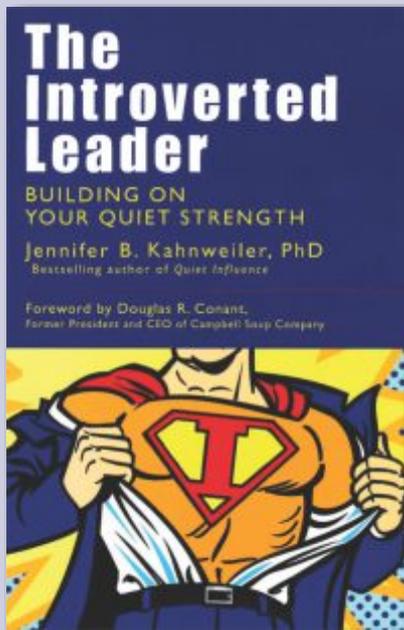
5 Close the loop

Make sure that people don't think that their ideas went straight into the rubbish bin. Record their recommendations in the meeting minutes or write a memo that's distributed to all who were present. Follow through with the necessary action and report back on every step of the process. Collect the data, evaluate and implement the ideas.

Realise that not many people want to talk frankly leaders about their concerns. They don't want to 'rock the boat'. They're prepared to put up with a tolerable situation. Yet their input is valued for not only their own personal welfare but also for the whole school. We need to encourage them by putting in place those steps that will, "… assure people that it's both safe and worthwhile to contribute, no matter where they sit in the organisation."

Reference

Detert, J R & Burris, E R 2016. Can your employees really speak freely? *Harvard Business Review*, January-February, pages 81-87.

The Introverted Leader
BUILDING ON YOUR QUIET STRENGTH

Jennifer B. Kahnweiler, PhD
Bestselling author of *Quiet Influence*

Foreword by Douglas R. Conant,
Former President and CEO of Campbell Soup Company

Look at the picture on the front cover of this book. A man wearing a rather ordinary blue outfit is removing his white shirt to reveal a Superman physique underneath. The cover gives a graphic insight as to what's inside the book. Powerfully, the book shows the great strengths of the introverted personality … if they're allowed to be unleashed.

Jennifer Kahnweiler, the author, states that she is an extrovert. Yet her writing shows a deep insight into the daunting challenges that confront introverts. One that she cites is that of 'Invisibility'. Introverts lose out on opportunities because they're unable to push themselves and 'shine' like extroverts; they don't get fair recognition for all their hard work; promotions often go to the more visible and in-your-face individuals. The introverts' personal influence in discussions can continually be diminished by their more vocal extrovert colleagues.

The author is a leader coach and mentor. In her book she outlines how the introvert can turn possible perceived weaknesses into undoubted strengths. She outlines how to develop these skills expected of leaders:

1. Public speaking
2. Managing and leading
3. Heading up projects
4. Managing those higher up in the organisation
5. Running meetings
6. Building relationships

Whether one is an introvert or extrovert, the above six skills are essential for the leader. Kahnweiler's insight into these area of leadership reflect real-world experience. She writes with empathy of the inner frustrations and turmoil that confront the introvert. Her book shows how to manage these challenges and become an outstanding introverted leader.

A person glancing at the book title might think that the book is written only for the introvert. That would be a mistake. We all have shades of introversion and extroversion. This book is of practical use to anyone wanting to further improve their leadership skills. The many anecdotes and down-to-earth style writing style make it a most worthwhile read.

INTROVERT OR EXTROVERT or between?

Introversion is an "attitude-type characterized by orientation in life through subjective psychic contents" (focus on one's inner psychic activity)

Extraversion as "an attitude type characterized by concentration of interest on the external object"

Enjoys Solitude

Best work when I'm alone

Prefers One on One Conversations

Surrounds themselves with close friends and family

Short social time

Loves Social Events

Energized by people around them

Favors Group Discussion

Sociable and upbeat at new surroundings

Longer Social time

"There is no such thing as a pure extrovert or a pure introvert. Such a man would be in the lunatic asylum" - Jung

Loosely based on "Quiet The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking" book and http://philosophy.lander.edu/ethics/jung.html

cturk/turnstone 2013

SACE
South African Council for Educators
Towards Excellence in Education

Laugh and learn together

A spoonful of humour makes the educational medicine go down. A workshop should try to have fun moments and be interactive. Even if there's an after-lunch 'graveyard' workshop session, participants should be kept awake and smiling!

SACE-endorsed Professional Development activities can be done under the aegis of SAQI (South African Quality Institute). The Institute has ten CPTD point-earning workshops. Workshops are done across South Africa. If you'd like more details, please contact Dr Richard Hayward, the presenter. Contact him on rpdhayward@yahoo.com or 011 888 3262. Poor schools are sponsored.

---

free

Free back numbers of all issues of *Quality Education News* are available for downloading. Kindly go to either www.MySchool.co.za (on the home page click on 'Beneficiaries') or www.saqi.co.za (click on 'Quality Education').