

Growing pains

Dennis Sleigh on how to encourage enthusiasm

Do you ever wonder what became of Graeme or Sally, those energetic colleagues with whom you used to share a staffroom? If they went on to greater heights, you probably don't have to wonder about them – instead, you read about them or hear about them every second day as they make their mark on education or other fields. However, what about the equally promising young people who never seemed to achieve their early promise – where are they today? I would suggest that many of them are probably filling in their time in some backwater where their original light has been extinguished and their early enthusiasm has become a memory with no substance.

Reflecting on these potential stars, I realise that in any community – cultural, political, industrial, ecclesial, educational, to name a few – there will be some people whose early enthusiasm ends up destroying them. Their problem is not one of their own

making; they simply become victims of their seniors. They end up as casualties in a system where the older members fail to offer adequate professional care and direction; the bosses may have detected a new source of energy to be marshalled in service of the system's goals but when this did not eventuate to the degree they expected, they switched their attention to someone else.

Putting this more bluntly, and limiting my discussion to educational structures, these upward-mobile educators fell victim to unscrupulous leaders who bled them for what they were worth and then discarded them when they prematurely reached the burn-out stage. This problem is certainly not limited to schools; there are countless articles in health, sporting and business magazines reporting the fate of ambitious young people whose life started with such promise but who burnt out within a decade. However, it seems to me that schools can offer fewer excuses for treating staff members in such a way: after all, our business is



to help people grow in a balanced manner, and if we ignore those who are approaching burnout, we are betraying our own vision.

At the outset I must say that not all of these burned-out cases leave teaching; some fail to live up to their obvious promise and perhaps they take a place among the uninspired teachers who continue to draw a salary but fail to enliven the young people in their care. Perhaps their pathetic efforts might remind Principals to support more energetically those promising staff members lest they, the leaders, inadvertently fill their schools with mediocrity.

This a good place to turn our attention to ways in which we can actually do something as educational leaders to support and develop the protégés who leave university full of potential and to ensure they retain and enrich this quality in their early career. In an article in last term's *Education Today*, I spoke about encouraging enthusiasts and managing zealots. We are dealing with a similar issue here – we are trying to estimate and develop a certain desirable level of involvement so that we can explicitly nurture these new-comers

in self-growth. Handled carefully, this intervention will prevent the keen teachers becoming so obsessed that their behaviour deters, rather than encourages support.

It is a matter of Principals making a detailed assessment, developing a shared plan for future growth, and then providing an environment where this growth can take place.

I have suggested that burnout is not a problem of the teacher's own making, but this statement must be qualified. While many of those who fell by the wayside had been allowed to overdo their efforts simply to prop up leaders who basked in the reflected glory of their minions, not every occupational casualty has been a victim of others. Some, alas, are victims of their own obstinacy; they refuse to listen to wiser heads and fail to recognise their own limitations despite the well-meaning support of those with greater experience. In this article I am by-passing this self-immolating group and targeting those who were actively encouraged to advance but were then allowed to go beyond reasonable expectations.

If we look at sport (especially with

teenagers) we see this scenario played out too often with young people who are tricked into believing they are tomorrow's stars; they are told that if they want to succeed, they must try harder and harder and so they labour under the impression that their future is assured if only they can lose the extra few kilos, run the additional kilometres, tackle or jump or bowl better than they did last year – but suddenly they find themselves suffering strains and injuries, and it is not long before they are back home playing in local competitions. The phrase "work martyr" is used of those who burn out at work; here perhaps we are talking of "sports martyrs". Like me, you might recall some of your former pupils who fit into this category. Contrast these young people with the stars who had coherent and professional direction as they moved through the stages of their chosen sport, and because of this, they were better able to pace themselves and avoid over-extension.

The good, the bad and the ugly

Before looking at some useful principles that leaders might like to consider



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in their relationships with their budding colleagues, I would like to offer three brief scenarios that will illustrate what I have said so far. The first one relates to a young teacher who was in her second year of teaching and in that time had experienced one school and one Principal – a leader who knew the talent must be nurtured if it is to flourish. The teacher had a passion for her subject – English – and heard about a conference to be held interstate during the coming holidays. She approached her boss and said that she would like to take the opportunity to attend it. The Principal approved the request but went a step further, actively encouraging her to present a paper at the conference. Rather than just refer the applicant to head office for financial support, the Principal offered local support as well. This included calling on the rest of the staff to let her have a trial run of her conference talk, so that her first delivery would not be in front of strangers.

This young teacher was offered virtually no help or support and while the overall carnival was a huge success, the teacher was so exhausted by the process that he withdrew from all such roles **in future years**

Feedback from that session supported the teacher in her final preparations. It was a successful event because the participants were treated professionally.

The next tale relates to a young and enthusiastic teacher who was interested in running sports carnivals and indicated this interest to the PE teacher. The novice's idea was that he might act as an understudy at the forthcoming carnival and learn the challenges that went with such a task. The PE teacher saw an opportunity to avoid work and, while pretending to be allocating certain tasks, actually passed on the whole program (in discrete sections) to the volunteer. This young teacher was offered virtually no help or support and while the overall carnival was a huge success, the teacher was so exhausted by the process that he withdrew from all such roles in future years, preferring to sit in the staffroom badmouthing the PE teacher for years to come. His enthusiasm had been further

damaged when the Principal was congratulating the PE teacher for an excellent carnival, but no mention was made of the person who had done all the work.

Finally, a newly arrived teacher approached her Principal to discuss what she felt was a good idea to nurture cross-system professional co-operation in their small town; she shared her idea in all its detail and the so-called leader told her that he would think about it but it didn't sound very feasible to him. While she was disappointed at this response, you can imagine her feelings a fortnight later when a colleague in a neighbouring school spoke to her about the plan and said how great it was – and what a tribute it was to this teacher's Principal (who had claimed full credit for the concept). Somehow I don't foresee that young lady sharing her ideas with her Principal in the future, do you?

Some guiding principles

Let us return now to a few suggestions about dealing with those subordinates who seem to show promise. How do you encourage and nurture this potential growth? I would like to suggest six

thoughts, not as an exhaustive list but rather as a starter for your own thoughts.

a) Set goals

When you are seeking to support a member of your staff team, try to channel their energy by setting one or two concrete goals – your experience should have prepared you to identify those tasks where the risk of burn-out is greatest and by selecting some other goals, you are actually helping your co-worker by slowing down unbridled enthusiasm, channelling it more effectively.

b) Support but don't replace

Offer assistance to your colleague, but don't let their selected tasks become just one more mess for you to finish off. Does this scenario sound familiar? "Let us imagine that a manager is walking down the hall and that he notices one of his subordinates, Jones, coming his way. When the two meet, Jones greets the manager with, "Good morning. By the way, we've got a problem. You see..." (For a detailed account of this phenomenon, see <https://hbr.org/1999/11/management-time-whos-got-the-monkey>)

c) Allow mistakes

When we are trying to make an impression on our superiors, we also make mistakes – it is part of being human. Some people are so afraid of mistakes that they

end up doing nothing and they make no progress. If you want to support a colleague, make it clear that errors – provided they are not duplicated too often – are acceptable as a learning device.

d) Challenge

According to George Bernard Shaw in *Back to Methuselah*, life is not meant to be easy and any ambitious professional will soon learn this. The secret is to offer enough challenges to this person to stimulate them but not so much that they burn out. If we avoid making the challenges too demanding, but gradually increase the pressure as time goes by, the neophyte should learn effectively.

e) Encourage

Every day most of us face some sort of disappointment but these can be handled more easily if we also hear some encouragement from people who matter. I do not advocate lavish praise – this breeds "affirmation junkies" who cannot progress unless their previous steps have already been loudly glorified – but a few sincere words of praise never go astray.

f) Recognise loneliness

Loneliness can be a major problem for the ambitious or for the successful operator – it is not limited to senior positions. As teachers, we have probably witnessed

high-flying students being brought crashing to earth by the envy of their peers, but we might also have seen the next layer – the B+ students – get caught up in that unpleasantness; perhaps they are viewed as the next "inhabitants of the ivory tower" and hence a threat to those who don't like to be shown up by superior minds. Based on these experiences, we should not be surprised that some adult colleagues could consciously isolate the high performing teachers in their workplace. As mentors of our talented staff members, we should at least warn them that such pettiness is not unusual. Perhaps we can help them by sharing the full quote from Shaw mentioned earlier; it reads "Life is not meant to be easy, my child, but take courage: it can be delightful." Future leaders must learn that even though there are some difficult and lonely passages to traverse in life, the rewards for those who persevere are significant. Help them through rough passages now and teach them how to handle them when they re-appear.

Every profession or occupational group needs the injection of new blood from time to time, and it is often easiest to gain this by ensuring that we cultivate the up-and-coming leaders in a way that respects their ability, honours their ambition and tries to protect their future by giving them a sound working basis for their growth. It is up to us.






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