

**Meeting of the Heads Standing Association
Bangkok: October 12-16 2005**

Leadership for open-minded education: a celebration of headship

We are very near the end of our conference and you will soon be returning to your schools. I have just a few minutes to remind you that the job you are returning to is one of the most influential in the world. You probably know that already, but let me tell you about a letter I found recently in the Geneva archive concerning the very first meeting of IB heads in March 1977. Sent from the United Nations International School (UNIS) in New York to Gérard Renaud in Geneva, it is marked ‘private and confidential.’ but that was nearly 30 years ago and it is time to make it public! I quote:

Although the idea in principle is quite good in terms of keeping a constant communication with the IB ...over-enthusiasm by this body in discussing certain pedagogical and purely academic matters might not prove fruitful for the IB... Many of the Heads of Schools are mere administrators...and this may become another bureaucratic set up in the IB hierarchy.

He need not have worried and I believe Winston Churchill’s assessment of the headmaster (I doubt that Churchill ever contemplated the idea of a headmistress) is rather more accurate:

Headmasters have powers at their disposal with which Prime Ministers have never yet been invested.

School headship remains one of the few jobs where you have enormous opportunity to get things done and to influence the way young people will live their lives.

Three qualities of open-minded leadership

My headmaster at secondary school was a remarkable man called Harry Rée, who was a hero of the French Resistance. I was his pupil for eight years, much later I became his colleague at the University of York and we remained friends for the rest of his life. When he died in 1991 I was asked to write his obituary for a national newspaper and I concluded it with these words:

...he changed the way we thought.

Harry Rée had three essential qualities as a head, all of which are immediately relevant to our conference theme of leadership for open-minded education:

1. He was prepared to take risks. He was willing to confront failure in order to achieve greater success. There is an important distinction here: by ‘taking a risk’ I do not mean putting anyone’s life in jeopardy. I mean having the courage to risk failure. That has become very unfashionable today because the public price of failure is so high.

2. He once told me that during his own interview for headship he was asked “What do you consider the most important quality of a head?” and he had no idea what answer they were expecting. Quite suddenly he had an inspiration – “Generosity”, he replied, and he is of course right. Generosity opens minds to all kinds of human possibilities; meanness screws them down tight.
3. Harry gave me a precious piece of advice as a teacher when he insisted, “When you go into a classroom to teach, always assume your students are brighter than you are and will achieve much more than you have ever achieved.” He was a man of enormous optimism.

Harry Rée had more influence on my life than anyone except my parents. He did indeed change the way I thought. If you cannot accept risk, if you cannot show generosity, if you do not want to see others do better than you have done then you should remain an administrator because headship is certainly not for you.

I have recently been introduced to a provocative little book called *Funky Business*, written by two Swedish economists, Ridderstrale & Nordstrom (Prentice Hall 2000). This is what they say about leadership (and let me stress I am speaking now about leadership, not management, which is quite a different story):

A major role of leaders, anywhere and everywhere, is to infuse chaos into order. Leaders must challenge people to depart from the patterns of the past... Meaningful leadership is about stirring the pot rather than putting the lid on... It is the job of great leaders to support the organization in combining order and chaos.

Charles Handy, founder of the London Business School, admits:

Most of the things I have learned were not learned formally but through accidents and failure. I learned from small catastrophes.

and Warren Bennis, who wrote my favourite book on leadership, *On Becoming a Leader* (Century Business 1989), chooses as one of his ten key factors *the Nobel factor: optimism, faith and hope*. He quotes a lovely story about President Reagan, whose approval ratings had sunk to an all-time low after hitting a record high immediately after the attempt on his life in 1981. Reagan’s solution to the problem was simple. He reassured his aid, “Don’t worry, Dick, I’ll just go out there and try to get assassinated again.”

Unfortunately, risk-taking, generosity and optimism are not fashionable qualities at the moment. Head teachers find themselves swimming against a strong tide which is cautious, selfish and lacking in confidence. It therefore requires an unusually mature governing board to build and maintain a platform of support and encouragement on which an open-minded head, who occasionally wants to bend some of the rules, can operate. It is a very important truth that a head is as good as the school board allows and encourages her or him to be.

Two tasks of open-minded leadership

I have just identified three **qualities** of open-minded leadership. Let me now suggest that the **task** of open-minded leadership can be summed up with two Vs: vision and values.

I want to illustrate the first of them – vision – rather unusually with an extract from a poem:

*What is the course of the life
Of mortal men on the earth? –
Most men eddy about
Here and there – eat and drink,
Chatter and love and hate,
Gather and squander, are raised
Aloft, are hurl'd in the dust,
Striving blindly, achieving
Nothing; and then they die –
Perish; - and no one asks
Who or what they have been,
More than he asks what waves,
In the moonlit solitudes mild
Of the midmost Ocean, have swell'd
Foam'd for a moment, and gone*

*And there are some, whom a thirst
Ardent, unquenchable, fires,
Not with the crowd to be spent,
Not without aim to go around
In an eddy of purposeless dust,
Effort unmeaning and vain.*

...
*We, we have chosen our path –
Path to a clear-purposed goal,
Path of advance! – but it leads
A long, steep journey, through sunk
Gorges, o'er mountains in snow.*

That was the English Victorian poet, Matthew Arnold, writing about his father, Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby School, who still provides a benchmark against which headship is measured. How can someone who died in 1842 possibly be of any relevance today? Quite simply because Thomas Arnold was concerned with reform, for the independent school system at the time was rotten to the core, and to achieve his reform he needed a vision and an appropriate set of values and his achievement has inspired generations of head teachers ever since.

The problem with the word ‘vision’, that first V, is that it carries religious and mystical overtones. As a head I never once had a religious or a mystical experience so let us, instead, take the word vision at face value: it means seeing clearly the way ahead. Matthew Arnold wrote quite simply: *We have chosen our path/ path to a clear-purposed goal/ path of advance* – that is what is meant by vision. At my first heads’ meeting in Accra in 2000 I made a statement and I asked a question that, taken together, have broadly defined my vision for the IBO. The statement was:

- The simple logic of numbers tells you that if you want to change the world you will have to do it through state education

and the question was:

- So what special contribution can international education, and the IBO in particular, offer to the national system of education?

And in this way the related issues of access, the nature of international education and the possibility of the IBO contributing to a wider reform of education were placed clearly on the agenda and have never been out of our vision, during the past six years.

Just occasionally a head can strike a firm personal blow for a particular value, the second V. In the classic novel, *Goodbye Mr Chips*, the headmaster reads out in chapel every week the heart-breaking list of alumni who have just been killed on the Western Front during the first world war. One evening he deliberately includes the name of Max Stäfel, the school’s former German teacher. It slowly dawns on the school community that Stäfel was German and must therefore have been fighting on the other side yet his life was being remembered in their chapel. It provoked critical comment and Chips reflects

Yes, he still had ‘em – those ideas of dignity and generosity that were becoming increasingly rare in a frantic world.

I still remember a rare incident at the International School of Geneva when a playground fight started and one of the teenage boys involved shouted to a friend for a knife, who gave him one. Moments later a teacher arrived on the scene and the fight evaporated. I expelled the boy and the friend who offered the knife. Their fathers, and the father of the potential victim, who were all close colleagues at work, begged us to show mercy but we refused because we believed the most crucial value of the school, namely a commitment to the peaceful resolution of disputes, had been unacceptably violated. Of course, the question arises would a more positive reinforcement of that value have been achieved by showing mercy? Those who wish to avoid the occasional judgement of Solomon should not become head teachers.

But in practice, head teachers achieve very little on their own and one of the most important (perhaps the most important) task of headship is appointing good colleagues. I was interested to learn that the legendary American CEO, Jack Welch, was involved personally in the appointment of the top 500 jobs in General Electric and I remember the comment in his biography which can be paraphrased as

You can forget about strategic planning unless you have the right people in the right jobs at the right time.

So, as I get older I realize that my KPI, my key performance indicator, is not what I have achieved in the past six years, but what the people I shall leave behind me, under new leadership, will achieve in the next six years.

And I now come to my final observation about leadership for open-minded education. You have heard of CEOs, perhaps of CFOs and maybe even of COOs but the most important of all is the CSO. Let me quote again from Funky Business:

True leaders are CSOs: chief storytelling officers. They provide the focus, inspiration and meaning that the organization has been crying out for.

Of course, heads are CEOs: the buck stops with them. But no one else can be the school's CSO, the chief storyteller. In the end, leadership is about communication and your ability to inspire your community by sharing your vision and your values is perhaps your toughest test.

I started telling stories about the IBO and its contribution, through international education, to creating a better and more peaceful world in Québec in July 1999 and I have just ended, exactly on the other side of the globe, in Bangkok, six years later.

George Walker
director general