A matter of urgency

DO YOU OFTEN FIND YOURSELF STUCK IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MINUTIAE, ACTING BUT UNABLE TO THINK OR EVEN IMAGINE A BETTER FUTURE? IF YOU DO, IT’S TIME TO BREAK THE PATTERN, SAYS DAVID LOADER, AS A MATTER OF URGENCY.

You arrive at work after a restless night, only managing to switch off and get some sleep after you made a ‘to-do’ list at 3am. Now at your desk you review that list – 12 items that must be dealt with today and another five that are less urgent. You answer the phone to find that you have two additional tasks, then check your email to find another five. You fear that a knock on the door will bring more – and soon your worst fears are realised. It’s 8.30am and already today’s ‘must-do’ list totals 20.

Feeling frantic, you start at the top of the list, determined to work through it, but remember that you have scheduled a meeting with John, an executive team member, in five minutes. As much as you’d like to cancel it, you recall that you had insisted John come this morning. You look in your calendar only to find more meetings, some of which you decide to postpone. You phone the next person in your diary, Jennifer, to postpone her appointment. Four minutes later – and you’re still trying to find an alternative time for a rescheduled meeting – John arrives. Quicker, you decide, to proceed with the scheduled meeting with Jennifer.

John, it turns out, is dying for a cup of coffee. That, you realise, will take more time, but you feel you have no option. Besides, a cup of coffee may help you to focus, so you go to the tea room, where you bump into Peter and, before you know it, he has you cornered about another issue. You feel like screaming, but manage a smile and politely but firmly explain that you cannot help him right now, and suggest he makes an appointment to discuss this further.

Back in the office, coffee in hand and with the door shut and the phone diverted to messages, you try to give your full attention to John. He has come prepared. He hands you a sheet of paper which you read: ‘So the urgent drives out the important; the future goes largely unexplored; and the capacity to act, rather than the capacity to think and imagine, becomes the sole measure for leadership’ – a quotation from Gary Hamel and Coimbatore Krishnao Prahalad’s Competing for the Future.

You can’t disagree! Concentrating is now even harder. While John is discussing the school, strategic directions and his frustrations, your mind is on your predicament. You are the living embodiment of the problem that John has raised, stuck in the middle of the minutiae, acting but unable to think or even imagine a better future.

Somehow you manage to get through the meeting. You offer to address John’s concerns, but where should you start? Where might the time come from? Recruiting more people to help is expensive and you’re supposed to be reducing costs. And in any case where might you find such an enlightened helper? Finding more time by delegating some tasks to others is superficially attractive, but then you consider the team’s already heavy workloads. And delegation has its own problems: explaining tasks in detail, providing training and of course monitoring. You could potentially end up with more work without satisfactory outcomes.

The day is unfolding badly. What should you do? You look at your desk with its depressing pile of papers, at the bottom of which is Brent Davies’ The Essentials of School Leadership. It catches your eye, so you pick it up and flick through it. Your attention is caught by the lines: ‘Strategic leaders have a dissatisfaction or restlessness with the present. This restlessness involves “creative tension” between the leader’s vision and facing the truth about current reality. Is your tension, you wonder, a creative one?’

To use a cricket analogy, many of us play our innings on the back foot, responding to the ticklish deliveries of others, absorbed by the detail and forgetting to focus on the bigger picture of the game. In order to move beyond the defensive, to engage with the present and build for the future in a strategic sense, though, we need to be exploring trends and issues in education, understanding the threats and opportunities in society and spending time looking for and developing alternatives that will better deliver learning.

The reality is that we’re all buffeted by a barrage of bouncers that constantly take our attention away from what we know we should be focussing on – the strategic, the long-term, the future vision. I know how hard it is to break the pattern and take time out to reflect and strategise, but break it we must if we are to create a better future.

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REFERENCES