

Café culture

DAVID LOADER GOES FOR A DECAF MACCHIATO AND A SOY-GLAZED MAHI MAHI WITH CILANTRO PESTO SHRIMP – HE'S IN A SCHOOL WITH A CAFÉ CULTURE.

Cathedrals are imposing structures, places where we go to worship, sit in organised rows, facing symbols that remind us of the official dogma to be followed. Staffed by a group of people among whom there is a strict hierarchy of function and status, from the bishop down, they're places where we behave in prescribed ways, eyes front.

Cafés are different. Instead of having to go to the cathedral, the chances are that the café will come looking for you, establishing itself in a place that's convenient to you, even spilling out onto the street. After all, a café proprietor wants you to enjoy being in her café.

If a café has a hierarchy, it's usually imperceptible. The best cafés are those in which staff members are least visible, there only when you need them, the emphasis being on the café community. These are the places where we meet friends and work colleagues, and extend our people networks. They are convivial places where we relax and feel free to share views and explore ideas. If some official dogma or decree from a cathedral were to make its way into the café environment it would find itself questioned, met with a healthy scepticism and maybe even wry humour.

Effective schools today have little in common with a cathedral. Rather, they operate with a café-like structure and culture. Sure, cafés lack the authority and official doctrine of cathedrals, and deliberately so, but they still have power and that power lies in the chaotic intimacies of an open system. Some leaders might fear the storytelling, the new and heretical ideas that can emerge in such a collaborative and collegial environment, or the lack of structure. Imagine a bishop trying to guide choices from an approved menu. The fact is, though, that it's a café-like environment that gives a school power

by encouraging flexibility and ingenuity. This can keep the school on track and ensure that members of staff are empowered to get things done. Richard Hames, the author of *The Five Literacies of Global Leadership*, argues that clever leaders encourage a café culture to form, encouraging people to swap information and resolve issues. 'Far from being a waste of...time and resources, it is learning that can be shared and then applied to enhance capability,' writes Hames. As he puts it, the 'disorderly informality of the café is responsible for 80 per cent of the organisation's results...at least!'

Stories about success and failure are important elements in a café culture. They're also an informal means of professional development. Often it can be a story, rather than a directive or how-to prescription, that informs and encourages a colleague. We can be open to stories, but sometimes closed when we attend lectures or briefings full of directives and instructions. Of course, individuals need to filter stories to identify what is meaningful and useful, but that filtering activity stimulates the mind.

Café networks are how we can extend our knowledge and skills through relationships. We're increasingly valuing those interconnected networks of relationships that nurture us and our schools. It's from such networks that we extract intelligence that can be synthesised and used differently in our own settings. New knowledge is what stimulates innovation in our schools.

Because café-like schools are attuned to what is happening in the day-to-day life of the place, they play an important role in the interpretation of events and the translation of ideas across the school, and thereby can support the change process.

So how can we build a café-like school? Can we just rearrange some of the pews

around some small tables and get a cappuccino machine into the cathedral? Is that enough?

In a word, no. There's plenty more we need to do differently to create a café culture. To begin with, leaders need to stop thinking they're bishops, to let go of the idea of leading from on high. Instead, they need to establish feedback mechanisms and foster interdependence between members of staff, encouraging informal communication, sharing and the distribution of leadership.

This is not a pie-in-the-sky idea, it's a pastry-in-a-café, and it's easy to place your first order. Start by abandoning staff-dominated school assemblies and replace them with student-devised and student-led experiences. Recognise students when they're teaching teachers and teachers when they're learning from students. Let students choose from, or even write, their own menu for learning, so they can choose what to learn, how and when. More radically, start thinking of your school as a place that comes to your students, somewhere that's convenient to them, in ways that are attractive to them, using technology that is familiar to them.

Cafés are in! **T**

REFERENCES

Hames, R. D. (2007). *The Five Literacies of Global Leadership: What authentic leaders know and you need to find out*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

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