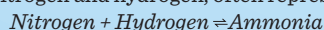


BEING BRAVE

No matter what edicts come from above, a good head teacher must have the courage of his or her convictions, says **Dave Harris**...

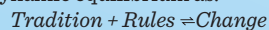
Society in general does not cope well with change. In fact, it often responds in such a way as to oppose the change that is trying to make itself felt. Such resistance, rather than being a process designed by curmudgeons in the pub (or the staffroom) in order to ensure things always remain like they always were, can actually be seen as an extension of a perfectly natural phenomenon – that of dynamic equilibrium (I'm a chemist by training so I know about these things). A chemical system will always find its natural balance, or what is known as its 'equilibrium state'. Thereafter, any further alterations to the system will always be opposed by the system, thus restoring and ensuring the original balance.

Take what is known as the Haber process, for example – the chemical reaction where ammonia is made from the gases nitrogen and hydrogen, often represented as:



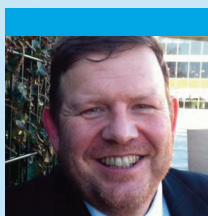
The chemicals on the left hand side of the reaction take up more space than the product they make. If you put them in a bigger container, the reaction moves to fill the space by forming less of the smaller product and returning to the bigger reactants on the left. If you put them in a smaller container, wondrously we get more of the smaller product. In other words, the reaction always tries to oppose the change you make.

If millions of tiny inanimate molecules can respond in this apparently logical way, it is perhaps not too great a leap of imagination to assume that millions of humans may combine in a similar way. Maybe we could summarise our human dynamic equilibrium as:



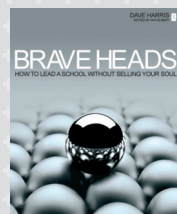
When change is implemented or imposed on a community, the natural response is for the community to try to resist the change or, as quickly as possible, regain its past position. This is something it does by focusing on traditions and historical successes: 'In the old days ...', 'When I was at school ...', 'You're not allowed to do that ...'

Governments also suffer from this irresistible drive for equilibrium – the current UK government has come to power at a time of great national and international uncertainty, at a time when financial structures and 'trusted' organisations are collapsing around us. It is, therefore, no surprise to find that



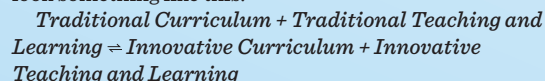
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVE HARRIS HAS TAUGHT FOR OVER 30 YEARS AND DURING THAT TIME HE HAS UNDERTAKEN CONSIDERABLE INNER CITY WORK. HE HAS BEEN A DEPUTY HEAD TEACHER, A HEAD, AND IS CURRENTLY PRINCIPAL OF THE NOTTINGHAM UNIVERSITY SAMWORTH ACADEMY. IN COLLABORATION WITH SPONSORS, STAFF, STUDENTS AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY HE IS WORKING TO CHALLENGE MANY OF THE 'RULES OF EDUCATION'. HE IS THE AUTHOR OF **BRAVE HEADS** (INDEPENDENT THINKING PRESS, £18.99), FROM WHICH THIS FEATURE HAS BEEN ADAPTED.



rather than using this period of upheaval as an opportunity to move forward and discover new innovations to move us on in this new 'reality', instead we find a drive to reintroduce standards and 'the way things were' from a previous 'golden' age. Jumpers for goalposts anyone?

When faced with a challenge to the equilibrium, governments will respond with whatever tools they have at their disposal to resist the change and restore the balance. Education is one such tool. Whenever some new innovation has been introduced and grasped by the teaching profession, the powers that be will almost instinctively make a 'traditional' response, trying to gravitate back to a 'safe' central ground under the 'back to basics' rallying cry so beloved of Middle England. Put into our formula, it might look something like this:



In 2012 we face the greatest uncertainty for a century around financial, political and industrial relations – and, remember, uncertainty and challenge mean an opportunity for innovation and progress. The UK government has responded not by grasping the nettle but by returning to a flawed process: the use of key performance indicators (or KPIs) to drive forward a return to a 1950s model of education (I'm not sure if you can drive forward going backwards but they seem to have managed it).

If you are a head teacher, your job is to make happen in your school what governments think should happen in all schools. If not, you're out on your ear. Knowing how ridiculous the situation is doesn't help. In fact, it makes it worse. You may have all the academic and empirical evidence to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the government is wrong, not to mention your own proven experience of knowing what a school needs and acting upon that successfully. None of that counts one jot, as you will be measured by the reactionary indicators that prevail. And it is in this gap between what you are told to do and what you know is right where your bravery will be most called upon.

I refer to KPIs as 'Knowingly Pointless Indicators' and loathe them with a vengeance, not because I don't want my school to excel but because they can have the exact opposite



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effect if we're not careful. Consider what happened a few years back within the UK's National Health Service and the then-government's obsession with targets. Hospitals were told their success would be judged by the length of their waiting lists. Therefore, one of the performance indicators became the average time it took for a patient arriving in casualty to be seen. And of course, concomitant with KPIs come the inevitable league tables. So, what did such a well-meaning measure achieve? It is no surprise to learn that many hospitals became fixated on moving their way up the league tables. For example, the bosses whose responsibility it was to achieve the KPIs, and not ensure people get better, would employ a nurse simply to interview everyone within fifteen minutes of arrival. Suddenly, the queue has magically gone away and the hospital has achieved its KPI. Success! Except, the overall patient experience, which does not figure as a KPI, has deteriorated. The delight at being seen within a few minutes of arrival evaporates as he or she goes into the second hour of sitting in the now invisible second queue.

That this will happen seems obvious to me. An organisation will work to fulfil the performance indicator that will bring it the best and often quickest reward, especially if there is a financial incentive attached to it, as is often the case. And when you're a cash-strapped public service, who would blame you? KPIs drive organizations to achieve KPIs. That is all. And I am yet to find a single KPI that, on its own, drives whole-scale organisational change.

In 'real' life, developing successful relationships is all about employing a plethora of small steps to move us forward and closer together. We praise and subtly reward actions we desire, often mirroring them ourselves, and together grow and develop. We soon learn that 'nagging' about a number of undesirable behaviours isn't good for us and doesn't do much to change the behaviours either. Sadly, these 'common sense' lessons are not used in the system-driven world of education. Here the overemphasis on the achievement of pupils at age 16 (at secondary level) and at the end of Key Stage 2 (at primary level), merely serves to act as the tail wagging the dog.

It is a simple task to predict that once the current shift to a more traditional curriculum is completed, some bright [sic] new politician is going to proclaim that teachers have lost their way, and introduce a drive for more innovation. As a leader your job isn't to do what is asked of you at the expense of the people in your care. Your job is to whatever you need to do for the people in your care, and that includes often resisting doing what you are supposed to do. And that's why people need you to be brave.

You may actually agree with the political view that the current educational standards in your school area are not acceptable. Years of failure, where the only success students achieve is in hitting the low expectations dished up to them, should not be tolerated and cannot go on. However, you may well disagree with the method(s) by which change is being forced upon the community.

The informed leader – and I use that term deliberately – has an idea of what he or she thinks is the best way by which the local community can be helped to help itself. The trouble is that this carefully and diplomatically gleaned local intelligence may well be at odds with what the external monitor (e.g. the Department for Education) deems to be the way forward for the school. What's more, political timescales are almost always out of sync with those required for effecting lasting change. The brave head does all that he or she can to resist the quick win merchants who are involved in your project, your community and your people, just long enough to secure their next promotion, knighthood or election.

Bravery is having the strength to do things your way – because deep down, you know your way is the right way.

