

Getting Perspective in Challenging Times

CSL would like to express their respect and appreciation for the brave and courageous work of school leaders during the current covid-19 pandemic. Since March 12th, you as school leaders have had to call on all your inner strength and resources to ensure the ongoing needs of your school communities are met. You have managed to work collaboratively with your leadership teams, your teachers, support staff and school communities to ensure that continuity of teaching and learning is in place for your pupils, and to address the concerns of parents and families. In the past few weeks, you have experienced greater levels of stress and anxiety than ever before, your workload has increased significantly, and you have dealt with your professional challenges alongside concern for the health and safety of your own families and loved ones.

You have been asked to provide effective distance learning overnight, and have been overwhelmed by advice on suitable IT platforms, resources and methods of communication. Teachers have expressed grave anxiety about the use of this new way of learning, and many others have shown impatience with this anxiety, being au fait with online learning themselves, and not understanding the challenges it presents for some. Parents have also expressed a desire for support and reassurance. They have requested reduced work, more specific work, more response from schools, less communication with schools, their understandable requests and anxieties depending on their own family circumstances.

You have expressed huge concern for disadvantaged pupils, those with SEN, those in homeless and direct provision accommodation, and those living in difficult family circumstances. You are concerned about anxiety levels, uncertainty, fear of illness, fear for the vulnerable, fear of the unknown and fear of a life and existence you have never experienced before. There is now an urgent need to get perspective so that you can remain calm, generous and positive about the future. This is no easy task but like many, many educational challenges you have encountered before, it is about leadership.

Leadership means dealing calmly with the storm. It is 'a people issue' (Smith and Riley, 2012:57) focusing on influencing the way others think, feel and behave. Leadership in crisis is particularly demanding. According to Elliott et al. (2005), the five common traits of a crisis include a wide range of stakeholders, time pressures and an urgent response, little if no warning, a high degree of ambiguity and a significant threat to the organisation's goals. We can easily match each component with the challenges of the current state of affairs.

According to Sutherland (2016), the biggest factor in coping with crisis in schools is trust. Trust can make the difference between schools continuing to flourish in tough times or struggling under the strain. What we need now is trust between all members of school communities. Trust is needed between teachers and leaders, between schools and homes, between boards and staff members and maybe most importantly, school leaders need to trust themselves.

Doing your very best is more than good enough. Regarding the issue of other people, trusting your staff and school community to assist you is essential. Listening to concerns, offering reassurance, facilitating feedback from staff and parents, and living the ethos of your school will see you through. No more is expected of you than this. Take it easy on yourself, you have done enough for now. Think about how you can be supported. Make contact online or by phone with principal colleagues and consider beginning the CSL coaching support remotely. If you are newly appointed, remain in contact with your mentor. If you are a mentor, ring your mentee, simply for a chat.

To get perspective and to keep an eye on the bigger picture, take quiet time out for yourself to reflect on all the good aspects of your school community, and how you have achieved so much together in the past. Reflect on the celebration of normality that will take place in the future when schools return, and your school community is together physically again. Reflect on all the people you have in your life who are dear to you. Talk, chat, use your phone and devices to keep communicating with them. Limit your exposure to social media and the news, get plenty of exercise and enjoy the simple pleasures when you have the time. Sustain yourself through this storm to enjoy the calm that awaits us all. If you need to talk, send an email to the CSL Team to office@cslireland.ie

‘Never cut a tree down in the wintertime. Never make a negative decision in the low time. Never make your most important decisions when you are in your worst moods. Wait. Be patient. The storm will pass. The spring will come’. *Robert H. Schuller*

References

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