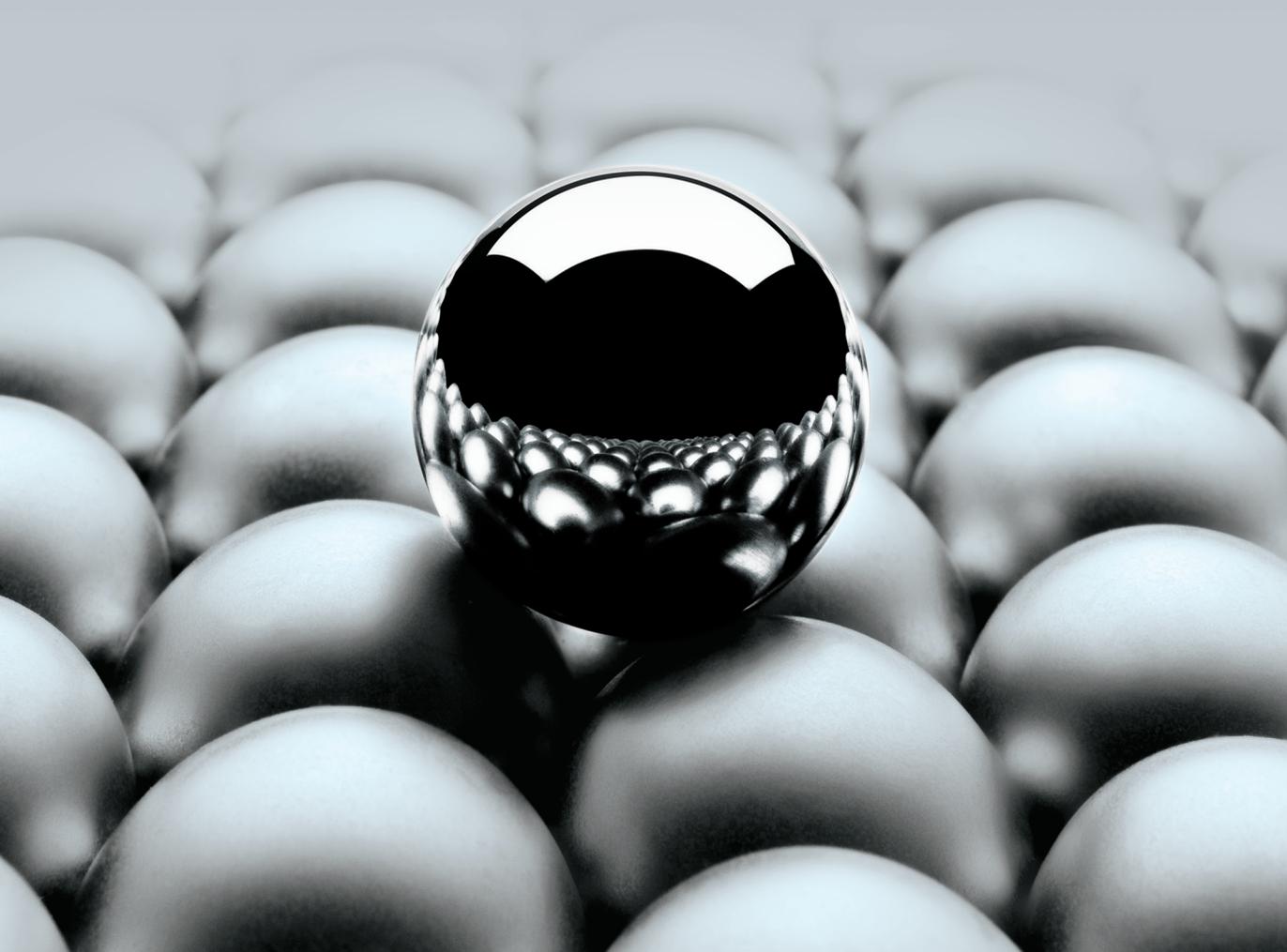


DAVE HARRIS   
EDITED BY IAN GILBERT

# BRAVE HEADS

HOW TO LEAD A SCHOOL WITHOUT SELLING YOUR SOUL



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# FOREWORD

I have a friend who is a head teacher at a prestigious school on the coast in Chile. It is his third headship and he has been there nearly two years now. In his office is a daunting gallery of oil paintings of 150 years' worth of headmasters (they are all men) looking down on him each day as he sits at his desk. The combined pressure of all that tradition, expertise and accomplishment frighten the life out of him most days.

Another experienced head teacher I know at a school in England was telling me about the sudden feelings of panic he experiences from time to time. 'I would understand it,' he explained to me, 'if it was on a Sunday evening but this is in the middle of the summer holidays while I'm sitting in my garden!' His anxiety disorder aside, it is the comment about Sunday evenings that is most telling.

Another head teacher I knew (I still know her. It's just that she is no longer a head teacher. It was just a phase she was going through) used to walk around her school pretending she knew what she was doing. 'How would I be acting if I really knew what to do?' is how she used to explain this to herself. She was especially reliant on the 'fake it till you make it' approach when it came to dealing with the school budget and the massive deficit she had inherited. 'What would I do if I knew what I was doing?' It was a strategy that helped her get the school back in the black within 18 months.

It's a challenge being a head teacher. A big one. And unless you're one of those arrogant types who refuses to believe that anything you do could

## BRAVE HEADS

ever go wrong and if it does it's someone else's fault anyway, it's a really scary challenge.

I remember my very first day as an NQT. I bumped into the silver-haired avuncular deputy in the gents. 'Nervous?' he asked. 'Yup', I said, thinking about all the dreams I had had in the weeks leading up to that day, those sweat-inducing dreams of being in a classroom and not having a clue what was going on as chaos raged around me. 'Yup', he continued, 'me too. It never leaves you ...'

Fear, then, seems to be a staple of life in a school, unlike many other common jobs (but akin to being a burglar according to the controversial Judge Bowers in Teeside recently who seemed impressed with the guts of the serial-burglaring drug addict up before him). Fear. Or F.E.A.R. – F\*ck Everything And Run! – as it was once described to me. It takes bravery to overcome fear. If you never experience fear then how can you be brave? When you are a teacher, you have to face your fears and get yourself through every day. When you're a head, you have to get yourself through every day and everyone else as well.

There is a great deal of talk these days about 'super-heads' and the need to succeed at all costs, success often measured solely in exam results and Ofsted headlines. It is a success that can come despite, not as a result of, the staff it would appear, based on what Ofsted chief Sir Michael Wilshaw seems to say, a man who seems to like the 'carrot and stick' approach to motivation using both objects with which to beat teachers. What would the epitome of courage in leadership Sir Ernest Shackleton say about that? At one point during his ill-fated expedition to the South Pole, he confided to the captain of the *Endurance*, Frank Arthur Worsley, 'Thank God I haven't killed one of my men!' to which the loyal captain replied, 'We all know you have worked superhumanly to look after us.' Shackleton's gruff response is revealing when considering what real

## FOREWORD

leadership is about: ‘Superhuman effort ... isn’t worth a damn unless it achieves results.’

I asked a friend of mine, David Hanson who heads up the Independent Association of Prep Schools and a man who has had more than his fair share of educational leadership experience, what his approach was when it came to taking all staff with you as a school leader. Surely you just get rid of the dead weight holding a school back? Isn’t that the brave thing for a head to do?

‘Relentless support’ was his response, a phrase with a professionally pleasing oxymoronic irony to it. You just keep on supporting them until something happens.

Dave Harris displays a similar approach when it comes to bringing the best out of his staff. All his staff. The expectation was that he would come with a scythe and cut down all that was holding back the school from which Nottingham University Samworth Academy or NUSA grew out of. Many saw it as a failing school. Failing the students. Failing the community. Failing itself. Why would you hang on to what and who had been part of that failure?

Not sacking large numbers of people was Dave’s second brave act at NUSA. Taking the job was the first. Right from day one, Dave wanted to do it in a way that he felt was the right way, the only way. The pressure on him was purely about results but the job before him, Dave knew, was bigger than that. Focusing on the important things – ‘the marathon’ activities as he calls it – as well as chasing external goals such as ever-moving floor targets – ‘the sprint’ activities – took courage. Doing what you feel, deep down, is the right thing to do day after day as the powers that be circle round you like vultures surrounding a peaky-looking zebra takes every ounce of bravery you have and, in this book, Dave is honest

## BRAVE HEADS

about the toll that takes and the roller-coaster ride this approach to leadership really is.

Not that you would know if you ever met him. As Shackleton said, as a leader you keep your fears to yourself: 'You often have to hide from them not only the truth, but your feelings about the truth. You may know that the facts are dead against you, but you mustn't say so.'

This book then is Dave Harris' opportunity to be honest. To share with the reader the stresses and strains of leading a school when you are brave enough to do it the only way you feel is the right way, despite what 'they' say and the pressure to do it 'their' way. In it, he is not telling you what to do as a school leader yourself. Not only is every school different, but every year in every school is different (or at least it should be, if you're being brave about it). Rather he shares his own experiences and the thinking behind them – backed up by some pretty impressive academic research as you might expect from an academy that was the first to have a university as its co-sponsor – to inspire you not only to find your own brave path but to also to have fun doing it.

As Worsley said of Shackleton: 'One would think he had never a care on his mind and he is the life and soul of half the skylarking and fooling in the ship.' After all, as every brave head knows, education is far too important to be taken seriously.

Ian Gilbert  
Market Harborough  
October 2012

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# BRAVE POLITICS



### 3 BRAVERY IS POINTING OUT HOW PREDICTABLE POLITICS CAN BE

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. Trust me. A chemical system will always find its natural balance, or what is known as its 'equilibrium state'. Once it has found this, any further alterations to the system will always be opposed by the system, thus restoring and ensuring the original balance.

Perhaps this could be understood by using a real-life example, one that you should recognize as a staple of any GCSE science paper worth its sodium chloride. If you look at what is known as the Haber process, the chemical reaction where ammonia (the starting point for fertilizers and many other important chemicals) is made from the gases nitrogen and hydrogen, then the reaction is often represented as:



Clever little things those chemicals. The ones on the left hand side of the reaction take up more space than the product they make. What happens 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 (the one on the right). In other words, the reaction always tries to oppose the change you make.

## BRAVE HEADS

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 summarize our human dynamic equilibrium as:

Tradition + Rules  $\rightleftharpoons$  Change

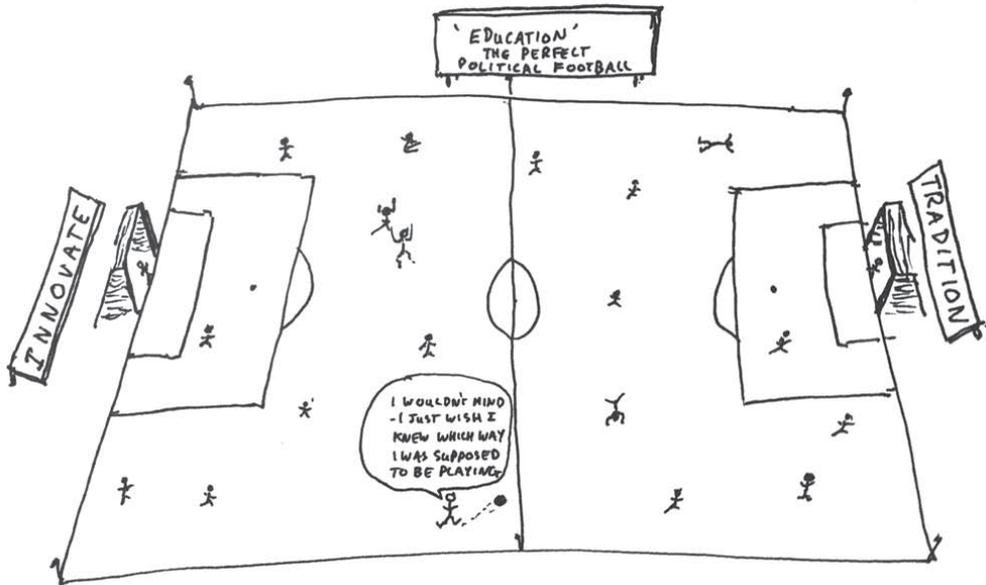
What we see, then, is that when change is implemented or imposed on a community, the natural response is for the community to try to resist the change or, as quickly as possible, regain its past position. This is something it does by focusing on traditions and historical successes: 'In the old days ...', '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' organizations are collapsing around us. It is, therefore, no surprise to find that 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 goal-posts anyone?

Talking of football, education will always be used as the government's, *any* government's, football. It is one of the front-line services which have shown the ready ability for quick responses and some easy-win headlines. If someone threw up a study revealing an overriding ignorance of the breeding habits of the common warthog you can be assured that Warthog Studies will be a compulsory part of the National Curriculum before the year is out, especially if the incumbent Secretary of State for

## BRAVE POLITICS

Education did a project on warthogs when they were at some leafy grammar school decades earlier.



Therefore 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.

## BRAVE HEADS

Put into our formula, it might look something like this:

Traditional Curriculum + Traditional Teaching and Learning  
⇔ Innovative Curriculum + Innovative Teaching and Learning

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.)

Now, by the time you read this there could be another government in place or you may be reading it in a place with a whole different government anyway. The thing is, whenever and wherever you read this book, 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 believe that the direction the government is sending you in is incorrect. You may even 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.

This may be the time to touch on those dreaded key performance indicators so beloved of systems people and governments who forget that

## 37 BRAVERY IS NOT BEING ONE-DIMENSIONAL

Much of the research focuses on the various leadership structures that can be used to bring about effective change in a school. Having a leadership structure is one thing; but this structure actually moving the school forward – and together – is another thing completely.

In his work, *Leading the Learning Organization*, Belasen suggests that the style of leadership structure used is key to an organization's ability to be successful in the long term:

Tall, hierarchically structured organizations can run through midlevel, transactional managers who rely on the exchange of rewards for performance. The vision of these transactional managers begins and ends with performance and results, not with performance breakthrough and results. (Belasen, 2000: 3)

The structure works but the organization this structure is holding up is flawed. Yes, there are certain short-term activities that need to be used and measured, but if that is all the structure can do then that is as far as school change goes. To draw on my analogy from the Brave Choices section, you will be forever sprinting. Marathon activities that actually create significant and lasting school change take a different sort of structure.

### STEPS TO BEING BRAVE

Identify three leadership decisions which you will delegate completely to someone else.

## 38 BRAVERY IS RECOGNIZING THE BALANCE BETWEEN THE WHO AND THE WHAT

A school leader's job is successful to the extent to which he or she gets right the subtle interplay between dealing with people and dealing with, well, stuff. In detailed case studies covering four countries, Mulford and colleagues conclude that the first necessary steps in creating meaningful organizational change is 'developing common understandings, honesty and trust through dialogue, sharing and distributed leadership, plus managing the inevitable risk and conflict involved' (Mulford et al., 2003: 189). This, clearly, is the people stuff and is important to get right. But there are also the organizational and technical details to identify and improve. Dimmock and Walker (2005) outline the three categories of skills they believe are *de rigueur* for all successful principals:

- Personal – how a leader manages his or her own behaviours and thoughts in their professional life.
- Communicative and influence – how a leader interacts at an interpersonal level with colleagues and other members of the

## BRAVE HEADS

community. In particular, how they mobilize colleagues and other school community members to a sustained commitment to school improvement.

- Organizational and technical – this relates to the techniques, strategies and systems that are associated with creating and sustaining school improvement.

They go on to observe:

The key skills essential to running good schools and colleges are personal and interpersonal on the one side, and technical and task-oriented on the other. It is the achievement of high levels of both, and a balance between the two, that distinguishes effective leaders. (Dimmock and Walker, 2005: 163)

### STEPS TO BEING BRAVE

For each of the ability areas – personal, communication and influence, organizational and technical – identify how you have shown ability and also what you need to improve.

## 39 BRAVERY IS ADMITTING WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW THE MEANING OF A LONG WORD

Sometimes, in amongst all the research and words of wisdom about what to do in order to be an effective and courageous leader, it is easier for a researcher to simply say what *not* to do. In *The Six Secrets of Change*, school leadership überguru Michael Fullan states:

One of the ways not to develop capacity is through criticism, punitive consequences, or what I more comprehensively call judgmentalism. Judgmentalism is not just seeing something as unacceptable or ineffective. It is that, but it is particularly harmful when it is accompanied by pejorative stigma. (Fullan, 2008: 58)

### STEPS TO BEING BRAVE

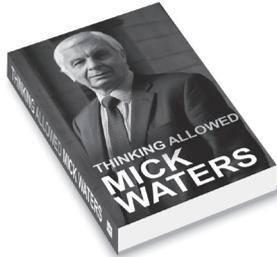
Have a 'long word of the week' which you display on the staffroom wall along with its meaning.

## 40 BRAVERY IS GIVING PERMISSION TO PEOPLE TO LIVE A NEW STORY

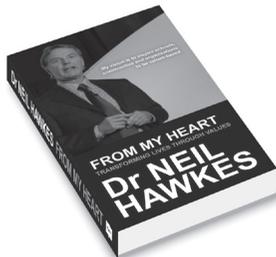
Fullan goes on to offer advice, particularly for new leaders, to ‘invest in capacity building while suspending short-term judgment’ (2008: 58). Now, the first element of this is clear enough. Of course you need to plan to make a school capable of more than it is currently. In *Improving Schools in Exceptionally Challenging Circumstances*, Harris (another no-relation I promise) and colleagues conclude that ‘in addition to building personal capacity, the Heads also recognised interpersonal capacity and organisational capacity as important elements of raising attainment’ (2006: 150). Raising attainment (i.e. scores) may well be the lever that is used by politicians to pull the appropriate financial levers, but it clearly must not be the single focus of the school principal who is seeking meaningful enduring transformation. This is backed up by Hargreaves and Fink who conclude their chapter on sustainable leadership with the following:

If the quest to improve achievement rests on cynical strategies to raise test scores, the results will be educationally unsupportable and unsustainable. Apparent improvements will largely be temporary and quickly reach a plateau; they will register as improvements only in what is directly tested. (Hargreaves and Fink, 2007: 46–64)

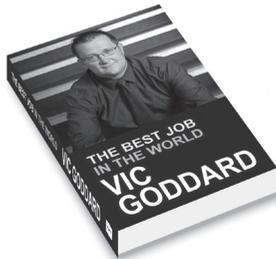
They conclude that ‘improvement needs energy’ and call for increased financial and human resources to be committed to making major change. Helping the school grow as a whole and across all aspects of school life is key, not just chasing the most number of those dreaded and dreadful KPIs that I talk about in the Brave Politics section.



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# HOW TO LEAD A SCHOOL WITHOUT SELLING YOUR SOUL

School leadership brings with it tremendous pressure from the government for results at all costs. It's the outcome that counts (and the league tables), not the process. Which means, now more than ever, for genuine leaders leading schools in the right direction for the right reasons, bravery is key. Dave Harris is well placed to write the ultimate guide to bravery in school leadership. As the principal of a high-profile brand new Academy he has had to stand by his beliefs about the role of the school in the community – 'It's a marathon, not a sprint' – despite the pressure to forget genuinely educating young people and just focus on 'floor targets'. A book for every leader who wants to make a genuine difference (and get great results, as Dave has done)!

---

*Brave Heads* is a personal account, a smart synthesis of current thinking about leadership and an invitation to reflect on and review how leadership might need to change to respond to a turbulent and often contradictory environment. It is a powerful and very welcome addition to the literature on how leadership needs to develop in order to create an educational system rooted in authentic values and a belief in the transformational potential of schools.

John West-Burnham, Professor of Educational Leadership, St Mary's University College, Twickenham

*Brave Heads* works both as a very useful handbook full of practical tips that any new head teacher would be wise to adopt and a timely reminder to more experienced leaders about what matters most in schools. For both, it emphasises the perennial privilege of being a head teacher – being a driver of change that benefits children and communities.

The book takes a refreshing look at both the challenges and the joys of leading a school, describing the bravery needed by head teachers in respect of facing up to external political imperatives, curriculum design and delivery, securing short- and long-term success, the leadership styles necessary at different times and the wealth of research into school leadership that can have real-world relevance and application.

Mike Butler, Chief Executive, Djanogly Learning Trust, Director of the Independent Academies Association

---



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 teacher and is currently Principal of the Nottingham University Samworth Academy, where he has built a school from scratch, a school turning theory into practice. In collaboration with sponsors, staff, students and the wider community he is working to challenge many of the 'rules of education'.

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