



THE ART OF BEING A

BRILLIANT*
MIDDLE
*LEADER



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AND ANDY COPE



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FOREWORD

Unsurprisingly, there is agreement among most educational researchers that the most powerful influence on pupil performance is the teacher. Of course school improvement helps, but the 'school effect' is much less than the 'teacher effect'.

In our focus on both of these, we tend to overlook the impact of the department or the house/college on pupil outcomes. This book repairs that gap by helping those in what might be called the engine rooms of schools - as leaders of departments, faculties, phases or houses - to be reminded of simple things that can and will make a difference, and in the process make schools better places to learn and live together.

Most teachers will be familiar with this quotation by Haim Ginott:

I've come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or

*humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized.*¹

Indeed, I have seen it on many a staffroom noticeboard.

But the next most important influencer of the weather is the middle leader. This was brought home to me in my first months visiting London secondary schools as part of the London Challenge. I had called on 150 in the first nine months and was asked by the schools' minister how many I would send my own child to. I thought for a while and, much to the minister's surprise, replied honestly that I would cheerfully have any child of mine in at least 135 and probably, after a little thought, in a further dozen, leaving just three which were so broken that we needed urgent action to help mend them.

I vividly remember visiting one of those three schools and being sat down to talk with the school council students. As an opener to discussions, I explained that I came from Birmingham and knew urban schools quite well. Thinking of the street gangs in Birmingham at that time (such as the Burger Bar and Johnson Crew

1 Haim Ginott, *Teacher and Child: A Book for Parents and Teachers* (New York: Macmillan, 1971).

gangs, about which we were really worried), I enquired of the north London school's student council members whether they had trouble with gangs. 'Not in the maths corridor,' came the unexpected reply!

Now, I tell this anecdote not because it convinced me that the school was broken, but because it made me think that there was something to work with. After all, in an otherwise hopeless climate, the maths department was making it possible for the teachers and the students to learn and enjoy learning. As an aside, it eventually turned out that the school soon improved as a focus on middle leadership paid dividends right across the school - admittedly with new school leadership. For leaders of schools, as we know, affect the weather too.

So here's a book which can make an enormous difference from three people who have years of experience, boundless optimism, considerable energy, unquenchable intellectual curiosity and a good sense of humour. All of these and more are needed by successful middle leaders, but I am sure you will be more likely to have them as a result of having this book at your elbow.

Sir Tim Brighouse

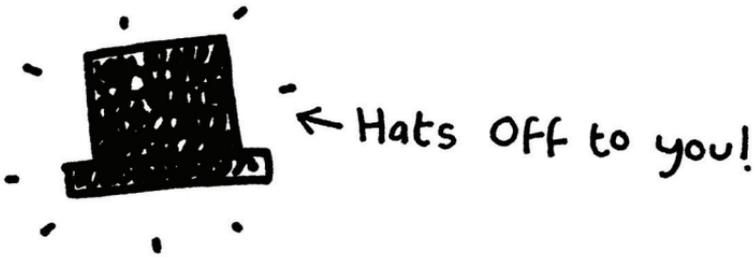
(Sir Tim has been professor of education at Keele University as well as chief education officer in both Oxfordshire and Birmingham local authorities. He spent some time as 'London schools tsar' and has, according to the *Guardian*, 'made a career out of enchanting teachers and bamboozling critics'.)

Chapter 1

THE STRUGGLE

It had long since come to my attention that people of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things.

Elinor Smith



Before we begin in earnest, we would like to doff our metaphorical hats to you. In fact, consider this a tug of the forelock: you are amazing. Holding down a school leadership position, at whatever level, means you inhabit that dichotomous position of having the most important *and* the most difficult of all jobs. You are truly all things to all people, as well as a master juggler, keeping several balls in the air while spinning plates with your feet. It's not surprising that you're exhausted!

Throughout history humans have been living with scarcity. But now the only scarce thing in our lives is time. The chances are that your lifespan of 4,000 weeks is zipping by in a blur. All this fast stuff means that we're living life beyond the legal busyness speed limit. If there was a busyness traffic cop, he'd be clocking you and doing a double take at his speed-gun. You'd be pulled over for the offence of 'living life way too fast to the point of being a danger to yourself and other people'.

If you follow the busyness police analogy through, you'd have to go on a speed awareness course and learn to live your life safely. And then, just like a real speed awareness course, you'd sit there grumbling that it was unfair that you'd been pulled up for racing through life. And then some smart alec trainer would come in and show you some gruesome PowerPoints about folk who've lived their lives too fast - burned out wreckages who have coronaries and several failed marriages behind them. And you'd all look at your shoes and think, 'He's got a good point but it won't happen to me.' Perhaps, for a few



weeks after your life speed awareness course, you'd actually slow down and be more mindful. You might even savour a sunrise and your marriage, but gradually you'd get caught up again and, before long, you'd be clocked above the limit once more.

The opposite of busyness isn't slowness. As we'll see later, it's pure unadulterated attention to the moment. It's pondering, thinking, musing and wondering. These are all the things that are absent when you're speeding through life.

We meet a lot of school staff who are close to exhaustion, crawling towards the next half-term that will provide an all too brief pit stop before they re-enter the race. The relentless pace is particularly full-on for department heads, middle leaders and head teachers. But in true trooper style, you soldier on as before, victims of what science calls 'learned helplessness'. There are several horrible examples of animals being subjected to electric shocks to see how they respond to stress. (Before we go any further, we're absolutely with you on this: we're all for reversing the procedure and subjecting these scientists to electric shocks. If we wired up our lab-coated friends to some electrodes and sent some voltage through them, we think they'd learn something very valuable: it hurts, it's cruel and they need to stop doing it.) That aside, guess what? If you subject dogs to

electric shocks they will try to avoid them, but after a while they will give up and accept their role as victim.

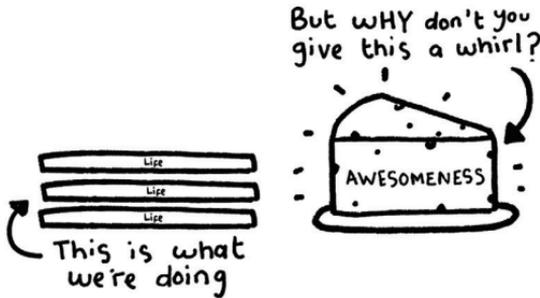
I think we can all learn to be helpless. We can all become victims of busyness. We're exhausted but we look around and see that everyone is suffering in the same way, so what can we do other than go along with the scam?

So here's a thought: did you ever opt in to being manically busy? Did you ever sit down and decide that your aim would be to cram so much into your life that you reach the point of physical and emotional exhaustion? We think the days of being on top of things have gone. We have to let go of our ideal of clearing our inbox and getting organised. In fact, letting go of that belief can be quite a relief. Take it from us: you don't have to be in control; that particular game has ended. To be blunt, it's beaten us. Tony Crabbe suggests that we need to find ways of moving from 'drowning' (a helpless feeling of going under) to 'immersion' (a deep focus on something that's important to you).¹

We're so concerned about having too much to do that we thin-slice life, living it in slivers instead of big fat wedges of awesomeness. Real joy requires undiluted attention. But, of course,

1 Tony Crabbe, *Busy: How to Thrive in a World of Too Much* (London: Piatkus, 2014).

we're always multitasking, so in our haste to experience everything we experience thin slices of next to nothing. This next sentence takes some grappling with but here goes: *we fill every available moment with something and end up with nothing, whereas filling some moments with nothing means you get everything.*



Read it again, this time *slooooooowly*. It's up there with the famous 'rules of cricket' tea towel, but it does make sense - we promise! And now strap yourself in for some controversy: we think busyness and thin-slicing might be the easy options. Working long hours and then going home to log on to even more emails, and cramming your electronic diary with too many appointments and not enough time, is a ruse. All this histrionic waving of hands is a whole lot easier than holding them up and saying, 'Hey, you know what, something's missing.' As Robert Holden says, 'If there's something missing in

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW THE SECRETS OF BEING A BRILLIANT MIDDLE LEADER, READ ON ...

Middle leaders are the backbone of any school. At their best they challenge, manage, plan, develop and inspire colleagues to make learning brilliant for kids. Gary, Chris and Andy cover the myriad issues facing middle leaders with their customary mix of good humour and solid, experience-informed advice. Dip into this book and you'll find a wide range of tools, strategies, advice and top tips to help you be your brilliant best.

A BRILLIANT BOOK FOR MIDDLE LEADERS

"Like all the 'brilliant' books the success of this one is in its writing - clear, funny and intelligent. Many of the concepts sneak up on you and you find yourself thinking them through in everyday leadership practice. If I could recommend one book to all aspiring leaders in education - buy this now, for yourself or to give to someone who needs a lift - it's wisdom in a bottle!"

Dave Thomas, Head Teacher, Ashmount School

"The reader is encouraged to resist falling prey to 'busyness' and to focus on the 'to-be' list rather than the 'to-do' list: start with the why and never lose sight of our fundamental purpose as teachers and leaders."

Jill Berry, leadership consultant, former head teacher

"If you would like to become a brilliant leader, then this book is definitely for you. The style of writing makes this a fantastic and easy-to-read resource."

**Nicole Brown, Lecturer in Education and Programme Leader,
Secondary Teacher Education Programme (STEP)**



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