

# Building & Managing the Culture of a Boarding House

by Gavin Moffat

# You are a leader

- You need firm convictions & strong inner beliefs to successfully lead
- Watching & listening are both very underrated activities
- There are 2 forms of observation
  - (i) fine detail
  - (ii) the bigger picture – the broad landscape

# Understand the School & the House

*'The only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture'*

*Edgar H Stein 1985*

- Is it a happy, positive place or is there negative, confrontational behaviour? Is there pride in the House or is morale not evident? How are relationships between staff/pupils?
- Look at a deeper level; its true significance, in the shared, subconscious taken for granted group of beliefs ie the institutional reality
- ie the pupil's attitude to their academic work, hierarchy within the House, the behaviour of elder pupils towards younger pupils and vice versa, whether pupils take pride in the fabric and appearance of the House.
- Is it a happy, positive place or is there negative, confrontational behaviour? Is there pride in the House or is morale not evident? How are relationships between staff/pupils?

# Articulate & communicate the vision

- Decide what your **core values & your fixed principles** are; not the transitory ones 'here today, gone tomorrow'
- eg. Attitude to academic work, pride in personal appearance and presentation, respect of each other's belongings, keeping their personal space tidy, how the pupils treat House staff & visitors ...
- Have a strong vision for the House allied with a clear narrative ie **keep telling the story, rolling out the same message** (even when you see the pupils rolling their eyes)
- Don't be afraid to take decisive action to remove resistors or those who are reluctant to be on script
- Don't declare victory too soon; having a good culture will suffer temporary dips until it becomes fully embedded.
- Fiercely defend your core principles **but keep them simple**. This is more easily comprehensible and emphasises them through repetition. **The message will therefore have resonance**

# Involve your staff & prefects in managing the culture

- Please don't think that you can do it all alone!
- **Control the discourse** – explain what you propose and why & ensure you provide the on-going narrative as it is taking effect as this gives meaning to what you are doing
- Anchor your actions in your principles 'This is going to cause us extra work but, if we're serious about this then ...'
- Lead by example. Make sure **your own actions are consistent** with what you require of your colleagues & prefects
- Take people seriously. Thank your House tutors for their duty night, ask them to debrief you before they leave
- Fiercely defend your core principles **but keep them simple**. This is more easily comprehensible and emphasises them through repetition. **The message will therefore have resonance**

# Using your Head of House & Prefects

- When developing a culture your HoH and prefects can be powerful deliverers of the message you wish to advocate to the House
- Think carefully about the role you wish your Head of House to carry out. How is he different to the prefects? How can he be a key ally? Is his position a ceremonial one or does it add value to the House?
- The importance of daily Housemeetings – who speaks? What do they say? How do they say it?

Get the right people in place

*“If you can’t change the people,  
change the people”*

# Review progress in order to manage culture

- *‘The winner is the loser who evaluates defeat properly’*

Colm O’Connell Irish Athletics coach

- Put a **date in the diary** to get the whole House team together (House tutors and House prefects) to sit down and review the progress made on instilling/maintaining your key values
- You will learn a lot about how your team views the culture of the House. **NEVER MAKE ASSUMPTIONS & BE PREPARED TO BE SURPRISED.**



# Reward achievement

- This provides a **strong motivation** for the pupils to respond
- Reward sends a very clear message to the pupils about your key values
- **Sincere, personalised praise** can do wonders for the morale of a particular pupil, group of pupils or the House as a whole
- Rewarding those who respond positively and 'get it right' can have a very positive impact on those who don't or who are indifferent to your values

# Dealing with difficult parents

- Parents who are very (overly?) engaged with their son/daughter's education
- They want direct access to the person that knows their child the best .... in 99% of cases this is YOU!
- This creates pressure on your time & a degree of personalised focus
  - Parents wanting personalised communication ...
    - = Demands effort for you to tell the story
  - Parents wanting individualised care for their child ...
    - = Demands effort to do the job

# Mr & Mrs Safe Middle-Class



# Mr & Mrs Traditional



# Mr & Mrs Serious Money





# Mr & Mrs Hands On



Mr & Mrs A\*



# Advice on dealing with these parents

- Be prepared & know your stuff in readiness for the meeting
- Don't ramble, be vague or generalise
- Acknowledge their position, seek their opinions and listen.  
This shows them that you are serious about the issue
- Be friendly & sincere. Thank them for taking the time to come and speak to you
- Don't be afraid to have a tutor in the meeting with you (for an academic issue) and/or the Matron (for a pastoral issues).  
This shows you're serious about the issue whilst also deflecting the parent's ire and removing the bullseye target from your forehead



# Building a rapport: listening & empathy

- do not miss opportunities to build a rapport with parents  
– this shows that you are interested in their child
- The importance of LISTENING 100% with the whole body – look & listen
- *‘Bathe the parent in a warm bath of appreciation’* (Dr Alan Watkins – Coherence)
- It’s not about the solution. Rather it’s that they are able to trust you.



*That's all Folks!*