

4.3 Deepening Understanding – Driving Improvement

To lead in education means to seek continually to deepen understanding and wisdom, extend knowledge, and develop professionally. Education is long term, requiring sustained commitment and endurance. Fuller flourishing of children, of staff, of the school community and its wider environment, is always possible, and leaders can inspire and enable the improvements that can help achieve this. Leaders passionately pursue the best and broadest outcomes for their children, removing barriers, empowering teams, and celebrating the success of others.

Deepening Understanding

The leader’s pursuit of wisdom is a commitment to a lifetime of learning, personal development, and engagement as deeply as possible in each area of their work. It is a necessarily continuous process of formation. It characterises us as leaders, and evidences our orientation to God, one another and ourselves, for “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). This is not a scary or intimidated fear, but rather a reverence, humility and awe which retains the posture of learning despite job title or accolade. And such an attitude to God can help put our other fears and anxieties into perspective – for, “perfect love casts out all fear.” (1 John 4:18). Leaders who seek this deepening are building their house on rock, not on sand, in contrast to the shorter-term pursuit of effectiveness and improvement.

The Bible shows us characters known for their own learning and discipleship, growing through their errors and experience, and seeking to trust God in the challenge. Often they don’t get it, and can’t see the purpose, but yet grow through the challenge, deepening and refining their understanding of God, themselves and leadership through it all. The character formation and leadership of Moses or Joseph through their political struggles, or David through his personal and military activities, shows us a God who is at work in our most testing times,

refining and re-shaping us. The stories are full of probing questions and long-standing doubts. Job when tested, is pointed to the elusive mystery of God, and shows us that deepening understanding is based on deeper questioning: “Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens above – what can you do? They are deeper than the depths below – what can you know?” (Job 11:7-8)

Deepening understanding is not all down to leaders simply working harder – it is first of all about openness to listen and receive. God is at work in the wilderness situations and testing problems. To silence the doubt or mute the question is to cut off the road to one’s own development and flourishing. Leadership is a process of continual learning and formation. The early team of disciples learned through experience – by committing together, eating and discussing together, experimenting, failing, correcting, re-starting, disappointing, and celebrating. Though they would go on to lead the early church, they stumbled and tripped numerous times, yet their teacher was faithful and patient as their understanding deepened. Leaders create the culture of a learning community in their staff, which in turns models this to their pupils.

1. What kinds of activities do you engage in as a leader to help your long term professional development and the deepening of your understanding? How do you learn best? From courses and programmes, or networks and relationships?
2. How can an understanding of faith in God help ‘to put our fears and anxieties into perspective’?
3. To what extent have your ‘most testing times’ deepened understanding for you or your team?
4. How important to deepening understanding is the development of healthy and active listening skills?