

How can headteachers and leaders promote staff wellbeing?

Praising colleagues, offering free flu jabs and never forgetting the power of saying thanks can make a huge difference

I have been a headteacher for nine years and at the age of 48 this much I know about staff wellbeing ...

Right now, keeping the fear factor outside the school gates is very difficult. I try hard to resist the climate of fear this government has so effectively crafted, yet I can feel it seeping into the staff room like chlorine gas. The attack on the profession is orchestrated and relentless, and headteachers are the single most important defence against the coalition's bombardment. What we have to do is relentlessly exhibit behaviours which are supportive and creative, not penal and reductive, especially during this period of industrial action. With immense irony, we need to behave like we're all in this together.

You won't ever get it all right when it comes to looking after colleagues. All you can do is try your hardest and don't make the same mistake twice. It's not you, it's your designation as headteacher that sometimes makes relationships difficult. Develop your emotional intelligence to understand how you must come across to colleagues. And always think about how you would want to be treated.

The best thing for students is a happy, motivated staff. By putting the staff equal first with the students, you are doing the best you can do for the students. Any headteacher who claims she or he always puts students first probably hasn't thought through in detail exactly what that means.

We offer free flu jabs to colleagues. Last year nearly half the staff accepted the offer, and at £10 a jab it's a bargain. Free tea and coffee facilities in the staff room aren't too much to ask either.

I'm also exploring free health insurance for colleagues. It would cost £15,000 per year and would, I think, be another marginal step towards colleagues feeling like they work in a profession. Do we even extend that to offering newly appointed colleagues a choice of employment packages, where they can choose between different pecuniary and non-pecuniary benefits?

I feel very strongly that we shouldn't miss out on the rites of passage moments of our own children just because we are teachers. We have an extraordinary policy whereby colleagues can take a "family day" of paid leave, which allows them to attend family events or attend to family business. Those colleagues without children might have parents to support or have other important domestic issues to deal with. Our family day policy allowed me to attend my youngest son's year 6 leavers' assembly, a tissue-heavy event.

Employ a qualified HR manager. We employ 170 staff; I cannot imagine another organisation of that size operating without one. The countless benefits of such a post easily outweigh the salary costs. Colleagues feel looked after and have immediate expert advice available at all times. Since appointing our HR manager, the staffs' short-term sickness rate has plummeted.

Seek out colleagues and tell them how well they have done. We all like praise. I know I need to tell people more often how much I appreciate them, but I keep trying.

Do all you can to create the sense of a single staff. Where possible, all policies and practices should apply consistently to teachers and support staff alike. The [Whitehall Study](#) in 1965 concluded that: "Men in the lowest grade (messengers, doorkeepers, etc.) had a mortality rate three times higher than that of men in the highest grade (administrators) and that more attention should be paid to the social environments, job design and the consequences of income inequality."

Invest in CPD. In this age of austerity, pour your funding into training your colleagues to be the best they can be. I've made this point before. It's so obvious but it's all too easy to forget that the only sure way to raise standards is to professionally develop every single member of staff.

We have a book club organised by a subject leader. Anything which helps create a sense of community is supportive. Tim Brighouse always emphasises the importance of [saying thank you](#), something you forget at your peril.

It's not until you are a headteacher that you realise the extent to which death impacts upon your colleagues. My very first act as a headteacher was to attend the funeral of a colleague's partner. No one asks to go to a funeral for fun; you have to grant permission without question. The local authority's HR manual is barbaric; it states that grandparents do not have an automatic right to attend a grandchild's funeral.

Returning from maternity leave can be traumatic and you have to be prepared to support new mothers as flexibly as you can. It's difficult to manipulate timetables, but if we are about nurturing young people that should extend to the children of our staff. We have 31 of our 108 teachers on part-time contracts; it drives our timetabler crazy but we have just seen our students gain their best ever results.

Set up a wellbeing committee. And don't micro-manage it. Ours wanted me to hold open door headteacher's clinics for colleagues, which have since proven popular and beneficial. And send flowers to the mothers of newborn babes and to the proper poorly; it's the thought that counts, not the cost.

[Berne's transactional analysis theory](#) is good for reminding headteachers about how to interact with colleagues; work in adult to adult mode always, the tendency to slip into adult-child mode occurs all too frequently.

Encourage moments when staff unite in celebration. We finish early on the final day of the autumn term and our chef James and his team cook us full Christmas dinner. The senior [leadership](#) team (SLT) serve the food to colleagues and we pay for the wine. Secret Santa tops the whole thing off; I've still got my set of juggling boobs.

If they are free on the last period of the day, let colleagues go home if they want to. Trust them to get their work done when they choose; it's about being treated like professionals.

Let your colleagues pursue exciting things to nourish their lives. Our school's core purpose is to inspire confident learners who will thrive in a changing world. A colleague has written two novels about ancient China; the Shanghai Literature and Publishing Group has chosen to translate his books into Mandarin and promote them in China next year. A few days off for a book tour? Of course; if our core purpose is good enough for our students, it's good enough for our staff.

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