

If you want teachers to be happy in the job, **show them respect**

Valuing and supporting students is a fundamental part of teaching. So why don't we show the same concern for our colleagues? asks Secret Teacher

I've come to [teaching](#) later on in my career. After 10 years of working for various organisations I finally answered that nagging voice in my head and trained to teach. The classroom is a brilliant place to be even though the work is arduous and, as an NQT, I feel up against it.

What I didn't expect was the extraordinary politics in schools. The latest order from above in my school is that we have to be "happy". I find this concept baffling – how do you order people to be happy?

What would it take to make me happy in a job? I've largely been happy in most of my roles so far. Without thinking too carefully about it, the main ingredients of job satisfaction are a decent [work-life balance](#) (ha, you say wryly), variety, and a working environment where you feel valued and respected. Obviously Mr Gove has the first one covered. The second one rarely poses a problem for teachers. The third aspect is the one I'm stuck with.

I was recently pilloried for my marking. As an NQT, I am aware of my many areas of development. But the feedback consisted of comments such as, "You are 'ticking and flicking'" and, "You are not marking often enough." You'd never sit a student down and tell them what they can't do in a long list. So why do it with a member of your department?

Teachers need developmental feedback, just like students. Remarkably there wasn't even a departmental marking policy, so I was being judged without any criteria. If this meeting were a lesson, it would require serious improvement.

As a relative outsider to the profession, what surprises me is that this is something so easy to get right. We don't need money; we don't need time; we don't even need acres of bureaucracy to implement a culture of respect. And what's more astonishing is that showing respect and valuing students is a fundamental part of our job. So why aren't we showing the same concern for our colleagues?

Provision for working environment and staff wellbeing in my school is pretty woeful. For instance, we do not have a staffroom. Teachers don't have a place to mark, plan, eat and meet colleagues – the students occupy the classrooms before school and during breaks. Some of us are lucky enough to have cramped, dusty department offices, but most of them have ended their illustrious careers as storage cupboards.

More disturbingly, we were recently polled and it was discovered that more than half of us are not happy at the school. In a staff briefing we were told in no uncertain terms that to be unhappy was to be working against the interests of the school. Instead of asking why so many of us were unhappy, or considering some sorely needed self-reflection by the [leadership](#), we were told that

the unhappy contingent are a negative force, wanting to "sabotage the progress of the school" and "infect" the happy bunch who are trying desperately to enjoy their lives, against an enormous tide of unproductive moaning and gossip.

We have since been given a deadline within which to communicate tangible issues to the senior leadership team, who have never heard any concerns before now apparently. After this, the survey will be going "in the bin" and the unhappiness stamped out in an anti-moaning campaign. But why is unhappiness unacceptable? And who in their right mind would think that a negative brow beating could turn staff into a happy workforce?

The secret to this elusive happiness lies in the way we are spoken to. Managers, you aren't "disappointed" in your staff if they forget to answer your email. You remind them politely and acknowledge they're busy. You don't tell staff they are "not allowed" to leave an open evening before a certain time; you acknowledge it's a late evening and thank them for staying. Unhappy staff are not "bitching and moaning", they need a proper outlet where their concerns will be considered objectively.

This is basic professionalism as I understand it. Ensuring you communicate diplomatically and respectfully can soothe even the most painful extra workload announcements and secure more happiness at work than any order from above.

Teachers' wellbeing needs to become a priority for policy makers seeking "higher academic ambition" for students. It is not healthy that the profession sees 40% of teachers leaving it within five years of training, or more than 400,000 fully-qualified teachers under the age of 60 who are no longer part of it at all. My own department is losing over half its members this year; two of whom are brilliant teachers leaving education entirely after more than 10 years of service.

Missing from the latest Ofsted guidance on leadership and management is any advice on how to ensure teachers feel respected and valued. Instead, it concentrates on ensuring "performance is rigorously managed". We have lost our way in the frantic focus on results and we have forgotten how to be civilised, social beings. Politeness goes a long way. According to one study, being kind causes the body to release the happy chemical dopamine. So be nice to your colleagues and we'll all work happily ever after.

This week's Secret Teacher is an NQT in London.

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