



# Brave Heads: How to Lead a School Without Selling Your Soul

*By Dave Harris*

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**Brave Heads: How to Lead a School Without Selling Your Soul** By Dave Harris

## HOW TO LEAD A SCHOOL WITHOUT SELLING YOUR SOUL

School leadership brings with it tremendous pressure from the government for results at all costs. It's the outcome that counts (and the league tables), not the process. Which means, now more than ever, for genuine leaders leading schools in the right direction for the right reasons, bravery is key. Dave Harris is well placed to write the ultimate guide to bravery in school leadership. As the principal of a high-profile brand new Academy he has had to stand by his beliefs about the role of the school in the community – 'It's a marathon, not a sprint' – despite the pressure to forget genuinely educating young people and just focus on 'floor targets'. A book for every leader who wants to make a genuine difference (and get great results, as Dave has done)!

Brave Heads is a personal account, a smart synthesis of current thinking about leadership and an invitation to reflect on and review how leadership might need to change to respond to a turbulent and often contradictory environment. It is a powerful and very welcome addition to the literature on how leadership needs to develop in order to create an educational system rooted in authentic values and a belief in the transformational potential of schools.

John West-Burnham, Professor of Educational Leadership, St Mary's University College, Twickenham

Brave Heads works both as a very useful handbook full of practical tips that any new head teacher would be wise to adopt and a timely reminder to more experienced leaders about what matters most in schools. For both, it emphasises the perennial privilege of being a head teacher – being a driver of change that benefits children and communities.

The book takes a refreshing look at both the challenges and the joys of leading a school, describing the bravery needed by head teachers in respect of facing up to external political imperatives, curriculum design and delivery, securing short- and long-term success, the leadership styles necessary at different times and the wealth of research into school leadership that can have real-world relevance and application.

Mike Butler, Chief Executive, Djanogly Learning Trust, Director of the Independent Academies Association

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### **Editorial Review**

#### Review

Reviewed by John West-Burnham, Professor of Educational Leadership, St Mary's University College, Twickenham.

There are few things in the literature of school leadership as compelling and authentic as a leader telling his own story in an analytical and rigorous way. Dave Harris has achieved this in a highly engaging account of his own leadership which combines a powerful narrative with thoughtful reflection and careful analysis. He skilfully combines theory and practice so that each informs the other in a way that enhances understanding and relevance.

At a time when many of the fundamental assumptions about school leadership are being questioned Dave Harris focuses on the ideas of personal authenticity and moral courage in a way that provides a compelling model for all school leaders - not just head teachers.

Brave Heads is a personal narrative, a powerful synthesis of current thinking about leadership and an invitation to reflect on and review how leadership might need to change to respond to a turbulent and often contradictory environment.

It is a powerful and very welcome addition to the literature on how leadership needs to develop in order to create an educational system rooted in authentic values and a belief in the transformational potential of schools.

Reviewed by Mike Butler, Chief Executive, Djanogly Learning Trust, Director of the Independent Academies Association.

Brave Heads, the latest book from Dave Harris, works as both a very useful handbook full of practical tips that any new headteacher would be wise to adopt, and a timely reminder to more experienced leaders about what matters most in leading schools. For both, it emphasises the perennial privilege of being a headteacher, namely that one is a driver of change that benefits children and communities.

The book takes a refreshing look at both the challenges and joys of leading a school, describing the bravery needed by a headteacher in respect of: facing up to external political imperatives; the design and delivery of the curriculum; the choices one makes aimed at securing both short- and long-term success; the leadership styles one may adopt at different times; and the wealth of research into school leadership that can have real-world relevance and application.

In the first section, Harris describes the inner conflict that can be experienced by headteachers, when, as a public servant working within a system often determined by politics, what one is required to do runs contrary to the values-driven leadership one is attempting to model; it is what some would term existential angst, occasioned by being forced to act in bad faith, against one's own beliefs and empirical knowledge about what is right. The paradox is also evident in Harris's own writing. He acknowledges that for the headteacher, every day is an act, is about adopting a persona for effect, even suggesting at one point that all heads should need an Equity card to do their job properly. He writes that, 'The good leader...is marked out by the way in which his or her internal rollercoaster of self-doubt, negativity and sheer desperation is rendered invisible to the outside world'. He defines bravery as 'the individual's ability to maintain high external optimism at times of lowest internal optimism'. Yet in the section specifically on leadership, the repeated mantra is 'Be yourself!' (Although, even this position is perhaps playfully undermined!)

Harris's writing often models and reflects the kinds of leadership behaviours he espouses. Some of his admissions and deeply personal accounts are searingly honest, such as when he describes his suffering from

a stroke whilst at work, this anecdote and others providing very real examples of the vulnerability, self-knowledge and willingness to be self-effacing that he argues later in the book are essential qualities --Mike Baxter, Chief Executive, Djanology Learning Trust, Director of the Independent Academies Assoc.

#### About the Author

Dave Harris worked for over 20 years in School leadership, including 12 as a school principal across both primary and secondary phases. During this time he developed a reputation for innovative thinking and practice. Since retiring from working in schools he now puts his ideas into practice as Managing Director of Independent Thinking Ltd.

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#### Foreword

I have a friend who is a head teacher at a prestigious school on the coast in Chile. It is his third headship and he has been there nearly two years now. In his office is a daunting gallery of oil paintings of 150 years' worth of headmasters (they are all men) looking down on him each day as he sits at his desk. The combined pressure of all that tradition, expertise and accomplishment frightens the life out of him most days.

Another experienced head teacher I know at a school in England was telling me about the sudden feelings of panic he experiences from time to time. 'I would understand it,' he explained to me, 'if it was on a Sunday evening but this is in the middle of the summer holidays while I'm sitting in my garden!' His anxiety disorder aside, it is the comment about Sunday evenings that is most telling.

Another head teacher I knew (I still know her. It's just that she is no longer a head teacher. It was just a phase she was going through) used to walk around her school pretending she knew what she was doing. 'How would I be acting if I really knew what to do?' is how she used to explain this to herself. She was especially reliant on the 'fake it till you make it' approach when it came to dealing with the school budget and the massive deficit she had inherited. 'What would I do if I knew what I was doing?' It was a strategy that helped her get the school back in the black within 18 months.

It's a challenge being a head teacher. A big one. And unless you're one of those arrogant types who refuses to believe that anything you do could ever go wrong and if it does it's someone else's fault anyway, it's a really scary challenge.

I remember my very first day as an NQT. I bumped into the silver-haired vuncular deputy in the gents. 'Nervous?' he asked. 'Yup,' I said, thinking about all the dreams I had had in the weeks leading up to that day, those sweat-inducing dreams of being in a classroom and not having a clue what was going on as chaos raged around me. 'Yup', he continued, 'me too. It never leaves you ...'

Fear, then, seems to be a staple of life in a school, unlike many other common jobs (but akin to being a burglar according to the controversial Judge Bowers in Teeside recently who seemed impressed with the guts of the serial-burglaring drug addict up before him). Fear. Or F.E.A.R. – F\*ck Everything And Run! – as it was once described to me. It takes bravery to overcome fear. If you never experience fear then how can you be brave? When you are a teacher, you have to face your fears and get yourself through every day. When

you're a head, you have to get yourself through every day and everyone else as well.

There is a great deal of talk these days about 'super-heads' and the need to succeed at all costs, success often measured solely in exam results and Ofsted headlines. It is a success that can come despite, not as a result of, the staff it would appear, based on what Ofsted chief Sir Michael Wilshaw seems to say, a man who seems to like the 'carrot and stick' approach to motivation using both objects with which to beat teachers. What would the epitome of courage in leadership Sir Ernest Shackleton say about that? At one point during his ill-fated expedition to the South Pole, he confided to the captain of the *Endurance*, Frank Arthur Worsley, 'Thank God I haven't killed one of my men!' to which the loyal captain replied, 'We all know you have worked superhumanly to look after us.' Shackleton's gruff response is revealing when considering what real leadership is about: 'Superhuman effort ... isn't worth a damn unless it achieves results.'

I asked a friend of mine, David Hanson who heads up the Independent Association of Prep Schools and a man who has had more than his fair share of educational leadership experience, what his approach was when it came to taking all staff with you as a school leader. Surely you just get rid of the dead weight holding a school back? Isn't that the brave thing for a head to do?

'Relentless support', was his response, a phrase with a professionally pleasing oxymoronic irony to it. You just keep on supporting them until something happens.

Dave Harris displays a similar approach when it comes to bringing the best out of his staff. All his staff. The expectation was that he would come with a scythe and cut down all that was holding back the school from which Nottingham University Samworth Academy or NUSA grew out of. Many saw it as a failing school. Failing the students. Failing the community. Failing itself. Why would you hang on to what and who had been part of that failure?

Not sacking large numbers of people was Dave's second brave act at NUSA. Taking the job was the first. Right from day one, Dave wanted to do it in a way that he felt was the right way, the only way. The pressure on him was purely about results but the job before him, Dave knew, was bigger than that. Focusing on the important things – 'the marathon' activities as he calls it – as well as chasing external goals such as evermoving floor targets – 'the sprint' activities – took courage. Doing what you feel, deep down, is the right thing to do day after day as the powers that be circle round you like vultures surrounding a peaky-looking zebra takes every ounce of bravery you have and, in this book, Dave is honest about the toll that takes and the roller-coaster ride this approach to leadership really is.

Not that you would know if you ever met him. As Shackleton said, as a leader you keep your fears to yourself: 'You often have to hide from them not only the truth, but your feelings about the truth. You may know that the facts are dead against you, but you mustn't say so.'

This book then is Dave Harris' opportunity to be honest. To share with the reader the stresses and strains of leading a school when you are brave enough to do it the only way you feel is the right way, despite what 'they' say and the pressure to do it 'their' way. In it, he is not telling you what to do as a school leader yourself. Not only is every school different, but every year in every school is different (or at least it should be, if you're being brave about it). Rather he shares his own experiences and the thinking behind them – backed up by some pretty impressive academic research as you might expect from an academy that was the first to have a university as its co-sponsor – to inspire you not only to find your own brave path but to also to have fun doing it.

As Worsley said of Shackleton: 'One would think he had never a care on his mind and he is the life and soul of half the skylarking and fooling in the ship.' After all, as every brave head knows, education is far too important to be taken seriously.

Ian Gilbert

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