

Managing the intersections – Keynote Welcome Address to Deputy Heads conference with the theme *Shaken not Stirred*, St Stithians College, 12 September 2013

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‘The name is Bond, James Bond’

This saying, together with the signature tune of Bond movies, is famous and well-known. There is a lesson in that for our schools: short, pithy words and sounds that are repeated in our school life, so that they become part of the bloodstream, easily recognisable tags for who and what we are.

Like me, you will most probably have been intrigued by the tagline for this conference: Shaken not stirred. Is this a case of marketing by fascination, by upsetting our normal expectations? How many of us come here with the expectation that we will be ‘shaken not stirred’? Will all be revealed as the conference unfolds?

‘Shaken not stirred’ is the way James Bond likes his martini cocktails mixed, a preference going back to the early Bond movies of the 1960s. The American Film Institute decided in 2005 that the phrase ‘shaken not stirred’ should be ranked #90 on a list of best movie quotes in the past 100 years of film. What a strange and arresting ranking and statistic! Furthermore, you can get a Shaken not Stirred ringtone sent to your cell phone.

Is the James Bond image an applicable one for Deputy Heads? Fast cars, bronzed bodies, gratuitous violence, meetings with spies, car chases in busy streets, daredevil stunts, clever cunning, emerging unscathed from life and death situations? Except for this last characteristic, for Deputies do definitely deal figuratively with life and death situations most days, the world of James Bond does not strike me as being normally synonymous with the life of a Deputy Head. Given the unlikely comparisons between Bond and Deputy Head, I am going to explore another analogy and metaphor as I welcome you warmly to St Stithians College, and as I open this conference.

Images of intersections

I have in my mind’s eye, based on lived experience, two examples of traffic intersections that work, and one that does not. The first is in Cairo where traffic in the city centre is a chaotic, jumbled cacophony – but not at the major intersections where brave policemen with whistles direct the proceedings: they ensure discipline and flow. It is chaos patterned. The second example is a suburban Johannesburg intersection, where green, amber and red provide order and structure, reminiscent of a good school timetable. Even when the Johannesburg traffic lights are not working – which happens quite often – most motorists are polite enough to turn them into functioning four-way stops; they see the common good of courtesy and order. My third intersection image – one that does not work – is of grid-locked Nairobi, the city that has seriously outgrown its road system. In Nairobi’s extended rush hours many intersections desperately need co-ordinating traffic officers or motorists with a sense of the common good. In the absence of a controller of the intersection, self-interested drivers take the gap, nudging forward into the smallest of gaps and closing down any

movement. The intersections gridlock in a jumbled mosaic of cars at all angles: slowly, inefficiently and sometimes miraculously – a testament to patient drivers – they clear and move.

What is an intersection? A place of crossing, meeting, mixing, flow, buzz, collision, chaos, and the synergy and energy as circles overlap, as in a Venn diagram.

Deputy Heads at the intersections of school life

I put it to you that the rightful place of a deputy head is as manager of the multiple and variable intersections of school life, involving students, teachers, parents, logistics and operations. Put another way, Deputy Heads occupy the pulsating centre of school systems and relations – they are the most ‘in touch’ of any staff member. They variously inhabit the kinds of intersections described above as Cairo, Johannesburg and Nairobi. As teachers, Deputy Heads typically love the classroom, the zone of learning and teaching, the refreshing and draining space of the child. Becoming a deputy head, though, involves taking one, two or three steps away from the world of the child, and occupying the adult-adult intersection – the world of teachers and parents. Some Deputy Heads love this new transition and intersection space; others find it a new and demanding challenge, not without significant internal tensions.

In addition to the daily, busy intersections which need constant attention and direction, I encourage Deputy Heads to seek to occupy two critical intersections. Identifying and working at them takes time, thought and effort; and often requires courage and perseverance amidst the business of everyday school life. The first of these is the interface with your Head of School. If you do not spend quality time with your Head of School, demand it! It is part of your role and obligation to maximize the effectiveness and impact of the Head of School. Obviously this works best if you respect, admire and get on with your Head. Because you are in the intersection you see and hear things which the Head does not necessarily see and hear. Your role is to convey these insights and observations to the Head – not so much in a tell tale way, but in a commitment to the common good and to maximizing and affirming the Head’s role in the school. It is probably true that these are not always easy conversations; they often require a blend of courage and diplomacy.

The second critical intersection space is to create intersections where they do not exist. To identify vacancies and silences takes a special kind of insight and, often, stepping back from the fray. As the position of Deputy Head is so knowledge-rich, looking for gaps is, for some, easy and, for others, difficult. A high-quality Deputy Head fosters, nurtures and builds new intersections – new relationships and interfaces – and so renews and unlocks fresh energy, or finds new solutions to old problems.

Rubbish bins at intersections

Psychologist Jason Bantjes used an arresting image in an address to Heads of Independent Schools a couple of years ago: principals are perceived by some individuals in our school communities as rubbish bins. I would add that such receptacles of emotional anger, anxiety, and external projection are most commonly found at critical intersections in the roadmap of school. Deputy Heads are likely also to be a receptacle for emotional projectiles and outworkings, although Deputies have the pleasure of knowing that, ultimately, the ‘buck does not stop’ with them, but with the Head of School.

Some teachers, parents and students need, in a psychological sense, to project their problems, anxieties, internal tensions, psychoses on to other people. They try to solve their psychological difficulties through projection and externalisation. Heads and deputies become convenient focal points.

Receive the projections and castoffs, but try not to let these taint or embitter you. Make sure the mess is tied up in a bag and taken to the garbage heap. Even more challenging, recycle it into something better and productive.

Your own personal leadership intersection

It's a good question to ask: am I a Deputy Head aspiring to be a Head of School? Or am I a career Deputy – this is what I am really good at, enjoy doing, and where I find fulfilment? These questions have been an important part of my journey as a school leader. During the 1990s, when I was Senior Deputy Headmaster at St Andrew's College in Grahamstown, my father wrote a book titled *Number Two to Tutu*. The book accounted for the remarkable and interesting relationship, from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s, between my father, in his role as Dean of the Province in the Anglican Church of South Africa, and Desmond Tutu, Archbishop of Cape Town. In effect, my father occupied the 'deputy' position to the Archbishop, the head of the Anglican Church in South Africa. Their close and symbiotic relationship was a central feature of the role that the Anglican Church leadership played in the last years of apartheid and the transition to the new democracy. My father's book reflected on, and validated, the importance of the role of the deputy – the number two – in this context. Importantly, the role that my father played as a leader focused on the internal life of the church enabled and empowered Desmond Tutu to live out an emphatic and prophetic ministry on the global stage.

In a different way, but with interesting similarities, my role during the first decade of the 2000s as Senior Deputy Headmaster enabled the St Andrew's College Headmaster, David Wylde – one of the most prominent South African Heads of his era and the first African to be appointed to the position of President of the International Confederation of Principals – to live out his role as a leading educationalist in this country and beyond.

Stirred – leadership as an emotional space

'Shaken not stirred'. One of the conference organisers mentioned to me that the planning committee had in mind, when selecting this phrase, to draw a contrast between a careful stirring (without spilling) and a more vigorous shaking. The beauty and intrigue of words is that they can carry many meanings. I wish to emphasise a different understanding of 'stirred' to the careful, controlled notion of the conference organisers, for the word conjures up emotion and feeling. This emphasis enables me to talk briefly about the head and the heart as another point of intersection occupied by Deputy Heads.

Educational institutions invest hugely in the development of rational and logical thinking, but they are impoverished places if they do not also grow the landscape of the heart, of the soul. Physiologically, the brain is the wonderful complex organ which processes both thought and emotion. And so, I want to argue that good Deputy Heads are 'stirred' people, in the sense of taking emotion and emotional role-modelling seriously. Emotions are often the submerged parts of the

icebergs which either sit under, or are stuck in, school intersections. Bring emotion to the surface, give it space, deal with it, and celebrate it. In short, show that you are fully human.

Criteria for success: a Deputy Head checklist

To mention the word 'checklist' is to oversimplify the wonderfully complex and rich life of a Deputy Head. I use the word here to give me a tool to distil a few key words which I associate with Deputy Headship. You need a good dose of IQ, but critically a strong component of EQ. You need people skills and system skills. You need to be a problem solver, a relationship builder: firm, but empathetic. You need the ability to be, in that biblical phrase, both seen and unseen. As far as you can, within the multiplicity of roles you fulfil in your roles, be yourself, true to who you are.