

The School Efficiency Project

The project that follows is taken from the Institute of Administrative Management's ***Certificate in Educational Administration*** course – a one year distance learning programme for school administrators run by the School of Educational Administration.

The Project arose from the fact that, when asked to nominate the one change to their working environment that they would most like to see, over 80% of administrators nominated something that was not only of benefit to themselves, but would also be of huge benefit to the school in terms of enhanced efficiency.

However, when we asked these same administrators why they were not trying to put the change into effect, most answered that they either had tried and been rebuffed, or they felt it was not worth trying because previous experience had suggested that their ideas for change were generally not well received by school managers.

It is important to reiterate that almost all of the changes nominated were ones that would greatly enhance the efficiency of the school. The administrators wanted them – and yet somehow the changes were not happening.

This seems an extremely unfortunate turn of events, since there is no doubt that huge amounts of money could be saved from education bills if only school administrators could find a way of presenting their ideas to managers in a way that would lead to open and fruitful discussions.

After our survey this article was added to the IAM's ***Certificate in Educational Administration*** course. Such was the impact of the article

that it was then decided to offer it free of charge to non-members of the course and to school managers.

In reading this article we hope that you will:

- a)** Find that it helps you to improve your own working conditions and the efficiency of your school.

- b)** Share with other administrators your thoughts on this article, and any activities you have undertaken as a result of it. You can do this via our web log – we will put up a link to this shortly.

- c)** Consider joining our course. We admit students in January, April and September – please call 01536 399 007 or email Prospectus@admin.org.uk or visit www.admin.org.uk/certificate.htm for a prospectus.

The School Efficiency Project

Increasing school efficiency by changing procedures in the school office

1. Can school administration make a difference to the efficiency of the school?

No one would deny that a good teacher can make a difference – a hard working, dedicated, well trained, talented teacher can beyond any doubt raise grades, overcome attitude and behavioural issues, and make a positive mark on pupils which can stay for the rest of their lives.

As a result, schools quite reasonably invest in teacher in-service training, in classroom resources and facilities and so forth. Around 75% of school expenditure goes on teacher salaries, and from this it is easy to see where priorities lie.

But what of school administration? Can that also make a difference? Given the lack of resources put into school administration and the reports from administrators who contact the School of Educational Administration with information on their attempts to change the way schools are administered, the perception among most school managers must be no – administration does not make a difference.

We disagree with this view. Indeed we argue that even without any extra funding for administration it is possible to make changes to a school's administration which can result in increased efficiency throughout the school. Indeed, getting the school administration right can in fact save the school considerable money, as well as making the school run far more effectively and efficiently.

This brief paper looks at how this might happen, and also considers why there has traditionally been such resistance to making changes of an administrative nature in schools.

2. Why bother to make changes?

The essence of administration is the desire to make the organisation operate more smoothly, more effectively and more efficiently. To do this, each administrator needs to understand the organisation's aims and ends, to appreciate that limited means are available (and what those limits are), and then use those means in order to deliver the best solutions. In short, as administrators we make the system work. Without us, the organisation will still work, but it would be far less efficient and far less effective.

Although it is possible to look at organisations such as schools and say, "that one has a good administration" and "that one a poor administration", a more effective way of analysing administrations is to see how close each one is to three distinct approaches.

We've already touched on "Administration" as the approach which centres on making the organisation more effective and more efficient. The other two approaches are "Maintenance" and "Subversion".

Just as no organisation ever achieves perfect Administration (there is always something that can be done more effectively) so we never see a complete example of Subversion. However, an example of what the subversion approach would look like was given most graphically on the "Yes Minister" and "Yes Prime Minister" TV series which gave us the notion of "Sir Humphrey Appleby" – the administrator whose job was not the effective and efficient running of government, but instead the maintenance of the status quo in order to foster the interests and

power-base of senior civil servants. Here the entire essence of government was undermined in order to maintain the benefit and powerbase of the civil service.

The third approach, Maintenance, may be seen as a midpoint between Administration and Subversion. In such organisations the role of the administrators is simply to do the job as it has been done before. Not, you will note, to do the job well or to do it more effectively, but simply to do it.

Let us consider these three approaches in a practical example. We will imagine that the school office is asked to check on certain pupils who have not turned up to school and for whom there is no explanation from a parent.

If Maintenance is the guiding principle then the administrators will not spend any time considering how they might carry out this task more effectively or efficiently. They will simply adopt the way in which the job was done before, and do it. (If it is a job presented for the first time they will simply work out one way of doing it and do it – without then returning to the issue to consider it further). Perhaps they will phone the parents and, if there is no reply, they will phone again later. Sometimes they might find that the child was in school after all, and that the teacher filled in the register wrongly. They will be annoyed, but this will not change the system.

In the school in which the office is run on subversive lines the office team might seek to perform this task in a way that maximises the amount of time the task takes, in order to enhance the importance of the job and thus the importance of their own position in the school. While phoning and re-phoning parents they will refuse to answer incoming calls and will not undertake any other work. Everything stops for these ultimately pointless phone calls. In other words, even

though it is evident that the system is not working, they will carry on using it, if for no other reason than to show the managers how idiotic the request was in the first place.

In a school using Administration, however, the process will be considered. The question will be asked, “What is the most effective way of getting the result we want, not just today but each time we do this?” Administrators might ask whether contacting these parents is actually necessary, and they will certainly seek to liaise with management over what to do about teachers who simply can’t fill in registers correctly. Emphasis will be put on issues such as these, so that gradually the time taken to undertake this task reduces from, for example, three hours a week to one hour a week.

While it is obvious that Subversion is not a good system for a school to use in its office, it is sometimes less obvious that Maintenance is just as problematic, not least because there appears to be no time to think through the issues. The day is already full of things to do. Re-planning how to do them will just add to the overload. Thus everyone gets the work done, and indeed works hard, but the systems do not get improved.

Of course, this might not be too much of a problem in a world that doesn’t change – but, as we all know, one factor that we can all agree on is that schooling in the UK today is changing extremely quickly. It is changing because of government regulation, technological change, changes to parental expectation and changes in pupil behaviour. Simply doing the same thing over and over again in the same way presents us with one problem – and that problem is added to by the fact that new tasks keep appearing.

Thus we have no choice – to be good administrators it is not enough to get the job done, we have to get the job done effectively and efficiently. Of course, we might well be able to do the job to the satisfaction of the staff and governors of the school by doing it this year in the same way that we did it last year – but that still might not be good enough, especially if we are now taking twice as long to do the task as was originally envisaged.

So the good administrator makes changes in order to find ways of getting everything done in the time available. And if we can do the job in even less time and still maintain or improve on the accuracy levels that were delivered before, then even better.

3. How the move towards greater efficiency is implemented

Changes to procedures in the school office can be implemented in two ways. Either the school administration team changes the approach and solves the problem themselves, or the problem is taken to others – managers and teachers who might request changes of procedure in other parts of the school.

In our research we found that both approaches could cause problems. In the former, as intimated earlier, there can be a lack of time for the administrators to consider alternative approaches. In addition, they are often not allocated any budget to help them improve efficiency. The job has to be done, and there simply is not time or money set aside to test and trial alternative approaches.

But even greater problems were reported to us when we looked at putting change proposals to teachers or managers. In the case of the missing pupils there were two obvious changes that could be made – one involving the installation of more effective ways of getting in touch with parents, and one which ensured that teachers did not make

mistakes in registers. The former approach normally didn't require too much expenditure to devise a messaging service which readily sent text messages to mobiles and left messages on home phones and email systems. But such decision-making and the informing of parents on the new procedures was something that was not considered to be in the remit of the administration, and so had to be handed over to management. When the problem was put to management, even when it was put with details of possible solutions that had already been researched, the most common outcome was silence. The project was simply ignored – or at least no one came back to the administrators to discuss it further, or even explain why it had not happened.

The situation was just as difficult where the behaviour of teachers was questioned. In all the situations we looked at there was no doubt that greater care by one or two members of the teaching staff would reduce the considerable amount of time that administrators were wasting. It would also reduce the level of stress experienced by administrators who were the ones who had to face irate and worried parents who were told their children were not at school only to find later that they were.

And yet, faced with this evidence, virtually no school managers were willing to take on the task of dealing with the teachers who were at fault. A couple of managers did “have a word” with the relevant teaching staff, but no long term plan was put in place to weed out these errors, and as a result the situation continued and the morale in the school office declined still further.

4. Our first conclusions

We felt from informal discussions with administrators in around 100 schools that a significant number of school administrators really wanted to improve the efficiency of the office, but that in almost every case where they asked for money to change a system or for changes to be made which involved people from outside the office these changes simply didn't happen. Requests were ignored, appeared to sink into a black hole from which they never emerged, or were flatly refused because of a lack of budget. Turning directly to those outside the office also failed to produce changes, as noted above, and so the situation looked hopeless.

5. Help from without

Schools in England are inspected, and it would be good to think that these inspectors would take proper note of the administration of the school, and how its efficiency might be improved. But the reality is different – most school administrators report that they hardly see the inspectorate, and, even when they do, the inspection they get consists of nothing more than a cursory glance.

Indeed, even in the handful of extreme cases in which a senior member of the management staff has subsequently been found to be misusing school funds to pay for football season tickets, Visa bills or other personal items, a review of the last inspector's report shows comments such as "excellent administration", and "sound financial management."

But, if the inspection teams are not there to help administrators, who is? This is a question that the School of Educational Administration posed at its very foundation, and it was a question that figured large when the SEA put its application for initial funding to the Dept of

Trade and Industry in 2002. We argued then, and argue now, that there are inefficiencies in school administrations, not because of any inability or lack of dedication on the part of the administrative staff, but because the notion that schools could be made more efficient through reforms to the administrative systems has not been taken on board by school managers and their local authority counterparts.

Because of this situation we believe that the most effective way to make progress in school administration is not only to provide the Certificate in Educational Administration course, but also to bring to school administrators and school managers simultaneously our view of the need for change in order to increase efficiency.

6. Our question to school administrators

Trying to find a way through this problem, in 2006 we asked a number of school administrators to answer one simple question: “If you were able to change just one aspect of your work, what would it be?”

All research should start with expectations – thoughts of what you would like to prove, or what you expect the answers to be and what you are hoping to prove. We expected that at least 50% of the answers we would get would involve contractual details (most particularly the number of weeks per year or hours per day the administrators were expected to work) and financial issues. We anticipated comments about overtime, and the lack of payment for it, the impossibility of arranging flexible working time, and so forth.

In fact fewer than 20% of the responses dealt with such matters. The overwhelming majority of administrators who contacted us submitted one of the following thoughts in response to our question:

- Teachers should treat administrators with more respect and understanding of their work, the pressures they are under, the deadlines they have to meet and the number of people to whom they are expected to provide a service.
- Teachers should understand more exactly what administrators do all day – the suggestion being that a lack of understanding of the administrators’ many and varied roles led to inappropriate behaviour by some teachers.
- Teachers should schedule the work that they give the administrators in such a way that administrators can fit the work into their schedule. The feeling was that teachers believed administrators were simply sitting with nothing much to do except answer the occasional phone call, and that it was therefore perfectly acceptable to drop work in and expect it to be done immediately.
- Managers should recognise that administrators are constantly striving to improve the efficiency of their work and should support this drive.
- The actions of managers and teachers can often have a huge impact on the work that administrators have to do, and simple changes to procedures could have a significant impact on the ability of the school office to undertake work.

7. What all these issues have in common

Of course no one would suggest that all these issues apply to your school – but it is extremely unlikely that there is no room for introducing some changes that would make your administration more efficient and more effective.

All of the issues mentioned above have certain things in common.

- a)** Each one can be very easily understood.
- b)** Each one would deliver more efficiency.
- c)** Each one could be delivered by the school – none is impossible.
- d)** None of these would cost any money.
- e)** Any of these ideas, mishandled, could result in the situation getting worse.

To explore this in more detail, let us take one of the key issues that affected a number of respondents to our survey and which we mentioned in passing in section 2 of this article – the following up of apparently unaccounted absences by pupils and students.

Administrators reported two difficulties with this operation. One was the problem of reaching parents on the phone, the other the fact that some teachers were inaccurate in their completion of the school register.

With the first issue there are several technical solutions possible, such as systems which allow text messages to be sent to the parent's mobile or home phone straight from a central computer in the school. With such a process the administrator can call up a single standard message and, by simply touching two or three computer keys, can send that message to the home phone, mobile phone and email address of the parent in question. Thus, instead of spending many minutes retrieving the parent's contact details, dialling the number, holding on, and possibly having to redial later, (all of which takes up time which is being paid for by the school through the administrator's salary) the matter is dealt with in seconds, leaving the parent the obligation of calling or emailing back with information.

Since experience shows that the majority of parents will provide a suitable daytime contact phone number or email address, most parents can be contacted in this way. The few who don't have such contact points, or who fail to return the call within a given time period, can be contacted manually. This does of course take time, but since the number will be small the amount of time taken up by the process is far less.

Such systems as these, involving using a computer and standard messages, have many other uses: as a way for parents to send in explanations for absence before the school makes enquiries; and as a way of sending out information about school trips, special events, school closures, changes to arrangements and the like. Multiple communications can be achieved with just a few keystrokes.

This system does cost money of course and some schools may not have this. That is understandable – but what is alarming is the fact that most of the administrators who reported back to us on this theme also commented that the manager who rejected the application for such a system would not even consider the longer-term cost benefit.

To consider the issues involved here the manager should be asking, “How much time per annum will it save the administrators?” From this one sees how much money is saved in salaries (and quite possibly phone bills), and then this can be balanced against the cost of the system. Figures that we have seen suggest that such systems can pay for themselves within a matter of a term – and yet most managers were simply answering the proposition with the response that there was no budget allowance for this.

(Of course this is not to suggest that many managers have not already introduced such systems into their schools – of course they have. What we are looking at here is the situation in which a school has not

introduced such a system and the idea for it is coming from the administration, not from the management. It is at this point that there seems to be a problem).

When we consider the issue of teachers filling in the register wrongly, the most common response administrators told us that they received was, “I’ll look into it,” followed by no further response – and a continuation of the problem. A few administrators suggested that the manager had “mentioned the problem” to the teacher, and that there was a slight improvement for a few weeks, but then the problem returned, and nothing more was done.

In taking these discussions forward we have often been told that “you couldn’t get this sorted in my school” and “that wouldn’t work here” – the implication being that this school has a uniquely difficult set of managers who will not consider the problems faced by administration.

This is undoubtedly too harsh a judgement – and in our opinion it is much more likely that the problem is simply down to lack of experience in handling this sort of problem. We believe that all such problems as these could readily be solved, if the approach was changed slightly.

8. Statement vs negotiation

Thus we reached the position where changes to systems looked difficult to implement no matter which route was proposed (whether admin led, teacher led or inspector led). But we felt that there might still be a chance of implementing changes because the benefits that accrue and the lack of cost implications in many cases, made changes highly desirable.

We therefore concluded that the route forward was indeed one that involved the administrators taking their issues to the managers.

However we know that the problems that administrators face when taking issues to managers are multiple. They include:

- A resistance to change in general.
- A resistance to extra work (which does not suggest that the manager is lazy, but rather that none of us willingly take on extra and possibly unpleasant tasks.)
- A lack of knowledge as to how the problem is best tackled.
- A lack of understanding of the benefits that can accrue to the school if the problem is solved.

To make this quite clear in a specific instance, we shall consider the question of the wrongly filled-in register, in which an administrator takes the matter to the Deputy Head. We may well have a situation here in which neither the administrator nor the deputy head have any experience of how to handle the matter between themselves, and the deputy head may have no experience on how to handle the matter with the culpable teacher. The deputy head may well feel that the administrator has a very fair point, but may not quite know how to take on a teacher who says, "I am not having some trumped up secretary telling me how to do my job." Equally he/she may not know quite how to handle the teacher who apologises profusely but then carries on making the same errors as before.

To consider another example – the administrators might feel it is more than reasonable to ask teachers to give a week's notice for any work they want undertaken. The deputy head might agree, but then find on announcing the measure to the staff meeting that teachers object on the grounds that teaching is not like this, it is often necessary to

change tack and have new materials prepared urgently and that it is not reasonable for administrators to dictate how such matters can be arranged. After all, every other school has an office that copes, so why can't we?

Which is just a prelude to the question, "Who is the most important – the administrator or the teacher?"

To try to overcome some of these arguments it is a good idea to consider the process that we are going to engage in, in order to achieve our desired end. We know that there can be resistance, because the manager you approach might not understand the notion of administrative efficiency, or might not want the burden of having to take the issue to teachers, or might feel that the request is a threat to his/her authority – and your approach will have to overcome all this.

This analysis clearly suggests that simply setting out your demands is unlikely to get the result you want – and my suspicion is that, when administrators have told me that they have "asked the manager for this but it never happened", this is where the problem has arisen.

When we look at the situation we can see that the requested change has two benefit elements to offer in negotiation:

- a)** The benefit to the school as a whole (that is more efficient administration)
- b)** The benefit to the administrator (a job well done in less time)

9. The negotiation

You need to put across the benefits that will accrue to the school if your change is implemented. Using our example you could say that the benefit to the school would be that administrators would save half an hour a day if there were no errors in registration documents, and that the profile of the school among parents (who of course do chatter to each other enormously) is being harmed by phone calls suggesting that children who are in school, or for whom explanations have been received, are in fact away without explanation. These are two important factors and a rejection of either would leave the manager looking as if he/she did not care too much about issues that are central to the school's well being.

But even though these benefits are clear and obvious, it is important that they are put across in a manner in which the magnitude of the issues can be fully recognised and remembered. Thus we have to start by considering the medium through which you put your ideas and benefits across.

Setting up a meeting

Clearly the best approach is the personal one-to-one meeting at a time and in a place that you will not be interrupted. This means making an appointment for the amount of time you think you might need. It means asking for an appointment, but avoiding accepting the statement that "you can come and see me any time" or "I could fit you in after break if it won't take too long..." Anything that suggests that this is going to be squeezed in between more important issues should be resisted because this is an important issue. You've probably been living with this problem for months anyway, so another week or two does not matter. Better to wait for the right moment – and indeed

showing the other party that you are willing to wait for a time when you can discuss the issue without interruption adds importance to the meeting that is to come.

In passing we should recognise that this level of planning for the meeting is exactly the opposite of slipping the issue in under ***Any Other Business*** at the end of a staff meeting. You need a fair and frank exchange of views to get this matter going, and you are not going to get that at the end of a staff meeting where no one is prepared for the issue.

Because the venue and timing is so important you must consider how you ask for the meeting. You could say any of the following:

“Could I have a chat with you?”

“Could you spare me a few moments?”

“It’s not important but, could I have a word?”

All of these approaches use everyday speech in a friendly way. You may feel that they help defuse any conflict that might arise and ease your way into the situation. This could be so, but simultaneously they also diminish the importance of the meeting, and allow the manager to schedule it at a time when there might be interruptions or other difficulties. They open up the possibility of saying, “what about now” even if “now” is not a convenient time. Remember that you are going to be saying to the manager, “there is a major issue here, and solving it will be of great benefit to the school. Not solving it will reflect badly on the school and on you as a manager, because my colleagues in admin are not going to forget how you deal with this issue.”

Here's another approach:

“Could I make an appointment to have a talk with you about a problem?”

This gives extra gravitas to the meeting, but again suggests that the meeting ought to be now – because some problems should be dealt with at once, and good managers often find it is helpful to get straight in and deal with issues. Indeed some boast of this as in, “If there's a problem tell me now – we don't want issues hanging about.”

So we come to an approach like this:

“I've come across a problem in the office. Could I have a meeting with you about it?”

The problem is now defined as being a problem in the office – but what sort of problem is deliberately left vague. The manager might jump to the conclusion that this is a staff issue – an issue of inappropriate behaviour by one member of staff to another? – and again we are back to the fact that the manager (quite reasonably in this case) might feel the need for an immediate meeting and an immediate solution. When the manager finds that this is not quite what she or he thought, the manager might relax, hurry the meeting along, and then potentially the impact of the situation is lost.

Here's a better version:

“I've come across a problem in the office. I think I have a solution to it, but I'll need your help to implement it. Could I have a meeting with you – it shouldn't take more than 15 minutes. When would be convenient?”

It is important to see just how different this type of approach is from the ones we started with. Here we have defined the issue (a problem in the office) but we have also done something else – we have suggested that there is a solution (a relief to the manager – this is not going to be one of those “here is the problem, you sort it out” issues).

But we are not pushing the manager too far. No time is set – that is the prerogative of the manager. You are also ready to accept the “I’m rather busy at the moment” or “I could squeeze you in...” responses – because you can say “no, it is rather important, and I am happy to wait a few days until you have time.”

Cancellation

So now the meeting is set and you can prepare yourself. The only thing that can go wrong is if the manager cancels the meeting. Meetings once made should not be cancelled, even if the top person in the school or the local authority wants to have a meeting. Good organisations recognise that everyone has a diary and a timetable.

Cancellations give you a very clear message – you are not being taken seriously, you are considered very much an underling. If this happens then true, you have made no progress, but at least you know where you stand, and there is something you can do to fight back.

If the meeting is cancelled twice you might wish to fall back onto submitting a written report. When the second cancellation is announced remind the manager that this is now the second time it has happened, and suggest that it might be better if you submit your comments in writing. But if you do, do remember that you still need to follow the approach outlined below in terms of time scales.

Interruptions

Just as holding a meeting without cancellations is not difficult, so holding a meeting without interruptions is not beyond the wit of anyone. If the manager is on call, and likely to be asked to do other things, then that is the wrong time to take the meeting. But if during your meeting the manager is allowing people to tap on the door and enter, if the manager takes phone calls (and has not put the phone on divert or asked whoever handles phone calls not to put them through) then the manager is not taking the matter seriously in the first place.

To allow interruptions to important meetings is ludicrous and unnecessary – it should not happen, because one cannot make vital decisions and listen to important evidence with constant interruptions. (If you are told that “this is a school – interruptions happen,” it is worth reflecting on whether interruptions happen during interviews for new staff or a new headteacher, if interruptions happen when the manager is interviewing a parent or prospective parent, if interruptions happen part way through a public exam such as a GCSE, if interruptions happen during a disciplinary hearing or a governors meeting... If the answer is still yes, then indeed you do have a problem in your school. If the answer is no, then that proves the point – interruptions are not inevitable – it all depends on how seriously the matter is considered by the manager).

On the other hand it takes real nerve to stop a meeting and to ask for it to be rescheduled at a time when there will not be interruptions. But in the end it may be necessary to say, “I think it is going to be difficult for me to express myself clearly with these interruptions – could we reschedule for a time when there will be no interruptions?”

What you say in your conversation

Firstly you need to express the problem. Then you need to express the solution to the problem. And finally you need to express the benefits to the school of accepting these solutions. So in our example you might point out that you are wasting time and harming the image of the school through calling parents whose children are not absent without permission, as the records suggest. Then you say, “but I do think there is a way around this”, and then you express it. And finally you explain that, “there would be real benefits to the school if we could overcome this problem – we’d have an extra two hours a week to deal with the other work that teachers want us to do, and the image of the school among parents won’t be harmed as it is now.”

10. Who can you nominate to negotiate on your behalf?

At this stage you may well be feeling that this negotiation business is not something you can handle. You might feel that a solution could be to take two of you into the meeting – but this rarely works well since clearly only one of you can talk at a time, and it is invariably harder to put forward a well constructed argument if each of you is trying to say a few words.

If you feel unhappy about such a meeting as this it would be better to get one of your colleagues to take the matter on for you. It could be a fellow administrator, the bursar, or indeed a teacher representing your interests. Using a teacher is not so effective an approach, but it can certainly be better than trying to do it yourself if you feel uneasy about the situation.

Just as you must consider whether you are the correct person to be handling the negotiation, you need to consider who you are

negotiating with. Talking to a manager who will simply say, “I see your point – leave it with me, I’ll have a word with....” may not be very effective since you then lose track of the negotiating process. If nothing happens you won’t know whether it was your contact, or the next person down the line who is causing a hold-up. If the answer comes back, “I told the head, but he didn’t see it as a problem,” you have lost your chance of pointing out that the benefits are being lost and the negative side of the situation is about to get worse. The answer, “the head promises to have a word at the next staff meeting” is also unattractive because “a word” is unlikely to break down staff resistance to your ideas.

Timescale

One way of overcoming this sort of problem is to ensure that you end the meeting by implementing a timescale. Assuming that the person to whom you are presenting your ideas agrees to do something with them, end the meeting by asking when you two can meet again to hear the results. Try to get a specific meeting set in the diaries, but if there is resistance to this, at least get a time frame. “I’ll let you know within the next couple of weeks” is better than nothing in this regard.

What you should then do is open your diary and write a note within this time frame – and let the person you are talking with see you doing it. In the case of the rather vague “couple of weeks” you open the diary, count forward the two weeks, and then say “that will take us up to the 25th” as you write a note in the diary. The implication is clear – you expect something in two weeks – and if you don’t get it you can go back and ask for a further meeting after the two weeks are up.

This is a really important element in the process, because without it you will find it much harder to go back after a period of time has elapsed. Without a set timescale for a response, you have no idea how

long to give your opposite number. What's more, it is very hard to request a follow-up meeting if you have heard nothing, because all the balls are in the opposition's court.

If however you have set a date and it is exceeded you can then ask for a further meeting in which the other party can explain what they have done.

11. The negotiating is over, and change is promised. But it doesn't happen

This is not unusual – but it doesn't mean all is lost. The head or deputy head has talked to the teachers and asked them to change their habits. A few do, but after a couple of weeks the old ways re-establish themselves. Of course the teachers are full of excuses – “I know the head asked us to give you more time, but I wonder if this time around you could...”

What now? Most negotiators will consider giving the other party a second chance. You ask for a second meeting, you remind the other party of the benefits to the school that are being lost, and you delicately suggest that, since the gentle approach adopted thus far has not worked, maybe something firmer is now required.

In this case you should now be putting the other party on the defence. He/she has argued that matters can be resolved – but has failed. Of course, at this stage they might say, “Well I tried, but it seems they don't want to help you,” – but this is rare, especially if once again you can focus on the benefits that the school is throwing away.

More common is a promise to mention it again, and once again you need to get a date sorted out, which you very visibly put in your diary.

At this point it is possible to become disillusioned by the whole process – it can take a month or two from the moment that you first ask for a meeting to the date of the promised second round of discussion with the staff – but you have to recognise at the outset that some of these negotiations can take time. Be prepared for this and bide your time.

You may well find that everything is now sorted after the second meeting – after all it is not too difficult for a senior manager to address staff saying, “we have spoken of this before – the benefits to the school are clear – I am not going to come back and talk on this again. I have promised the office that this matter will be resolved, and it will be resolved.”

But if there is still no progress then you have to take matters into your own hands. Returning to the issue of members of staff who cannot fill in attendance records properly, each and every time you find yourself faced with the situation of an error having been made you send a note to the teacher and to the head pointing out politely but firmly that the situation has arisen again. Do this each time and every time – and you will find that eventually the problem will be resolved, not least because, not only is this situation showing up the school in a bad light, it is now undermining the authority of the manager in what is clearly becoming a public dispute.

Fortunately matters don't normally get this far. If you have asked teachers to give you more time to undertake work, but they still refuse, then you can implement your own system in which you have an in-box into which all work from staff is placed. Anyone asking for it earlier than the normal deadline should be told, “I will try, but I think it is highly unlikely.” (This is incidentally far better than simply saying no – it stops the teacher becoming worked up in the face of an outright refusal, but leaves them uncertain. However, unless you

really do have nothing else to do, you should not give in and do it immediately, because in that way you will undermine your whole situation.)

What you will need to remember is that by this stage staff have had two requests made of them by a manager, and they have refused to take note of this request. Once again the manager's position is being undermined. A weekly report listing the members of staff who have persisted in asking for work to be done very quickly should also help.

12. But isn't this all too confrontational?

If you get to these extreme positions yes it is – and that is highly unfortunate. But you need to remember two things. Firstly, we have followed this issue through as if nothing works. In 95% of cases you will find that your tactic of having a carefully arranged meeting with a manager, and an agreed date by which all will be resolved, will bring about the solution you require. Secondly, you do not have to push matters further than you wish – you do not have to keep on taking the matter further and further until you win. You will win if you keep on and on pushing, but you don't have to go to the end.

Indeed there is one other option to be considered in these latter stages of such a negotiation. What you can do is go back to the manager with whom you are negotiating and say, "It hasn't worked, the teachers are not changing their habits, and I don't want to keep taking up your time on this. The way we are working is highly inefficient, but they don't seem to mind. Short of your telling them that work will not be done in less than 3 days no matter what, I don't see what we can do – they are clearly not taking any notice of the situation..."

A few – a very few – managers will say, “You are right – I can’t do anything about them”. But most will rise to the challenge and impose their authority at this point – especially when you emphasise that the teachers are taking no notice and their approach is making the school less and less efficient.

13. Doing it again

Once you have conducted your negotiation, you could go straight back in with the next issue. “You were a great help to us all in the office on the issue of deadlines – I wonder if we can now raise a further issue...” But your negotiating position will be strengthened if you leave the negotiating for a month or so before planning your next campaign. What you can be sure of is that you will enter from a position of strength as a result of having seen through the first discussions. You have a tactic that works, your requests are utterly reasonable, and you are the person looking after the best interests of the school in terms of efficiency.

Concluding comments

At this point students on the Certificate course are invited to choose an issue on which they would like to effect change, and which will make their life easier and improve the efficiency of the school. If you have any ideas on what you would do for such a project, or indeed any other thoughts on this article, we’d like to hear them. Please click [here](#) to go to our blog, where you can add your comments and see what others have written. (link to be put up shortly)

For more information about the course please call 01536 399 007 or email Prospectus@admin.org.uk or visit www.admin.org.uk/certificate.htm for a prospectus.