Account of practice:
Leading by example
Robin Bosher, Director of Primary Schools, The Fairlawn Federation

At the time of the interview Robin was the executive headteacher of the Fairlawn Federation in Lewisham, a federation of three primary schools. Before leading this federation Robin had headship experience in two other schools. His first headship was in Bromley in a primary school of 210 pupils. Fairlawn Primary School was his third headship, with 510 pupils aged 3–11 years and 22 teachers. The Fairlawn Federation serves 1,300 children.

Robin said: “I absolutely believe in leading by example. It is the quickest way to change practice. I have seen that in the schools where I have been the headteacher and in the schools in the federation.”

He talked about how in schools experiencing difficulty:

You usually find some alienation between the teachers and the children and the teachers become negative. The quickest way to improve this situation is for the headteacher to model professional behaviour, to show how you expect teachers to behave with children. Then you can see who is following you and you can challenge and support those who are not.

He believed headteachers have to be examples to the whole school community:
- the adults in the school
- the children
- the wider community, especially the children’s parents

Leading by example is particularly effective and important to:
- improve pupil behaviour
- improve professional behaviour
- promote the importance of teaching and learning
- demonstrate what high standards are

As a head Robin focused on creating a culture of continuous learning: “We all need to be learners because none of us ever knows everything.” It is important to be honest about your strengths and weaknesses and to be reflective. At the same time Robin acknowledged that “there is a line of acceptability and if, after a time, you do not see improvement in colleagues’ practice then you have to have a conversation about that with them”. He called these ‘brave conversations’ because leaders should be frank and direct in asking a colleague to consider whether they could develop their practice to the agreed standard, or whether the classroom was the right place for them.

In Robin’s experience, new headteachers have to put values first:

You have been appointed because of your values, because of what you said at interview about what you want for the children in your school. For me it comes down to: how we treat one another; mutual respect; fairness; equality of opportunity – especially equal access to what the school offers and to the curriculum; the celebration of success because celebration is more important than negativity; and our values around teaching and classroom practices.

Robin believes a new head’s first term is all about values and needing to be able to ‘walk the talk’. He acknowledged that this means new heads have to know and be confident in what their values are and how they put them into action. New heads should share their values with the senior leadership team (SLT) and the staff, explaining why they are important and, crucially, how the values apply in classrooms.
Leading by example is a challenge. The biggest challenge is behaving consistently: “You have to get it right all the time, every time.” Robin said you cannot be an actor who turns it on and off, you have to be true to your values all the time, so for example: “You cannot model professional behaviour in classrooms and corridors and then be sarcastically critical of, say, children in the staffroom. That is confusing to the staff.”

Asked about how other leaders might contribute he said that you have to have others around you to walk the talk. Developing this idea he added that when you become a head you have to do some “special things with the SLT”:

First, you have to work with them on values. You need the SLT to share the same core values. You can have different styles of leadership, but the same basic values. So I’d advise having an ‘away day’ with the SLT where the new head spells out what her or his values are. Then together you work out what these will look like in action. Do this first with the SLT and then with the staff. You need to do it in that order because you’ll want the SLT to lead the staff when you do essentially the same exercise with them.

Here Robin emphasises the need for clarity about what we believe in, and why, and to give examples of these beliefs and values put into practice. Clarity is also needed in determining the roles and responsibilities of senior and middle leaders and how they deliver their responsibilities. He gave the example of a deputy who had responsibility for promoting parent partnerships, and had to be:

at the school gate at 8.40am and 3.25pm for 20 minutes each time and [to engage] with 20 parents on each occasion, talking about how their children were getting on and how they were progressing. It also involved the deputy ‘picking up’ those parents who were bringing their children late to school and explaining to them what it meant for their child to be late to their lessons.

Robin ensured that colleagues lived up to their responsibilities by monitoring and keeping a watchful eye on practice, “being constantly around the school, observing what was going on”. He invited feedback, so a parent who had been in discussion with a colleague might be asked: “How did that conversation go?” He also used formal evaluations of events and annual questionnaires to solicit information.

Asked about subject and key stage leaders and whether he expected them to lead by example, Robin replied unequivocally: “Yes, I absolutely do!” He knew they all needed what he called ‘bespoke’ training and provided it three or four times a year, covering such matters as gathering evidence, action planning and budgets. He recognised that he was a pragmatist: “As a new head you have to deal with what you have got, so bespoke training is essential.” However, he also made it plain: “If I am appointing a new subject leader I only appoint those who are great at delivering the best teaching because fundamentally being a subject leader means modelling the delivery of that subject.”

And to confirm this point Robin spoke of how when he had responsibility to improve poor schools he drew on the expertise of teachers to lead the improvement of practice:

In schools where teaching is not as good as it should be I put my best teachers in to lead. I have done this twice because these teachers were able to model what great teaching and learning looked like. I can provide the strategic leadership, but the best teachers lead the teaching. The leadership of teaching, for example, includes being able to show colleagues what a great piece of writing in Year 3 looks like.

Leading by example, modelling excellence and the highest professional standards is undoubtedly central to Robin’s success as a headteacher and to the quality of the schools he led.