

Dump, delay, delegate or do?

NICKII MESSER talks to four school business leaders about how they're taking control of the new overwhelming workload

'What have we learned from Covid-19?' (*Insight* Autumn 2020) was a compilation of accounts from exceptional school business leader (SBL) colleagues. It described what they have learned about themselves and their professional practice in response to the many new challenges and restrictions that the pandemic and lockdown brought to the role.

As we struggle through another national lockdown, and even more onerous pressures and demands, I revisited four colleagues to explore how they are coping and how they continue to consolidate their improved learning and practice.

Like so many other front-line workers faced with the seemingly impossible, they have had to dig ever deeper, finding essential reserves of determination, resilience and grit. Managing their workload and time has never been more important.

I asked our four SBLs to focus on how they have coped with the expansive divide between what they believe they can physically do and the demands of an ever-growing to-do list, using the 4Ds Time Management technique of DO, DELAY, DELEGATE, or DUMP. Time is your most precious resource, so where do you most need to spend it? When presented with a task, do you just get on and do it, put it off until later, give it to someone else to do, or dump it altogether?

Stephen Barrett, Conny Brandt, Cheryl Campbell and Sue Prickett took one of the 4Ds each, and share with us how they narrowed the gap between capacity and necessity. My grateful thanks to each of them for so generously allowing me to add myself to their to-do lists, and never once threatening to dump (or delegate or delay) me!



Stephen Barrett
School Business Leader, Kingsmead School and Sixth Form

Dump

Deciding what not to do is as important as deciding what to do (Jessica Jackley).

One thing I decidedly moved away from due to Covid-19 and the various states of lockdown – with some enthusiasm – is paper. Pretty much everything my admin team and I do is now entirely paperless.

It may seem obvious or small fry in the grand scheme of

things, but it has freed up masses of time.

Gone are the days of having to read/interpret staff handwriting on order forms or parents' on admission forms, having to tick off as forms come in, having mountains of paper building on our desks, filing things in the right folder, making copies for other people, scanning stuff as it comes in or chasing people down corridors to get their signatures on bits of paper. Now everything is done via an online form – admissions forms, overtime claims, HR processes (starters, returners and leavers), order forms, payments runs, payroll and just about everything else. It means we no longer have to worry about things going missing and removes reliance on bits of paper getting from one person to another. You simply share a link.

The result is all previous hassle has gone and loads of hidden time has been freed up, meaning we've been able to respond to the government's last-minute admin hand grenades with much greater ease than we would have otherwise.

Once the fog of Covid-19 lifts I will have a more efficient and effective admin team and processes than ever before, with lots more time on their hands to tackle those other jobs you never quite find time to do.



Conny Brandt
(@Peterhouse SBM) Autism Initiatives, Peterhouse School

Delay

The key is not to prioritise what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities (Stephen Covey).

One of the main impacts of Covid has been the number of additional tasks required, often at short notice, such as putting Covid safety measures in place, closing down bubbles etc, meaning other things have had to wait.

Now, for every task, I ask: what will happen if I don't do this? Will someone be put at risk? Will someone not get paid? Will we fail to meet legal requirements? If the answer is No, the task can usually be delayed.

The next question is how far can I delay it? Will it reach a point where delay has a greater impact than just doing it?

One example was appraisals. I normally carry out staff appraisals during the early part of autumn term. This year, with a number of bubble closures, appraisals were delayed until staffing had settled. I still made sure these meetings took place later in the term as they are an important staff support mechanism. Delaying too long would imply we view appraisals as less important.

Other tasks can be delayed further. For example, our cycle of policy reviews, ensuring all our documentation remains up to date. Key policies such as safeguarding are essential, but other school-specific policies and procedures were put on the back burner to be picked up at a later stage.

The main risk with delaying tasks is that it can build a backlog that feels overwhelming to address. However sometimes you delay a task and eventually realise that it didn't actually matter that it never got done!



Sue Prickett
Chief Finance and Operations Officer, SENDAT

Delegate

An empowered organisation is one in which individuals have the knowledge, skill, desire and opportunity to personally succeed

in a way that leads to collective and organisational success (Stephen Covey).

Delegation doesn't come easily to SBLs: we like being in the thick of things. However, when your workload is suddenly doubled by operational requirements of a global pandemic, delegation needs to happen quickly, decisively and effectively.

Start by providing the information and framework teams need to do their job. Keep communication lines open and clear and don't let your delegate feel they've been abandoned.

As the CFOO, I've increased my own capacity by better utilising my teams. I'm lucky to work with skilled professionals and the ability to rely on their skills helped me enormously this year. Focus on core strengths and build on them. Empower team members by providing your expectations and any statutory guidelines. Let them own projects in a way they know will work for their settings.

All operations staff quietly stepped up this year, keeping children fed and our schools safe and operational. Never delegate a job you aren't willing to do yourself – when needed, I cleaned alongside my premises team. My admin staff supported me exceptionally with the FSM schemes, being best placed to deal with local issues and difficulties while I logged on at all hours.

A great benefit of delegation is upskilling. My immensely supportive finance manager gave me the best Christmas card ever this year. I always feel conscious of that blurred line between my responsibilities and using her skills to support my role, but

'Do your team a favour, increase your capacity and believe in them enough to delegate'

she wrote: 'Thank you for your belief in my abilities, it's been amazing,' going on to explain the buzz she'd experienced by being included in various projects. I quietly blinked away the festive glitter that briefly caught in my eye! Do your team a favour, increase your capacity and believe in them enough to delegate. They're worth it.



Cheryl Campbell
CEO & Founder of Association of BAME Business Leaders in Education (ABBLed)

Do

It always seems impossible until it's done (Nelson Mandela).

In January 2020 the Institute of School Business Leadership (ISBL) published results of its recent workforce survey. I read the report with interest and was drawn to the statistic that less than 2% of the survey respondents were from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic background. This played on my mind over the next few months. I asked questions about the survey and learned the same was representative of SBLs across the UK.

As a school governor of many years, an important question we pose to headteachers when presented with reports is 'so what?' After the publication of the survey results I waited for the 'so what', ready to put myself forward for any working group. But it never materialised. As we entered lockdown I thought 'I need to do something myself to change this statistic' and from this, in May 2020, the Association of BAME Business Leaders in Education (ABBLed) was born.

I was overwhelmed with the support from existing SBLs, of all ethnicities, who stepped forward to show encouragement when we formally launched in July 2020. Even more pleasing was the financial support from businesses, allowing ABBLed to establish a bursary fund to support both aspiring and current SBLs to access CPD.

In the space of a few months, I have used ABBLed as a platform to raise the profile of the profession and help existing SBLs ask questions of themselves about how they can help make our profession a more diverse one. We owe it to the communities we serve, and I only hope ABBLed continues to go from strength to strength. ■