Painful transitions

10 lessons in the change from outdoor provider to independent school

Releasing Potential began in Portsmouth in 2001, providing outdoor education to young people who had become disengaged from mainstream school.

In 2016, our work began to dwindle as a result of changes to the way that education could be delivered. To our dismay, we realised we could no longer continue without a Department-for-Education number. The only way to get this, it transpired, was to become a school.

The prospect was frightening: how would our committed team of Instructors and Tutors cope with demands of teaching? How could we deliver a coherent curriculum when anything resembling school would alienate our students? What about OFSTED?! We knew, instinctively and anecdotally, that our alternative model of delivery—rooted in outdoor education and practical, vocational skills—worked for the sorts of children who most needed our support. For those unable to cope with the restrictive environment of the traditional classroom, or those whose behaviour meant that sitting for GCSE exams seemed unlikely, the outdoors offered us a powerful vehicle to bring about real change. But how, we wondered, could this change be quantified, measured, explained to parents and funders, or justified to the Department for Education?

Notwithstanding our many reservations, in May this year we had our first three-day OFSTED inspection as Releasing Potential School. Having never been tested against national norms, our unusual approach passed muster and we received a "good" rating overall with many "outstanding" features. While complexly exhausting and a huge test of our systems and people, the process was also affirming; it confirmed the importance of the outdoors as a key part of our work. The report explained:

> *Pupils' personal and social development accelerates at this school because they are comfortable in their surroundings and confident to share their aspirations and worries. Pupils can see a way through life that they may not have seen before* (OFSTED, 2018).

Despite the challenges, the process of becoming a school has taught us a number of lessons, all of which should help pave the way for other providers; we hope that from our (many) mistakes and lessons learned, we can help light the way for others to follow.

Lesson 1

Culture and ethos are more important than you think

If you want to make a big change, your organisational culture has to be geared towards ensuring your best people buy into the journey. In his 2013 book on the New Zealand national rugby team, Legacy, James Kerr describes the practice of "sweeping the sheds"[1]. An important lesson in the culture of humility espoused by the team's management, the practice of ensuring senior players and managers clean up after themselves, no matter how successful or important they become, is a key lesson we also had to learn. Without setting the ground rules, communicating expectations, and living by them—and without giving people something to buy into and be part of—you won't take your team with you on the journey.

Lesson 2

Everyone has an opinion, and they are ALL relevant

Just as no one player in a team is more integral than another, all opinions need to be considered, even when they are hard to hear. Knowing all the perspectives can sometimes be uncomfortable for a senior team, but failing to get people on board at the start of a big transition because you've not thought about the unexpected consequences of decisions can be fatal. Fostering an atmosphere where people are afraid to challenge you—in which the views you hear only reflect your own assumptions—might be easier, but it is a false economy. The trick is to give equal weight to all opinions but understand who you are and who you aren't as an organisation, and act accordingly with a full understanding of the potential consequences.

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Photos: from the author

Lesson 3

Understand who you are and who you aren't

At the beginning of the transition process we had to consider who we were and who we were not. We looked at a range of models, but none of them fit with what we were doing. The National Curriculum was too prescriptive, but alternative curricula focussed either too much on social-emotional wellbeing or too much on academic attainment. Eventually, we created our own curriculum which combined these two elements, rooted in the five areas that we valued and that we knew worked for our students: Outdoor Education, Personal-Social-Health-Education, Food Studies, English and Maths. It was a huge risk (we couldn't find anyone that had done it successfully before) but it meant we could be clear (and also very proud) of what we did and why. When our inspector saw that we had looked at other schools' OFSTED reports in preparation for his visit, he was confused. He told us we were unique, and should not compare ourselves to anyone else – this was hugely gratifying and meant the risk we took had paid off.

Lesson 4

Take managed risks and admit when you get it completely wrong

We've made mistakes and we've learned a lot from them. For example, we tried funding the rental of a small 'shop' through which our students could sell products made in school. It was a noble idea, to give sixth form students a work experience placement that would normally be closed to them because of their additional needs. It failed, fairly spectacularly. Students struggled to access the shop, the products didn't sell, and a lot of senior management time was sucked into the logistics and set up of the project when it was desperately needed elsewhere. Despite this, the project unlocked something important for one student, so we can't consider it a complete failure, despite the cost. We've learned from our experience and won't make the same mistake again – we've had to acknowledge our limitations with good grace, and try not to let it impact whether we take a risk on the next idea.

Lesson 5

Never burn your bridges

We've worked with a lot of other organisations and found that differences in cultures can make collaborations tricky, but not impossible. We've been let down, misled, taken advantage of and underestimated, but from these experiences we've learned that relationships, no matter how fraught at times, should always be protected where possible. Being "nice" may sound a bit naïve, but the best way to get the most out of relationships is to make sure there is always a way back from conflict. We've had to get very good at the "forgive and remember" approach; as a result, we've enjoyed honest (if not always straightforward) partnerships that have been vital to our growth.

Lesson 6

Instructors can't be forced to become Teachers

One of the biggest challenges has been recruiting, training and getting the most out of our team. Historically, our staff have always been skilled outdoor practitioners, but with the pressure to deliver a curriculum, we had to re-assess the extent to which we could expect Instructors to deliver education. We learned early on that Instructors were, on the whole, resistant to the bureaucracy required by teaching – it is why, for many, they were doing the job they were doing in the first place. We created some anxiety amongst valued staff by adding more to their workload, and we got it wrong a fair bit before we got it right. Eventually, we decided to focus on finding ways to limit admin and ensure that outdoor-qualified staff were free to concentrate on delivery. We also took the decision to invest in recruiting a small number of experienced teaching staff and upskill them in outdoor practice. We delivered basic functional skills (Maths and English) training to our Instructors to boost confidence and somehow we began to get Teachers and Instructors to meet in the middle. It has been a challenge to deploy staff appropriately, but with some good logistical work we mostly get it right now.

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.....you should read about 'Sustainable Education' on page X of the Conference supplement.

Releasing Potential's upcoming conference brings together a ranges of voices to explore transitions in, to and from education and social care settings. It takes place on 10th July 2019 in Hampshire. Early bird tickets available via: www.releasingpotential.com/institute/conference-2019/

Lesson 7

Knowing and being honest about your priorities will help you recruit and retain staff

Instructors who are brilliant at delivering activities will not always be suited to working with challenging young people – understanding and accepting this has really helped. In the outdoor sector, being the best at what you do is important. For our students, however, building a relationship with a trusted adult is of far greater value than climbing, canoeing or navigating. Being able to cope with your plans being completely derailed by a child or young person, and being able to see their behaviour as a sign of struggle rather than an unwanted distraction from your session, is key. In recruiting staff to work in the school, we've had to turn down amazing people when we knew they would struggle to build rapport and prioritise the needs of our children over the activity being delivered. This has been hard, but vital to ensuring our team is comprised of the right people who will commit to our vision.

Lesson 8

Be prepared to lose good people and be OK with it

Change is hard. We lost good people along the way when we began the transition to becoming a school – they had not signed up for working in that sort of environment. Some of those we lost, we fought hard to keep. Apart from being emotionally exhausting and time consuming, the process was messy and we made a lot of mistakes. Ultimately, we got lost in trying to please everyone; we needed to understand that staff turnover is natural and healthy when it can be anticipated/ planned for, and losing people, while sad, was both inevitable and unpreventable in most cases. Accepting that not everyone will cope with change is part of the journey. Sometimes the star player has to be benched in order to shake things up, and the painful fallout from these decisions should be part of your planning process.

Lesson 9

Don't underestimate the impact of change on the service user

We planned for the impact of change on our team, on our finances, and on our culture. We did not, however, plan for the impact of our transition on the children and young people who rely on us. We assumed that changes to our ways of working would largely only impact staff, and that, as professionals, we would absorb these changes and continue unimpeded in our delivery. We failed to realise, until it was too late, how our own anxieties would affect already-anxious students, and how strong relationships with students could backfire in this scenario. A perfect example of this is when our OFSTED inspection came. We got the news the afternoon before and set about preparing for the visit. The next day, almost all of our students failed to show – the inspector was perplexed, but we knew that our own worries (would we pass or fail? Could we be a school? What about the curriculum?) had stopped our students from engaging with us. Change had caught up with all of us, as a community, in ways we had not anticipated.

Lesson 10

Learn to let go

One of our core values is the notion of "banking compassion". The idea is that you continue to care for children and young people, to invest your energies in them, even when they aren't ready to accept or value it. You bank your compassion in the hope that one day you'll see a return, while understanding that the return may never come, or may come far in the future. We live by this approach. It means texting that student who never comes in, telling them you'll be ready to meet at the climbing centre at 10am, even when you know your time will be wasted. It requires a lot of resilience from staff but it is essential. The problem is, we also need to let go sometimes. We need to work within the remit of what we can deliver, and accept that we may not be the best place for some students. Letting go is hard, but there comes a point when we must accept the limitations of what we can achieve. We are privileged because that point is usually pretty far off, but when it comes, we have to be ready for it. ■

References

(1) Keer, James (2013). Legacy: what the All Blacks can teach us about the business of life. Constable and Robinson, UK.