

Speech

Sir Michael Wilshaw's speech to the TES Leadership conference

From: [Ofsted](#) and [Sir Michael Wilshaw](#)
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Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw, spoke at the TES Liberating Leaders conference held at Bedales School, Hampshire.



Thank you for inviting me here to this beautiful school, Bedales. I believe the title of your conference is Liberating Leaders: A Leadership Conference with a Difference.

And today I want to make the case for difference, for maverick teachers and school leaders. Why? Because we desperately need more mavericks in the classroom and in the headteacher's office.

A pretty ordinary education system – unfortunately we still have one – needs people who are flamboyant, colourful and yes, downright strange. In other words, we need extraordinary people. We need our awkward squad. The independent sector

has always had them – our state system needs more of them.

It may seem peculiar to argue for more mavericks in education. Schools, after all, are ordered, structured places with clear hierarchies – the teacher and the taught, those who have authority and those who look up to it. Yet in my estimation the best heads and teachers are often mavericks. And when I say ‘maverick’ I mean ‘odd’. I should know; I’m pretty odd myself.

But I wasn’t born odd. I really had to work at it. I had to learn pretty quickly as a young teacher, that teaching, like it or not, was inevitably bound up with personality and character. Imparting knowledge is never going to be enough, especially when those at the receiving end are disinclined to receive it.

After experiencing my first week of teaching, I learnt from the experience and resolved to be a teacher and person who could never again be taken at face value. I had to be a chameleon, changing my personality according to the circumstances. It wasn’t a question of giving students what they wanted; it was a question of reading them sufficiently well to give them what they needed. A good teacher, I came to realise, understood how children thought and how their perceptions of the teacher governed how well they learnt.

Forty years later I saw exactly the same lesson on ‘The Merchant of Venice’ in the hands of a great teacher, Rebecca, who was universally recognised by other staff as a bit bonkers...

And, as an apprentice headteacher I learnt from some of the best maverick leaders.

Take Cecil Pocock, the headteacher of the school I attended. He used to arrive in class on a bicycle, gown flowing, moustache bristling. Dismounted he had to say only one word – “Pax” – and any hubbub in the class immediately ceased. There followed some of the best history lessons I have ever heard.

Take Bridie Burns, headteacher of the first school I taught at in Bermondsey. She was a 4-foot dynamo who moved around the school as if on wheels. Everyone was terrified of her, although

she had the warmest of hearts for the poor and the disadvantaged in East London. A raised eyebrow and a curt admonition were enough to silence the school thug or a tyro teacher like me who had the temerity to wear a short-sleeved shirt. You knew where she was in the school because a hush, a cloud of complete calm descended on her immediate vicinity.

And then there was Paul Docherty, who taught me so much about headship. Paul elevated the art of the unexpected into an Oscar-winning performance. Informed that children were misbehaving on the local buses, he donned a disguise, lurked at the back and, when trouble erupted, leapt out to confront the astonished culprits. Trouble on the buses soon became a thing of the past, because students were never entirely sure if the passenger obscured by a hat or newspaper was demonic Docherty or not.

All 3 of these teachers were very different people. But they were all as tough as hell. They all exuded authority and they all had a fierce moral conviction that all children, especially the poorest, deserved the best education — and woe betide anyone who got between them and that mission.

They were also something else: they were accomplished actors. They weren't odd for the sake of being odd. Out of school they were very normal, ordinary people. But in school it was different. They put on an act. They acted the maverick.

A hint of menace helped – and so did an outsize personality. Truly great teachers like Cecil Pocock, Bridie Burns and Paul Docherty knew this. They read their students and created personae accordingly. They became towering characters who made incredible impressions in the class, in the corridors and, yes, on the buses.

They weren't mavericks because they wanted to be different. They were mavericks because they wanted to make a difference. It was calculated oddity, peculiarity with a purpose. To reach these children they had to get 'in character'. And although their characters varied they had some traits in common.

All commanded instant authority; nobody doubted who was in charge. All could be unnerving, though they managed to do the unexpected in a reassuringly familiar way. All were fair; there was nothing whimsical, cruel or capricious about their surprises. And all exuded a sense of optimism, which wasn't necessarily sunny but left you in no doubt that defeat and disappointment were not on the menu. They were, if you like, part Rocky, part Henry V and part Mrs Doubtfire.

Of course, at some level, everyone knew it was an act. I'm pretty sure that at home Cecil Pockock did not ride his bike into dinner or attempt to quell any domestic disturbances by uttering the word "Pax". I can imagine what the result would have been if he had. Acting was reserved for the classroom.

This, in no way, makes it bogus. School is theatre – everyone has a part to play – students as much as teachers. Children often put on a mask: the class clown, the school geek, the attention-seeker. They instinctively understand that teachers play a role, too. But as in the theatre, roles only work if people believe they are credible.

The inauthentic performer

The second invaluable lesson I learnt from my mavericks was this: a persona is essential but it will only work if it is believable. A teacher's classroom act must connect in some way with who they really are. It's no use, for instance, acting the authority figure if you can't say boo to a goose, or if you are essentially anarchic.

Children will sniff out the fake at 5 paces. To act in the classroom is to exaggerate some traits you actually possess and suppress others for the purpose of engaging children. It is not about fraud or fakery. It is about projection and imaginative editing. Your act must be an extension of yourself not a contradiction of it.

To take a fantastical example – it's pointless pretending you're Superman if children can't even glimpse a Clark Kent through your Frank Spencer. Actors are typecast for a reason. And there

is a reason why John Wayne wasn't known for his Hamlet.

Children, the sternest of critics, are particularly unforgiving. They know so much is at stake – their futures are at stake. So they won't hesitate to dismiss as a fraud any teacher who tries to play a part for which they are not suited.

Students know that a teacher with only a passing acquaintance with the subject won't get them through the exam. They suspect that a diffident or hesitant head won't keep them safe and secure. The wise teacher and head adopts a persona that is tethered in some way to his or her personality – not unlike a good actor.

The same can be said of teaching styles. A lot of hot air has been generated in recent years about the correct way to teach. When I was coming up through the ranks, progressive pedagogy was all the rage. Latterly, the traditionalists have been in the ascendency. When it comes to content, I'm a traditionalist. But I have always been and remain an agnostic when it comes to teaching styles.

What is right is what works for the teacher and the class. Two of the best teachers I ever employed had widely different teaching styles. One was a 'sage on the stage' who delivered lessons soberly, but engagingly and with great authority. The other bounded from desk to desk like some female Robin Williams, declaiming as she leapt. The results from both were outstanding.

Why should I have attempted to force them to conform to teaching in a particular way? As a head, it was far better that I left them to stick to what they were, rather than tried to make them something they were not.

Ofsted is not interested in prescribing a particular teaching style. If we were ever guilty of that – then I apologise now.

The self-obsessed performer

Worse than delusion, for me, is outright indulgence. Students

must not only believe in you as a teacher and leader but also that you are performing on their behalf for the right reasons. To play the maverick for personal reasons rather than professional ones, or to be unorthodox just for the sake of it won't work.

Maverick teachers and heads aren't cool or 'down with the kids'. They aren't non-conformist because it amuses their Twitter followers or does wonders for their public profile. They don't get excited by the thousands of devotees they have on social media if their students can't pass their GCSEs. They tend to the audience that matters – not the one that strokes their egos.

The mavericks that had such a big influence on my education and career weren't indulgent or self-obsessed. They cannily adapted a persona to suit a particular student or a school need, not because they wanted to express an inner yearning that demanded a public audience.

If a head insists on wackiness for the hell of it, for instance, and without the proper culture and structures in place, the result will be chaos. If a head demands a course of action not because it is in the best interests of the children but because he or she is eager to please the council, the union, the government, and, yes, even Ofsted, then they are not doing their job.

Maverick teachers or heads deploy the unconventional in the service of their students. They don't adopt it for their own ambition or to indulge their own weaknesses. They use it to ignite curiosity, to excite the indifferent, to inspire the neglected, to confound vested interests and to keep the vulnerable safe.

Never make the mistake that children won't see through you. If you haven't got their best interests first and foremost in your mind as a head, it will be as apparent to them as a receding hairline or visible roots. If you're not there principally for them, they will know it.

The adaptable performer

The final lesson my trio of mavericks taught me was adaptability.

At the start of my tenure as HMCI, I think I may have recommended Clint Eastwood as a role model that heads should follow. I recalled that scene in Pale Rider when the baddies are shooting up the town, the mists dissipate and Clint is there, the lone warrior fighting for righteousness.

I also remember that the notion wasn't universally welcomed. But I stand by Clint. If a head finds him or herself in the educational badlands, facing impossible odds and a hesitant posse – then Clint is what is needed. And for those of you who prefer Oklahoma to True Grit or Pale Rider when it comes to westerns, can I remind you that the song's title is Annie Get Your Gun, not Annie Get in the Conciliation Service.

Tough situations call for a tough act. But what I neglected to say at the time was that Clint is not suitable for every eventuality. What my mavericks taught me was that great teachers and heads weigh up their students and schools very quickly and adapt their teaching and leadership style to suit.

Clint can be very useful in a special measures school, for instance, where you know that 'steady as she goes' won't cut it. Where what is needed is decisive, highly visible and perhaps unconventional action. But he is less appropriate in a coasting school, where what is required is a bit of subterfuge and cajoling. In that situation what's needed is a Machiavelli or a Frank Underwood, minus the body count of course.

A maverick leader adapts. They refine their act. They appreciate, for instance, that what may work with unresponsive children won't cut the mustard with implacable staff. The unconventional can be very effective. But even Clint, when the occasion demanded, swapped a rifle for a guitar.

Conclusion

Now you may be thinking, and what of Chief Inspectors? Has being a maverick served me well?

Well I can tell you now that it hasn't made me popular. What is

interesting is that the catcalls have come from different parts of the audience as time has gone on.

Initially, I was a government stooge and patsy. I wasn't Wilshaw but Sure Will, eager to do ministers' bidding. I haven't heard that one for a while, mind.

But however I'm perceived, my mission as far as I'm concerned has remained the same. I am still a maverick with a purpose. As important as the reorganisation of Ofsted was, being Chief Inspector was not and has never been a purely bureaucratic position. We are charged with holding schools to account and improving the lives of our youngest citizens, especially the poorest. And to do that, to get things done, it is sometimes necessary to challenge, to take a risk, to be awkward – to be a maverick.

Do we need more mavericks in education? Yes we do – all the way to the top.

Thank you.

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Ofsted

Sir Michael Wilshaw

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