



Report to the Headteacher

An interview with Jon Chaloner, Headteacher of Glyn Technology School, Epsom

When Jon Chaloner took up the headship of Glyn Technology School, Epsom in September 2006, it was a school that had lost its sparkle and was coasting. Around 65% of students were getting 5 good GCSEs or more and the school had slipped from an Ofsted rating of 'very good' to 'satisfactory'. In fact it was threatened with a 'Notice to Improve' after the first day of the March 2006 inspection.

An unsatisfactory report

I'm a Glyn old boy so I must confess to having a soft spot for the place. It was founded in 1923 as Glyn Grammar School for Boys and became fully comprehensive in 1985 when the last grammar school cohort left. It has almost doubled in size since I was a student there in the 70s.



I caught up with Jon at a reunion dinner and was immediately taken with his energy, friendliness, and his humility. His senior prefects were there and while clearly very respectful, they seemed very comfortable around him.

Jon spent the first ten years of his teaching career at a boys' school in Kingston upon Thames. He reached assistant head teacher level before moving to a secondary school in Bracknell as Deputy Head. He was promoted to head teacher two years later.

Jon made a point of meeting with a wide range of staff at all levels and roles before he started to understand the context of the school. The main thing that stood out was not any lack of potential amongst the staff but a need for leadership and direction.

"There didn't seem to be a sense of direction and they wanted vision," he told me. "They wanted to know where the school was going; what it was trying to achieve."

Once in the role, he began to dig a little deeper and found, as he puts it, 'the value added wasn't there'. He compared Glyn with a similar school, Howard of Effingham. Although they had received the same 'very good' grade in 2000, Howard's rating was 'outstanding' by 2006.

He quickly realised he would need help to restore the value element and make sure students fulfilled their potential. Jon persuaded the supportive governing body that the school needed a second Deputy Head teacher to focus on student progress. He felt this was an element of leadership that was lacking if the school was to add value to the students' experience.

Full marks

During the two years between 2006 and 2008 the top team personnel changed completely so that there was a balanced blend of Glyn experience and new blood.

"Learning and achievement, rather than behaviour management, is now at the heart of what the school is about," explained Jon. "We approach that challenge with clarity and leadership, and by being open and honest with each other."

As the results show it's an approach that is clearly working. In 2008, 85% of students achieved five GCSEs or more and the results for this year are even better at 86%. The contextualised value added score (CVA) used by the government and Ofsted has crept over the mythical 1000 mark. A figure around 1000 means that students are gaining what should be expected compared with what they gained before starting secondary school. A figure over 1000 shows added value.

Since a new inspection regime was introduced in 2005, Glyn is only the third UK secondary school to have gone from satisfactory to outstanding within one inspection. The Ofsted report stated, "The school is a very different place to the school of a few years ago. It's more dynamic and challenging. The new head has improved the school dramatically."

There have been huge improvements in the staff too: 60% have improved from satisfactory to outstanding. It is rare for a school to make such significant progress with the same staff.

What, I wondered, did Jon do to bring about such a significant shift in the school's results and in its staff?

Making leaders out of managers

He'd taken over from a headmaster who had been in the role for many years and Jon was concerned the senior team may regard him as a young upstart who thought he knew it all. He knew he had to win them over as he would not be able to make progress alone.

"Their role was to help lead the school, not just manage it day-to-day to keep it ticking over," he explained. "I wanted to get the senior team members thinking beyond the present to what the school could be in three or five years time. I made it very clear I expected to get Glyn to be outstanding in two inspections time. I made sure everyone knew what we were working towards."

Jon's first year took in the school's 80th anniversary year. He saw this as a good hook on which to hang his ideas for change. The result was Glyn 80. He organised interested staff into 20 work groups to tackle 20 things that needed to change. These included things like the sixth form and behaviour policy in the school.

"In my last job I'd worked around underperforming colleagues instead of tackling the problem," he admitted. "I was determined not to do that this time.

"Now I ensure staff perform their roles in the way I want them to. If they can't then they have to take on another role, or leave. Seeing this in action sent out a massive signal to all staff. They saw that I was prepared to tackle staff underperformance head on."

By the end of his first term, he had a good core senior management team. However he had more managers than leaders.

"Learning and achievement were the things we needed to focus on but sometimes it appeared that people were more concerned with who was going to drive the minibus," he told me with a wry smile. "I knew I had to bring in people with good leadership skills to complement the existing team."

However, just as Jon was beginning to make progress his plans took an unexpected and unwelcome turn. He suffered an illness that kept him off work for six weeks. In fact, the school thought he might not return. However, his enforced break gave him time to sit back and reflect. He found that he was thinking about lots of new ideas and plans.

Shaking up the old regime

I'm always fascinated to learn from the people I interview how they go about building their top team. I wondered if the academic world would be any different to the corporate life as I posed these questions to Jon.

Jon had inherited a team of senior people that were comfortable in their roles. They had all been doing the same thing, year in, year out with a fair degree of success. Jon, however, was concerned that they might not be able to transfer to other areas of responsibility. He described an exercise he used to gauge how each of the leadership team viewed their responsibilities. He cut up all their job descriptions and put the tasks on the table. He then asked them to pick up the bits they believed were theirs.

"Some tasks were left on the table," he explained. "It was clear some colleagues didn't realise the totality or depth of their job description. Therefore there wasn't complete ownership."

Jon had to work out how to develop the team from this point. Like the rest of the staff, the team needed leadership and direction.

He believes part of his role is to develop head teachers of the future and firmly believes that all-round experience is necessary. The days of curriculum or pastoral experience are over – senior leaders must be able to lead on both, sometimes simultaneously. To this end, everyone on the team has had their job descriptions adjusted.

"It reinvigorates and renews the passions. It creates something new for them; a spark that will help them develop rather than carry on doing what they have been doing for years," he said.

"My head of sixth form had been doing that job for years. His role change refreshed him and he is a completely different animal."

"In different ways my previous heads had given me freedom to create, innovate and make mistakes. I wanted to give that to my staff," he said.

When I asked him what he looked for in a leader, his response was swift and positive:

"Personal values: personal conviction. I also look for a bit of spark and vision. But the spark doesn't have to be the same as my spark. I do expect everyone to work at my pace and capacity though," he admitted.

"When we are appointing a deputy, I look at how they can support me as head. We need people who will buy into what it is I'm trying to lead here. We look for people who will support me in making the school outstanding; who understand that student learning is at the heart of everything we do".

Creating an inclusive environment

When Jon arrived at Glyn an historical divide existed between teaching and non-teaching staff. For instance, teachers were allowed to address the head by his first name but support staff were not. Staff meetings were for teachers only.

Jon tackled both these issues within his first two weeks as head. All staff address him as Jon and support staff as well as teachers now attend staff and training meetings. His inclusive approach also includes an annual staff training conference. Two of the training days include staff working together in groups. There are workshops and good guest speakers are brought in to give different insights into how schools operate. The result is a win-win situation. Staff feel valued and the students benefit from constant teacher development.

Re-establishing whole school assemblies is another of Jon's innovations. There are four each year at which the 1600 students get together along with 160 staff to celebrate the achievements of students, teachers, and support staff.

Living the values

Creating a new mission statement was an excellent opportunity to get everyone involved. "Students, staff, parents and governors put a lot into it," Jon remembered. "The leadership team made the final decisions but the whole school community got it to where we are now.

"We have tried to make it a living and breathing statement of what we are about. It is a statement of what we aspire to be each day. The old one was 20 years old. It was good for the time, but we needed something that was now."

As well as the mission statement, the school has something they call the 'PRICE of Leadership'. It outlines what is expected from a leader at Glyn, whether that's the head or a teacher leading a class:.

P - proactive

R - reflective

I - integrity

C - clear vision

E - effective communication.

These five elements contribute to the heart of a Glyn leader, at whatever level. And that is to be a role model, doing the right thing even when no-one is looking.

Small steps to big changes

Jon and his team began to chip away at the inherited problems, starting with small yet highly visible things. They got the local community onside very quickly with a few simple measures to improve student behaviour outside of school.

"We have staff at bus stops making sure the boys behave themselves," Jon explained. "The local community policeman was enlisted to help us monitor the school and surrounding areas.

"We refused to push these issues to one side and it was a hit with the local community. The locals very quickly acknowledged our students' good behaviour and the local paper wrote an article about what we were doing.

"It was one of the areas tackled by the 20 working groups we'd set up and it was a nice quick win."

Improvements were made inside the school that directly benefitted the students. Signs bearing the Glyn logo were put up around the building to help bring about a sense of pride. A seating area was built outside and toilets were refurbished.

Departmental budgets tripled. That meant more resources could be targeted at learning and teaching. In 2006 only 15% of the rooms had interactive whiteboards. Another 20 have just been installed making around 60% of the rooms fully interactive. Every classroom, including the hall and the sports hall, now has a projector and speakers.

Scoring successes so early on in the change programme spurred Jon on even further.

"The positive results validated our actions," he said. "Anyone who had thought I didn't know what I was doing, or that we didn't need to change because everything was fine as it was, had been proved wrong."

The advice from one governor has remained with Jon throughout – "preserve the best, improve the rest."

Changing behaviour to change the culture

Since most cultural change can only come about by changing behaviours, I wondered what the problems had been at Glyn.

Jon admitted that, during his first year at the school, people were bypassing the management structure. Consequently, it seemed that every problem would come to his door.

"I had a hand in everything. It felt like I was the head, deputy head, IT technician, and PA to myself. It was a mindset. However as I strengthened the leadership and management skills of the team closest to me, things began to improve.

"That mindset has changed because people now have faith in their line manager.

"Managers are now making decisions whereas before they would say, 'I'll get back to you later because I need to go and ask Jon'.

"Behaviour changes have taken place because staff have been empowered to use the leadership and management structures. As I have strengthened the team we have equipped people to make decisions on my behalf.

"I now have so many highly capable people around me who can lead and manage. It's given me freedom to look at the larger strategic picture, at where the main focus is going to be."

Sustaining the change

Of course making changes is just one element of a programme. It's sustaining them that counts. For Jon, making the correct staff appointments plays a crucial role in this challenge.

"We don't recruit someone unless they are absolutely the right person for the position," he told me. "If there are no satisfactory candidates then we will work in a different way. I want excellent teachers because that is what will keep standards up.

"We are outstanding in 27 of the 39 grades in the Ofsted report. That means there are twelve areas we have to work on.

"We don't allow ourselves to become complacent. Sometimes after scoring outstanding, you get a dip in results because your foot comes off the gas a bit. The staff are aware of that."

Back to school

I asked Jon if he had set new goals for the coming academic year.

"It remains the same: increasing the achievement of the students," he said. "We want them to gain more than they ever thought they would.

"It will be an interesting year. Fifteen new colleagues will join a school that is rather different to the one I joined. At the same time, 60% of staff were here for the last-but-one Ofsted report - they've seen Glyn go through quite a bit of change."

There is no doubt that Jon has not only raised standards within the school, he has also raised the game for the staff. I wondered how much expectations had risen along with this.

"If I am still doing this job in four or five years time I would expect to have different deputy heads," he answered. "It will be interesting to see how the current deputies translate what they have achieved here into their own opportunities.

"It's exciting to see how all staff, at different levels, will develop."

Lessons learned

I asked Jon what were the main things he had learned over the last few years.

"I have constantly evaluated the opportunities I missed in my last headship to make sure I didn't miss them again in my first two years at Glyn. I am more proactive in this headship than I was in my last one.

"You are only as strong as your weakest link. The main thing I've learned, however, is that your weakest link can get stronger if you put in time and effort.

"If I have had to suggest to a member of staff that they should move on, it has not come as a surprise to them. Before getting to that point we would have given them all the support available to try to make it work."

Before letting Jon get on with preparing for the new school year I wanted to ask him one last question. It's a question I like to pose to all my interviewees: what would you say to the person you were three years ago? After thinking for a second or two he replied,

"I would tell myself I have an exceptional team. I would also tell them they are exceptional.

"Perhaps I have sometimes unwittingly tackled people more harshly than was needed about their shortcomings. I certainly did this with the two deputies that I appointed in 2007 and 2008. I did it only because I could see their great potential but perhaps pointing out their weaknesses was not always necessary. It's very true that you are often harder with those you work closest to.

"Integrity and making people feel valued are two important elements to progress. If you don't show integrity and truly value people you won't get anywhere. I believe that I know enough about the staff to make them feel that they contribute.

"I'm very aware that I need to be a role model all the time. I do this by giving people the time of day; by being around; being on gate duty and talking to the students.

"If they see me doing these things, they will feel more compelled to do the same.

"As for Glyn's future, I believe the main ingredient that will keep this school outstanding is the recruitment of high quality teachers and high quality support staff. And constantly revisiting and refreshing what it is we are trying to do."