

Visit us →

# LEADERSHIPEDGE

Coaching in Schools



## January 2023 - Behind the Mask

Did you have a good Christmas?

As we return to school, this common question will most often lead to a quick civil exchange, “Yes, thanks. You?” And we will go on our way. But couldn’t this be an opportunity for something better, more engaging than a simple courtesy?

In my third year of teaching, I moved school and was struck by my new Head of Department’s question, “How are you?” which began all of our conversations and came with a pause and gently-held eye contact. It was different. It was rare to feel a space open up in the busy school day to talk about me. Being valued and listened to in this way was instrumental in building my confidence enough to apply for (and secure) the role of Assistant Headteacher just a few years later.

That question, that pause and that eye-contact mattered. As Shakespeare wrote, “Eyes are the window to your soul” and science backs this up: our eye size changes when we relax or tighten our brow; our pupils dilate when the sympathetic nervous system puts us on alert; “crow’s feet” at the corner of our eyes show a genuine, rather than fake, smile.

So if you are genuinely interested in your colleagues’ thoughts and feelings, could you make more of an effort to get behind the mask, look into their eyes and hold the pause while they answer?



There are compelling reasons to make this effort: when people feel seen, they can be encouraged to bring their best self to school. Authentic, connected, psychologically safe individuals are more likely to take risks in their teaching, in conversations with colleagues, and in wider school leadership initiatives. We can get frustrated when people don’t ‘step-up’ but unless we demonstrate our curiosity to understand their perspective, we may in fact be blocking that potential. Naturally, where a person feels valued, they gain a sense of belonging and are more likely to commit to a role and organisation. In addition, by helping colleagues gain confidence in sharing their thoughts and feelings, as my HOD did for me, you are nurturing a future authentic leader.

Maybe you are slightly fearful of probing behind the mask: What if it reveals more work to do or challenging conversations to have? What if they get tearful or angry, or over-reliant on me when I’m already so busy?

But our question to you is: What will most likely happen if you don’t encourage them to open up?

**“My coach left lots of space for me to think about what I wanted to say, and listened to understand rather than to react to what I was saying.” – Leadership Edge Foundation Stage Participant**

Over Christmas, colleagues have hopefully been able to reconnect with their authentic, private selves. And so, before they slot back into that comfortable place behind the mask, can you encourage them to bring that ‘humanness’ into school to create warmth and diversity of thinking within your staff voice?

Instead of “Did you have a good Christmas?”, we invite you to consider some different questions:

How did you spend your holidays?  
How are you feeling about being back at school?  
What’s most on your mind for this half-term?

The core issue here is whether we are ready, as leaders, to take off our own masks and show that we truly do care about the people we are privileged to lead, “The leaders who get the most out of their people are the leaders who care most about their people” (Simon Sinek). And making time for a human conversation seems a pretty good place to start.

Wishing you, and your colleagues, a genuinely happy 2023.

**Catherine Hulme**

Director  
Leadership Edge

PURE coaching with Leadership Edge: Purely YOUR thinking space.

If you have enjoyed this think-piece, you can find our back-catalogue [here](#)

We invite you to take our **free 3 minute self-reflection quiz all about you** and what's stopping you from being the best you can be! Results direct to your inbox:  
<https://assess.coach/leadershipedge>

You have been sent this email because you are a member of Leadership Edge coaching programme, or have subscribed to our newsletters. If you no longer wish to receive our Monthly Coach please email us [info@leadershipedge.org.uk](mailto:info@leadershipedge.org.uk).