

You need people to tell you the school is on fire



LES WALTON
COLUMNIST

THE way management relates to all employees has a critical impact on the success of any organisation. The first caretaker in my first school, in the 1960s, was called Fred. Every Wednesday he helped out at the Youth Club. He would prepare the school hall for our weekly activities. Nothing was too much trouble.

Then I met Jack in 1971. Our secondary modern school moved a half a mile down the road to merge with the grammar school to become a comprehensive school. Jack, the grammar school caretaker and former pitman, resented the secondary modern staff joining his school.

In his view being the caretaker in the local grammar school was of much higher status than working in a comprehensive school. Before the establishment of the new comprehensive he was used to morning meetings with the headmaster in his 'study'. Now he was being invaded by all these secondary modern kids and teachers.

Both the kids and the teachers did not compare favourably to Jack's perspective of the grammar school student and teacher, who in his view were superior both academically and socially.

'Remember,' he would say, 'if it wasn't for all these little b...%\$%\$% the school would be perfect. Every day they come in and make a mess of my place.'

Jack ran the school with a rod of iron and the occasional help from the headteacher. If a member of staff stayed late to work he would kick them out. If a football match went into extra time he would 'declare time'. If the art teacher dared to leave some paint stains he would have a 'blue fit'. To give Jack his due the school was immaculate. It would have been even more perfect if all children had been banned.

One day I was being interviewed for a post in another school. When I returned to school I was in a pretty good mood, even pleased to see Jack standing by the school gate. Behind the school was what appeared to be a beautiful red sky. "Jack, I said, "have you seen the lovely sunset pointing to the red glow surrounding the school?" "That's not a sunset," shouted Jack. "The \$!*.ing school's



> Mind you clean over 11 feet...

on fire." Just at that point a fire engine came rushing up the road, siren screaming.

When I announced I was leaving, Jack came to see me and said he was arranging a leaving do for me at the local rugby club where I played - but only for the men. He gave me no choice. He also gave a speech. Basically, he said that all teachers were s**t and I was no different. I 'wittily' responded by saying that whenever he was cleaning a corridor he would 'sweep the lady teachers off their feet'. Jack immediately retorted that he never did such a thing and that he always treated the lady teachers properly! In a funny way he was one of the things I missed about the school.

My next caretaker's speciality was only cleaning to 11 feet from the floor. The school was beginning to look like it was covered in two different coats of paint. This complied with union guidelines. One classic quote from a colleague at the time was if Bill refused to clean above 11 feet, I would have to take 'steps' to sort it.

When local financial management was introduced the school took control of the repairs and maintenance budget, previously managed by the local authority. I brought in Chris, a professional builder. Chris managed all the maintenance and transformed the school within a year. Chris was proactive and addressed many of the long standing repairs, which the school so badly needed.

When I became principal of a further education college I would give a yearly presentation to the 500 staff. I

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would always include 'quote of the year'. Alan, the building manager, won hands down. He would issue weekly email bulletins to the staff. His winning announcement? 'I am notifying staff that they cannot enter the staff room this morning as I have taken off the door.' I knew what he meant.

Too often we don't value those who clean our buildings and ensure the basic services work well. One day I was leading a conference in a Durham hotel. I was wandering around the hotel looking for the reception. I asked a cleaner who pointed me in the right direction. I then noticed a sign for the reception which pointed the opposite way. The cleaner pointed out that it had been wrong for months. 'Nobody asks us for our opinion, so we just let the problem continue.'

Good school leaders listen to all their staff, not just the teachers.

Very early in my career a very flustered headteacher asked me to go to his office. When I arrived the Archbishop of Santiago, Chile, was standing dressed in full regalia. He introduced himself as Cardinal Raul Silva Henriquez. I then took the Cardinal on a tour of the school, introducing him to all the staff including Jack the caretaker and eventually the school cook. Doris bent forward and kissed his large gold stone-set ecclesiastical ring. Just afterwards Doris took me aside and whispered that the ring was on the wrong hand. When we quizzed him a little more he eventually admitted he was a waiter from Hexham.

Konosuke Matsushita, the one-time head of Matsushita Electric, once commented that organisations' 'continued existence depends on the day-to-day mobilisation of every ounce of intelligence'. That intelligence must include all staff and of course the school cook!

■ Les Walton CBE is chair of the Northern Education Trust.