

Supporting each other with mental health and wellbeing:

A guide for School Business Managers

in partnership with





Callum's Story

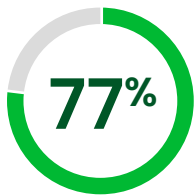
It was an ordinary Wednesday afternoon when an email from Callum in finance pinged into our inboxes. He announced that he was leaving the building for the last time because he could not face working with us any longer. It was a shock. We stopped work to talk about what had happened to make him walk out.

The deputy head and the School Business Manager went to see him at home that evening. Colleagues sent him emails and cards and invited him to events. Callum did eventually return to school, although in a slightly different role. It was a positive outcome. But it should not have taken a crisis for everyone to rally around.

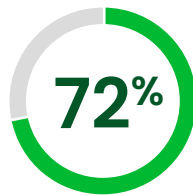
Introduction

To have a long and fulfilling career as a School Business Manager it is important to recognise that your energy is not unlimited. But it can be difficult when demands are coming from every direction.

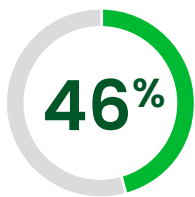
The reality is that your effectiveness in your role depends on you being energised, motivated and mentally healthy.



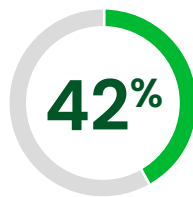
experienced symptoms of poor mental health due to their work



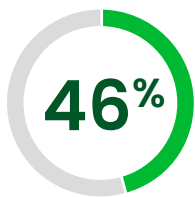
think their organisations culture has a negative impact on their wellbeing



are stressed (rising to **84%** for senior leaders)



have considered leaving the sector in the past two years due to pressures on their mental health



always go into work when unwell (rising to **54%** for senior leaders)

Figures from the [Teacher Wellbeing Index](#).
They refer to all teachers, leaders and support staff.

Many aspects of the school day are beyond our control, but the good news is we all have the power to influence the school culture in which we exist. This guide developed by Education Mutual in partnership with Education Support will delve into ways to be more psychologically aware and give practical tips and advice on how to support your colleagues.

Creating a psychologically safe environment

There is an old saying 'You'll catch more flies with honey than with vinegar' but it is not easy to give orders and nurture people at the same time. As a School Business Manager you are likely juggling a mass of tasks while trying to get the job done, look after the welfare needs of individuals and deal with any frictions within the group.

A good place to start can be to work towards a psychologically safe environment where everyone feels respected and listened to. Safety and trust among colleges can make a huge difference

to not just how effective we are in our roles, but the quality of relationships and school culture. You might want to consider the following questions:

- **Are the members of this team able to bring up problems and tough issues?**
- **Is it difficult to ask other members of this team for help?**
- **If someone makes a mistake in this team, will it be held against them?**

Psychological safety is about people being able to be themselves, in order to perform at their best without any risk to their mental wellbeing. A psychologically safe environment embraces people's humanity and accepts them for who they are.

Were you surprised by any of your answers to these questions?

Once you have finished reading this guide, you might like to undertake this quick 5-minute [Psychological Safety Audit](#). You can use this audit within your team, department or whole school. Just remember to ask everyone to contribute their thoughts and act on the suggestions and ideas that come out of the exercise.

Developing strong relationships

With those you manage

How do you show appreciation to your team?

It can be a huge boost to let colleagues know they are appreciated, and that you recognise their efforts or enjoy working with them. Evidence shows that feeling appreciated, can have a positive effect on workplace wellbeing.

Research carried out over the past 30 years also shows appreciation is not only a good way to make staff feel happier, but also more effective in their roles. In fact, studies have shown a moderate to large effect on employee motivation, even when the recognition was a simple 'thank-you' note. Employees rewarded with verbal praise or positive feedback also showed greater intrinsic motivation than financially rewarded or non-rewarded employees. They also showed more interest and enjoyment than non-rewarded employees.

So, how can you put this into practice?

Some School Business Managers make a point of having a weekly shout out where they single out a member of the team who has

put in extra effort. Others have teambuilding sessions, where staff work with someone they have never spoken to before.

Setting clear work goals or building in time to celebrate wins for ongoing work is another way to boost morale and strengthen relationships.

Everyone is different, so you might find what works for one member of staff doesn't work for the other. That's okay. Try different approaches to showing appreciation and see what works best for you and them.

And don't forget about yourself!

Did you know there is a #NationalSBLDay? On June 11th Twitter is full of kind comments and positive reinforcements.



Another way to show appreciation to yourself could be use the School Business Professional Network Directory to find groups, peer support or events in your area that support your professional development.

Working with your headteacher

We understand it's important to keep your school on the right side of the law, sometimes playing the role of a 'critical friend' by challenging certain decisions. This can be tough and may put a strain on your relationship at times. Headteachers may be focused on the big picture and educational outcomes that they are not necessarily alert to the finer implications. For example, with increasing staff absences a headteacher might be tempted to send out an offer letter before the final reference from a teacher's previous school has come through.

In 2018, Dr Fiona Creaby wrote a [report](#) for the Institute of School Business Leaders (ISBL). Her research showed that some staff felt these struggles keenly: ‘Often Heads and SLTs don’t understand the business or governance aspects or they don’t see it as that important, so you are constantly having to fight for recognition to be taken seriously...I have a background in governance and worked at a senior strategic level but discussions about whether we should form a MAT with our local schools happen without me...’

“When I arrived in post... I was quite shocked at head teachers’ knowledge of absolutely basic things like HR, public sector finance rules, compliance rules for premises... and I arrived and said ‘you can’t do this, you can’t do that!’ and to start with you are seen as... a handbrake as... a bureaucrat, but all you are trying to do is bring them up to speed with employment law and health and safety law and that there are certain things that you have to comply with.” (Creaby p67)

So, how can you navigate these types of relationship difficulties?

The key to any successful relationship is communication. A breakdown in communication is often the cause of many relationship problems, particularly in the workplace. Most headteachers are not mind readers. This means if we want or need something, we have to be clear and let them know what it is we are asking for. Assertiveness is not about being aggressive, it’s about communicating clearly and explaining what you are happy with doing or not doing.

When it comes to creating a better relationship with your head (or any colleague), building a collegiate environment is a fundamental pillar for improving protective resilience and wellbeing. Download these [tips for leaders](#) about building collegiate relationships across the school workforce.

Senior leaders and teachers

Many of those who responded to Dr Fiona Creaby’s survey said that having the right qualifications bolstered their confidence. Others found being able to share problems with local professional networks gave them the courage to challenge decisions and to take a stand on matters of compliance.

SLT and SENCOs will sometimes have a different perspective from the business team. A recent example is the universal Catch Up premium and the National Tutoring Programme. On paper, this looked like a good proposition. Nevertheless, many schools chose to make their own arrangements or employ their own tutors who knew the catchment area and the pupils.

Another example was a primary academy chain where headteachers chose a new reading scheme. A School Business Manager bought in a different scheme which saved money. However, teachers highlighted it would not meet the need of pupils with dyslexia. Would an initial conversation have helped in these situations?

Get to know the SLT and what their strengths and specialisms are. Clean classrooms, well equipped playgrounds, sports facilities, minibuses, modern IT suites, improved disabled access are all down to the efforts of School Business Managers and their teams. However, it helps to know which members of SLT can provide insights, extra information and case studies to use for fundraising bids or reports to governors.

Stakeholders

Governors

Often governors have limited time and a heavy administrative burden. It can help to lighten their load by providing paperwork on time for committees and provide data from the School Improvement Plan in a way that will engage them. If maths improvement is a key area, instead of tables and charts and GCSE results, why not pepper it with quotes from teachers and parents? They will likely remember the key messages more easily!

Parents

Like anyone, parents want to feel heard. It is important to give them space to talk and understand their point of view. You may be involved in administering the home-school agreement and the annual parents' survey. Increasingly schools use apps to communicate – so much more effective than the crumpled newsletter at the bottom of a bag – but it can help to check your method is not excluding any parents. Try to get a member of the team to parent coffee mornings and meetings held in the summer term for families of new pupils.

Another tip, before you speak to a parent, is to ask yourself 'do I have the information I need?'. Take heed of any relevant practice or formal guidance from others. A colleague may be able to help with the best approach based on their experience. This will help inform the conversation.

External partners

These might include onsite childcare facilities, after school clubs, liaison with other agencies, specialist support services, adult learning. Make sure you know the key personnel. Covid and sudden school closures showed that contact lists were not always up to date.

You have a role to play in marketing the school so make sure information is current – delete the references to closure dates due to Covid in 2020. It is also good policy to have a member of teaching staff on side who is willing to cajole teachers into supplying good news stories and samples of pupils' work.

Dealing with difficult conversations

Challenging people respectfully is both difficult and demanding, but often as a School Business Manager it is essential in building positive relationships and encouraging them between staff. A large part of staff feeling comfortable in having challenging or difficult conversations is feeling psychologically safe to do so, so as leaders it's important to think about how you create the right conditions to facilitate this. People often avoid challenging conversations because they are afraid of conflict. Effective challenging involves being assertive and raising awareness of what is happening, supported by facts.

To do this, encourage staff to:

- **Feed back to their colleague about how their attitude or behaviour impacts on them**
- **Ask direct, open questions to their colleague e.g. "When, How, Why, What, Where"?**
- **Change focus from "what?" to "how?", from "then and there" to "here and now", and from "I can't" to "I choose not to"**
- **Ask for their feedback and thoughts after they have stated their case**
- **Affirm all the positive qualities the other person possesses**

Before having a difficult conversation with a colleague it can help to plan ahead and decide what the goal is: better timekeeping, a clearer focus on the task in hand, a friendlier tone. Experts in this field recommend starting with the word *I* because it is less confrontational than *You*.

Try starting with phrases such as:

- ***'I feel'***
- ***'I think'***
- ***'I've noticed'***

Next, state the problem with specific examples:

- ***'I noticed you were late on Tuesday and Thursday last week',***
- ***'When I heard you talking to that supplier, you sounded very abrupt'.***

Make sure you get their perspective. There may be a legitimate reason for their lateness or distracted air. Above all, say what change you want to see. This is often implied in the conversation but not explicitly stated. Look at these sentences and see how you can adapt them to problems you are dealing with:

- ***'I'd like to talk about _____ . I think we need to find a way for you to _____.'***
- ***'I think you are unhappy at work. Can we talk about this?'***
- ***'I have something I'd like to discuss with you that I think will help you to be more productive.'***
- ***'I'd like to talk about your work _____ , but first I'd like to hear how you think it is going.'***
- ***'I'd like to see if we might find a way for you to _____.'***
- ***'I would like to hear your feelings about _____ and put forward my views as well.'***
- ***'I would like you to keep a timesheet and talk again at the end of the month'***
- ***I would like you to focus on your phone manner this week and see if you can sound politer and more friendly***

Get Support



If you are struggling with your mental health and wellbeing or feel you're heading for burnout, don't suffer alone. Speak to colleagues, friends, family or call **Education Support's free, confidential helpline, staffed by **qualified counsellors** and available **24/7** on **08000 562 561**.**



Further ways to support staff

Education Mutual's staff absence protection support's member school and trust staff with a wide range of health and wellbeing services as part of all memberships providing support through Stress coaching, Face to Face counselling, 24/7 GP support, nurse support services as well as school wide mental health first aid training and Occupational health services.

Get in touch today to find out more at [educationmutual.co.uk](https://www.educationmutual.co.uk)





Published by
Education Mutual

12 Hamilton Court
Mansfield
NG18 5FB

educationmutual.co.uk
info@educationmutual.co.uk
+44 (0) 1623 287 840



In partnership with
Education Support

40A Drayton Park
London N5 1EW

+44 (0) 20 7697 2750
educationsupport.org.uk
Registered Charity No. 1161436