

HOME TRUTHS

Colin Foster suggests that being a genuinely supportive colleague may involve more than simply being agreeable and making the right noises...

A colleague walks into the staffroom at breaktime. *‘Those Y10s are a nightmare – they won’t do a single thing I say!’* How would you react? How might your colleagues react?

Surely only the most socially inept and insensitive colleague would respond with the classic, *‘Well, they’re fine with me!’* – because what could that possibly achieve, other than make your colleague feel small?

Teachers want to be supportive colleagues, and will frequently recognise that ‘we’ve all been there’. This colleague has obviously had a very stressful lesson, is feeling low and needs some affirmation and support. It follows that we’d want to build them up, not knock them down – but what would you actually say? And how can you prevent your ‘supportive’ response from simply making them feel even more hopeless?

Blaming students

I find that supportive colleagues will tend to say things like, *‘Oh, that group! They’re exactly the same with me – they take no notice of anything.’* This seems like a nice thing to say. Perhaps the colleague no longer feels quite so much like a failure. It isn’t just them, because others have evidently experienced similar issues.

But of course, the natural implication of *‘It’s not you’* is *‘It’s the students.’* And so the conversation will often descend from there into demonisation of ‘these students’. *‘What is it with*

kids like that? They have no respect for school, or for any authority whatsoever. Their parents are just as bad – they take no interest,’ and so on.

Is this OK? What if the colleague had entered the staffroom saying something more extreme, like *‘Those Y9s are vile!’* Would you challenge that way of talking about students? Or would doing so make you ‘unsupportive’, as if you don’t understand how hard teaching can be?

These kinds of ‘supportive’ remarks (*‘Oh, I know! Tell me about it!’*) can quickly gain momentum in a friendly staffroom. Everyone’s keen to show their wounds and

“With our supposedly kind remarks, are we enabling people towards defeatism, inaction and hopelessness?”

how agreeable they are. That may make the colleague feel a little better in the short term, but fundamentally, I think it ends up being disempowering.

The message *‘It’s not about you’* is hard to separate from *‘There’s nothing you can do about it’*. If those students are ‘just like that’, and it has nothing to do with your teaching, then what hope is there? You may as well find another school – or another career.

A safe space

People will often defend ‘letting off steam’ in the staffroom, and say that conversations around what I’ve called ‘demonising’

students are somehow therapeutic. The argument goes that the staffroom should be a ‘safe space’, and that so long as such conversations take place out of earshot of students or visitors, it shouldn’t be policed with regard to what’s said.

I’m not so sure. I’m no professional counsellor, but when I completed a short counselling course many years ago, it challenged my presuppositions. Previously, my assumption around counselling was that it was about being nice and patient, and accepting whatever the client said. It involved saying ‘Poor you’, and

giving the person time to talk about their feelings so that they felt ‘listened to’ and affirmed.

While I’ve no doubt that at least some of those things can be important for a good counselling relationship, I also discovered that experienced counsellors are actually often quite ‘tough’ with their clients – even in ways that could seem cringeworthy to outside observers.

Mentors learn to be highly skilful at challenging people to make changes and take responsibility for their actions. This isn’t about blaming anyone – the point is that even when

something is in no way your fault, that doesn’t mean you’re completely powerless to do anything about what happens next. Yet holding those two things together isn’t easy.

Rethinking ‘supportiveness’

I’m not saying we should all start acting like amateur counsellors, as that could do more harm than good. I do, however, wonder if the prevailing sense of what it means to be ‘supportive’ needs a rethink.

Many years ago, I was in a staffroom when a colleague entered saying something along the lines of *‘Those Y8s won’t do a single thing I say’*. The collective reaction was to nod along sadly – but then one teacher glanced up from her marking, and shocked the room by looking straight at the colleague and saying, “You have to make them”.

What an awful thing to say! The atmosphere of the room instantly changed, and the colleague who had entered walked off, clearly annoyed, saying “Well, how am I supposed to do that?” It seemed at the time like a textbook

example of a highly inappropriate response.

Many years later, when the *‘Won’t do a single thing I say’* teacher was retiring, he cited the other colleague by name – though not in relation to the incident I’d observed

– as being the best and most supportive colleague he’d met in his career.

Perhaps the comment was therefore made within the context of a trusting relationship, the marking colleague with the ‘inappropriate’ response having, in a sense, ‘earned’ the right to say what she did? Or maybe it was a blip in an otherwise more ‘supportive’ set of encounters? In any case, it made me wonder whether we’re often more concerned with saying something that will signal us as being ‘supportive’ and make us look good, rather than saying something that may actually be helpful to the other person in the long run.

Time and tone

To be clear, I’m not advocating saying deliberately tough things to your colleagues in the staffroom. Indeed, the most useful conversations usually need to be held in private, rather than in front of everyone, and are perhaps best had later on, once

the ‘heat’ of the moment has died away.

Yet even then, do we teachers ever share those tough messages? Or are we more minded to simply stick to nice, safe things that make us seem virtuous, but are ultimately unhelpful – even counterproductive? With our supposedly kind remarks, are we sometimes just enabling people towards defeatism, inaction and hopelessness?

Taking responsibility for dealing with things that aren’t your fault seems like an important aspect of being a professional. We must find ways of talking about strategies for handling challenging situations and learn from one another – while accepting that none of us are perfect, and that we all have struggles. Often quite similar ones.

Pointing out that there might be something we can do to address a particular challenge doesn’t amount to blaming us for causing it. Indeed, it might even be what ultimately sets us on the path to improving the situation.



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