Intuitive vs Data Driven Decisions for School Leaders: A Case Study on Capacity vs Capability

"Never ignore a gut feeling, but never believe that it's enough"
Robert Heller

Schools are complex and rapidly evolving organisations. School leaders are often faced with an overwhelming number of decisions in an impossibly short timeframe.

In this overloaded, time pressured environment many school leaders rely on their 'gut instinct' or 'intuition' (which is usually based on their many years of accumulated experience) in order to rapidly respond to a range of situations around teacher capability, parent engagement, student learning and positive and negative behaviour in the classroom.
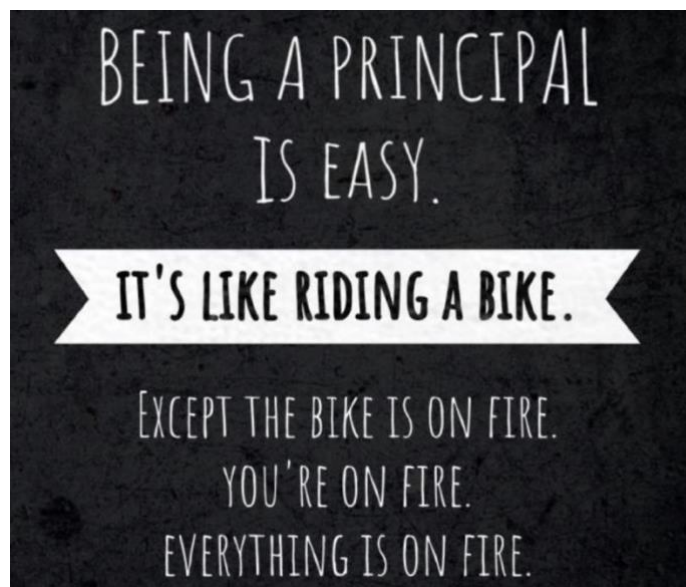
Intuitive vs Data Driven Decisions…

Sometimes, when school leaders trust their intuition or 'gut instinct', it turns out to be a really wise decision because it prevented bigger problems from emerging. Intuitive decision making relying on 'Gut instinct' is favoured by business and leadership guru Sir Richard Branson who is quoted as saying "*I rely far more on 'gut instinct' than researching huge amounts of statistics.*"

Other times school leaders trust their 'gut instinct' but it betrays them and their rapid responses become very 'unwise' in hindsight and end up creating much bigger problems. The data driven approach, which downplays the role of gut instinct, is favoured by other leadership experts such as W Edwards Deming who is credited with the famous quote:

"Without data your just another person with an opinion."

The most frequently occurring and most damaging failure of 'gut instinct' among school leaders is when they misdiagnose behaviour and/or teaching and learning problems in classrooms as problems of 'lowered teacher capability' when, more often than not, they are actually caused by 'lowered teacher capacity'. Such misdiagnosis leads to the implementation of the wrong solution which only makes matters worse (but more on that later…).

Gut Instinct & The Toss of a Coin...

Heads or Tails: What Da Ya Reckon?

According to journalist and author Malcolm Gladwell (who has reviewed much of the research on the accuracy and reliability of 'gut instinct'), relying solely on 'gut instinct'

to assess a situation creates, at best, a 50/50 chance of getting it right – the equivalent of tossing a coin. This 50/50 chance remains the same regardless of both your profession and your amount of accumulated experience. In this light we must ask the question: So how can school leaders increase the odds of making effective decisions under pressure?

The answer is: by making 'data driven' decisions. However, this is not always as simple as it seems as it requires not only (a) up-to-date data continuously available on school leadership dashboards, but also (b) data which highlights the interaction effects between outputs, inputs and influencers (AKA Students, Staff and Parents). As we've discussed in previous articles, a great school leadership dashboard should display these different factors in a ratio proportional to 50:40:10.

HPTschools Dashboard (Primary) 50:40:10 OUTPUTS/INPUTS/INFLUENCERS		Prev. Yr Whole School Average	Prep								Year 1								Year 2								Year 3							
			T1 Mid	T1 End	T2 Mid	T2 End	T3 Mid	T3 End	T4 Mid	T4 End	T1 Mid	T1 End	T2 Mid	T2 End	T3 Mid	T3 End	T4 Mid	T4 End	T1 Mid	T1 End	T2 Mid	T2 End	T3 Mid	T3 End	T4 Mid	T4 End	T1 Mid	T1 End	T2 Mid	T2 End	T3 Mid	T3 End	T4 Mid	T4 End
Improving Attendance	Attendance Rate %	92.6%	96.4	95.2	93.2	92.4	92.3	91.1	91.4	91.2	97.3	96.0	92.4	91.1	92.7	92.0	91.5	91.1	95.8	95.0	92.5	91.9	93.1	92.0	92.3	91.5	95.1	94.7	92.5	92.6	93.1	92.5	92.4	92.1
	% less than 85%	9.7%	6.8	8.1	4.7	5.4	3.8	2.8	3.5	4.1	4.3	4.6	4.8	5.3	5.4	5.9	5.8	5.6	4.4	4.9	3.5	3.8	3.1	2.6	2.9	3.2	6.0	7.2	5.4	4.7	3.8	2.1	2.8	3.4
Lifting the Top	English A Standard %	19%	21	20	23	29	33	35	37	37	37	27	30	31	36	41	42	43	43	14	16	16	20	22	27	28	28	14	17	15	17	15	14	12
	Maths A Standard %	27%	25	26	27	30	33	34	35	36	36	36	40	44	47	49	50	50	50	19	22	17	20	26	28	30	30	20	25	23	28	23	23	23
Reaching Standard	English C and above %	91%	90	92	92	89	90	88	90	90	90	87	88	85	86	87	88	90	85	86	87	87	88	87	88	87	90	91	91	87	88	89	82	83
	Maths C and above %	94%	94	95	95	95	96	95	95	96	96	96	96	92	93	97	96	96	96	89	90	90	91	92	92	92	90	92	91	93	91	90	85	85
Safe and Disciplined Students	Average Daily Incidents (Minor)	4.5	0.76	0.88	0.65	0.64	0.65	0.67	0.68	0.76	0.88	1.00	0.75	1.45	1.81	1.23	0.90	0.75	0.50	0.43	0.60	0.72	0.75	1.70	0.75	0.68	0.40	0.57	0.50	0.45	0.40	0.49	0.40	0.41
	Average Daily Incidents (Major)	6.99	1.31	1.24	1.46	1.38	1.12	1.22	1.25	1.32	1.25	1.98	1.45	1.91	2.05	2.15	2.05	2.10	0.50	0.98	0.75	0.83	0.75	1.41	1.25	1.31	0.75	0.98	0.75	0.68	0.50	0.61	0.98	0.50
	Total Number SDAs	51	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	3	1	2	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	2	0	3	1	0	0	2	0	0
	Number of Students with SDAs	28	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	3	1	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	1	0	2	1	0	1	2	1	1
Positive Behaviour	Students on Bronze	5	3	5	5	6	5	8	4	5	2	3	6	7	8	8	7	10	3	6	3	4	5	13	7	10	2	5	3	3	3	4	3	2
	Green Slips P'Class P'Week (Av)	17	20	22	22	25	19	20	24	25	16	20	13	19	25	25	27	26	22	22	17	23	20	23	22	25	22	21	20	21	20	18	22	20
Learning Walls	3rd Teacher Walls Updated	NA	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Building Collective Teacher Efficacy	Team Data Wall Updated	NA	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N
	Team Activity Cycle Completion	NA	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N
	HPT Job Satisfaction	81	86	84	88	78	91	89	92	84	76	78	64	64	52	51	54	58	87	85	84	79	83	85	82	82	83	82	78	77	78	78	76	75
	HPT Performance Feedback	83	88	87	88	85	87	86	86	86	83	88	80	85	82	77	78	76	94	94	89	93	92	93	87	84	81	83	86	65	70	68	74	73
	HPT Peer Support	89	95	94	93	92	94	91	89	88	85	89	90	92	93	89	88	90	96	96	94	92	96	96	97	82	82	87	78	65	58	66	62	63
	HPT Work/Life & Wellbeing	76	73	70	86	73	88	81	79	81	75	73	63	74	69	68	75	76	73	78	82	74	82	84	79	74	73	74	80	77	75	69	72	81
	Collective Team Efficacy	82	86	84	89	82	90	87	87	85	80	82	74	79	74	71	74	75	88	88	87	85	87	90	86	84	80	82	81	71	70	70	71	73
Community Engagement	School Newsletter Engagement	26		45		40		38		37		40		34		42		44		29		26		25		26		25		24		23		22
	Non Payments (%)	9%		1		1		2		1		3		4		7		6		5		6		6		3		4		9		2		4

In this article we want to explore the impact of intuitive versus data driven decisions in building High Performance Teaching Teams. We specifically examine the positive impact that comprehensive School Leadership Dashboards can make to support data driven decisions on two common, yet very difficult, problems school leadership teams regularly manage: (1) Falling Grades; and (2) Behaviour Spikes. Let's outline these two scenarios below:

Case Study 1. Falling Grades

The Principal was debriefing the leadership team after a meeting with regional administrators about the school's performance…

"We really need to do something about literacy and numeracy in Year 3. The data on both is terrible but especially literacy. The Year 3 English results were a disaster – the number of students achieving a grade of A had fallen by 16% and the number of students getting a C or higher had fallen by 7% over the course of the year. Student learning is going backwards – we need to do something about it now!"

Intuitive Assessment & Outcome: Falling Grades

Intuitive Assessment: As the leadership team discussed the situation, the Year 3 Team Leader described their own concerns about the extent to which 'learning

intents and success criteria' were being implemented effectively. Upon hearing this, the Principal chimed in – agreeing that poor teaching and learning practices are the likely culprit.

Subsequent Intervention – Capability Focused: The leadership team immediately agreed to increase the walk throughs and re-educate all Year 3 teachers on the importance of learning intents and success criteria replacing their team meetings for the remainder of the term with focused professional development.

Outcome: Cancelling remaining team meetings and ramping further training caused major tension between school leaders and Year 3 teachers. Additional walk throughs did not yield any evidence of problems hypothesised as being the cause of decline. Academic decline worsened as the year continued…

Data Driven Assessment & Outcome: Falling Grades

Data Driven Assessment: The leadership team quickly displayed their School Leadership Dashboard on the projector screen and began looking for any variance in student, staff and parent data that may have related to the falling grades.

Falling Grades: Year 3

HPTschools Dashboard (Primary) Yellow - OUTPUTS Green - INPUTS - Blue - INFLUENCERS		Prev. Yr Whole School Average	Year 3							
			T1 Mid	T1 End	T2 Mid	T2 End	T3 Mid	T3 End	T4 Mid	T4 End
Improving Attendance	**Attendance Rate %**	92.6%	95.1	94.7	92.5	92.6	93.1	92.5	92.4	92.1
	% less than 85%	9.7%	6.0	7.2	5.4	4.7	3.8	2.1	2.8	4
Lifting the Top	**English A Standard %**	19%	28	14	17	1	17	15	14	12
	Maths A Standard %	27%	30	20	23	3	28	23	23	23
Reaching Standard	**English C and above %**	91%	90	91	91	7	88	89	82	83
	Maths C and above %	94%	90	92	91	93	91	90	85	8
Safe and Disciplined Students	**Average Daily Incidents (Minor)**	4.5	0.40	0.57	0.50	0.45	0.40	0.49	0.40	0.41
	Average Daily Incidents (Major)	6.99	0.75	0.98	0.75	0.68	0.50	0.61	0.98	0.50
	Total Number SDAs	51	0	3	1	0	0	2	0	0
	Number of Students with SDAs	28	0	2	1	0	1	2	1	1
Positive Behaviour	**Students on Bronze**	5	2	5	3	3	3	4	3	2
	Green Slips P'Class P'Week (Av)	17	22	21	20	21	20	18	22	2
Learning Walls	**3rd Teacher Walls Updated**	NA	N	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
Building Collective Teacher Efficacy	**Team Data Wall Updated**	NA	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N
	Team Activity Cycle Completion	NA	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N
	HPT Job Satisfaction	81	83	82	78	77	78	78	76	75
	HPT Performance Feedback	83	81	83	86	65	70	68	74	73
	HPT Peer Support	89	82	87	78	65	58	66	62	63
	HPT Work/Life & Wellbeing	76	73	74	80	77	75	69	72	81
	Collective Team Efficacy	82	80	82	81	1	70	70	71	73
Community Engagement	**School Newsletter Engagement**	26		25		24		23		22
	Non Payments (%)	9%		4		9		2		4

Examining (A) the 'output data' from students, they quickly discovered the academic decline became noticeable during term 3 and had worsened in term 4 with behaviour and attendance remaining unchanged. Examining the (B) 'input data' from teachers showed classroom practices were normal but their teaching team data wall was not up-to-date, and they were not engaging in all of their agreed team activities within the Team Activity Cycle. Looking deeper into the Team Pulse Data tracking Collective Teacher Efficacy there was a marked decline in professional feedback and job satisfaction commencing just prior to the decline in student academic data. Examining the 'influencer data' showed no major changes in parent activity.

Subsequent Intervention – Capacity Focused: The Year 3 Team Leader increased their attendance and participation in the Year 3 Team Activity Cycle and followed up Team Pulse Data seeking team driven solutions to apparent Peer Support and Performance Feedback issues.

Outcome: Over the next few weeks the Year 3 Team revealed they had been struggling with a gradually increasing pattern of personality conflict and competitive behaviour within the team (which had led to lower quality meetings and cessation of team huddles and check-ins). Whilst each class had still complied with the school's teaching and learning standards, the lack of sharing had created major variance between classes with teachers emphasising different aspects of the curriculum. This created Year Level inconsistencies which led to radically different outcomes on assessment tasks. The Year 3 Team Leader facilitated a review and update of the Team's HPT Data Wall – particularly around "above and below the line" behaviours and a fishbowl activity role play using their "calling behaviour protocol" on likely interpersonal problems. With a renewed commitment to working as a team and re-engaging with their full activity cycle there was an improvement in team behaviour as the year concluded and a commitment to working together better into the future.

Case Study 2. Behaviour Spike

"What are we going to do about the spike in negative behaviour among Year 1 students?" asked the Principal to the school leadership team during their weekly leadership team meeting. Behaviour problems in Year 1 students had risen dramatically despite the fact that all the Year 1 teachers had just completed classroom management training and positive behaviour data in Year 1 was actually quite high.

Intuitive Assessment & Outcome: Behaviour Spike

Intuitive Assessment: The Year 1 Team Leader suggested that the limited experience of some of the teachers meant that they may not be following the protocols effectively. The very experienced Principal agreed and further added "*In my experience, staff just don't like the hassle of low-level classroom behaviour and just send it up to the office – this is usually worse among inexperienced staff…*"

Subsequent Intervention - Capability Focused: The leadership team agreed to immediately ramp up walk throughs in Year 1 classrooms and do a series of refresher sessions on behaviour management with Year 1 teachers.

Outcome: Year 1 teachers were disengaged during refresher sessions on behaviour management (however got correct answers on all the quizzes and scenarios) and were visibly stressed by the increased walk throughs in their classrooms compared to teachers in other Year Levels.

Data Driven Assessment & Outcome: Behaviour Spike

Data Driven Assessment: With the School Leadership Dashboard displayed on the projector screen they began looking for any variance in student, staff and parent data that may have related to the behaviour spike.

Behaviour Spike: Year 1

HPTschools Dashboard (Primary) Yellow - OUTPUTS Green - INPUTS - Blue - INFLUENCERS		Prev. Yr Whole School Average	Year 1							
			T1 Mid	T1 End	T2 Mid	T2 End	T3 Mid	T3 End	T4 Mid	T4 End
Improving Attendance	Attendance Rate %	92.6%	97.3	96.0	92.4	91.1	92.7	92.0	91.5	91.1
	% less than 85%	9.7%	4.3	4.6	4.8	5.3	5.4	5.9	5.8	5.6
Lifting the Top	English A Standard %	19%	37	27	30	31	36	41	42	43
	Maths A Standard %	27%	36	36	40	44	47	49	50	50
Reaching Standard	English C and above %	91%	90	87	88	85	86	87	88	90
	Maths C and above %	94%	96	96	96	92	93	97	96	96
Safe and Disciplined Students	Average Daily Incidents (Minor)	4.5	0.88	1.00	0.75	1.45	1.81	1.23	0.90	0.75
	Average Daily Incidents (Major)	6.99	1.25	1.98	1.45	1.91	2.05	2.15	2.05	2.10
	Total Number SDAs	51	0	1	1	3	1	2	2	4
	Number of Students with SDAs	28	0	1	1	3	1	1	1	2
Positive Behaviour	Students on Bronze	5	2	3	6	7	8	8	7	10
	Green Slips P'Class P'Week (Av)	17	16	20	22	19	25	25	27	26
Learning Walls	3rd Teacher Walls Updated	NA	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Building Collective Teacher Efficacy	Team Data Wall Updated	NA	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y
	Team Activity Cycle Completion	NA	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
	HPT Job Satisfaction	81	76	78	64	64	52	51	54	58
	HPT Performance Feedback	83	83	84	80	85	82	77	78	76
	HPT Peer Support	89	85	89	90	92	93	89	88	90
	HPT Work/Life & Wellbeing	76	75	73	63	74	69	68	75	76
	Collective Team Efficacy	82	80	82	74	79	74	71	74	75
Community Engagement	School Newsletter Engagement	26		40		34		42		44
	Non Payments (%)	9%		3		4		7		6

Examining (A) the 'output data' from students, they quickly discovered the behaviour spike became noticeable towards the end of term 2 and stayed high across term 3 and 4. However reporting of minor behaviour dropped dramatically during term 4 despite major behaviour and SDAs remaining high. Also of interest in (A) is the very high

amounts of green slips (AKA gotchas / golden tickets etc.) occurring across the same time span as the behaviour spike.

Examining the (B) 'input data' from teachers showed classroom practices were normal and their teaching team data wall mostly up-to-date and they were fully engaged in all of their agreed team activities within the Team Activity Cycle. Looking deeper into the Team Pulse Data tracking Collective Teacher Efficacy there was a marked decline in job satisfaction and work/life & wellbeing coinciding with the behaviour spike. Interestingly, Peer Support and Performance Feedback remained quite high with 'Peer Support' actually increasing during the behaviour spike. When looking at the influencer data, parent engagement also remained very high however an increase in 'non-payments' was noted.

Subsequent Intervention – Capacity Focused: As a result, the Leadership Team increased their attendance and participation in Year 1 team meetings and group huddles. Additionally, they made sure to check in with the team around their Team Pulse, seeking guidance from the team about causes and solutions to Job Satisfaction and Wellbeing issues.

Outcome: After a series of individual and team discussions at check-ins, huddles and team meetings it became apparent that the problems began when teachers were frustrated with leadership decisions (and lack of consultation) about SDA consequences for major behaviour, combined with subtle criticisms of teacher capability in the aftermath. This had led to a 'circling of the wagons' among Year 1 teachers who collectively adopted a strategy of reduced reporting and excessive use of rewards for an absence of negative behaviour (as opposed an occurrence of positive behaviour).

Parents, sensing teacher unease, became increasingly supportive and attentive to the teachers situation in the classrooms and more negative towards school leadership. With the situation finally clarified relationships were restored between the teachers and school leadership, improved reporting, feedback and consultation protocols were agreed upon and guidance on behaviour support to correct the more recent problems were welcomed. Parents were also actively engaged in the process of collaborating to enhance Year 1 student behaviour and proactively raising any concerns with both classroom teachers and the school leadership team was welcomed.

Data Driven Decisions: Insights on Teacher Capability vs Capacity

One of the most powerful insights hidden within the case studies on falling grades and behaviour spikes is the leaders 'intuitive' assumption that these problems are caused by teacher 'capability' problems when the subsequent 'data driven analysis' revealed they were actually caused by teacher 'capacity' problems. This misdiagnosis of lower capability instead of lower capacity is an all-too-common mistake made by school leaders who rely heavily on their intuitive leadership skills. This is understandable (but not OK) given most, if not all of their leadership experience is in education settings - the core business of which is focused on teaching new capabilities with the need for 'improved instruction' being the default answer to under-performing students. However, when leaders intuitively assume 'capability problems' are the root cause of issues among teaching staff they may make the mistake so succinctly articulated in Maslow's famous quote:

"If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail"

Let's face it, teaching staff are not equivalent to students and 'improved instruction' should not be the default answer to under-performing teaching staff. Teachers, in contrast to students, are adults who by nature and training are very capable, caring, professional educators. To perform their jobs effectively they need to maximise their capability (AKA skills and knowledge etc.) as well as their capacity (their wellbeing, focus, energy etc.).

When problems emerge in the classroom, be that behavioural or academic, school leaders need to determine how best to support the situation. In both our case studies the intuitive diagnosis and subsequent support was based on the assumption of a capability problem (i.e., teachers not having the skills and knowledge to manage the

issues of concern). The result of treating these situations as capability problems was increased stress and frustration (and lowered collective efficacy) among teachers and more worryingly, no improvement in student learning or behaviour.

Whilst teacher capability problems are real in certain circumstances (and need to be addressed accordingly), from our experience, the majority of classroom problems are more likely to be related to lowered teacher 'capacity' and can easily be diagnosed correctly and supported appropriately if data driven decisions are made based on a comprehensive (50:40:10) school leadership dashboard. In the cases reviewed in this article, getting the diagnosis right meant the support was effective and the learning and behaviour of students improved and the collective efficacy of teachers also grew.

What Role Should 'Gut Instinct' Play in School Leader Decisions?

"Never ignore a gut feeling, but never believe that it's enough"
Robert Heller

Intuition is the 'entrée' not the 'main course'...

As we've seen in our case examples relying on intuition alone is very problematic. In the real world of school leadership what is even more troubling is when apparently 'very experienced' school leaders solely rely on their intuition and then use their 'years of experience' as a rebuff to dismiss alternate points of view and rebuff alternate evidence. This is often where 'less experienced' school leaders have an advantage – they may only be 'partially' confident in their own intuitive judgement and thus may seek out further data to either confirm the accuracy of instincts or alert them to the contrary.

In the time poor, high pressure world of school leaders, recognising and "partially" trusting their gut instincts can create a fast-track for our focus of inquiry into the data – which once confirming (or otherwise) our instinctive judgement enables a timely and appropriate 'data driven decision'. Thus, the school leaders gut instinct should serve as an 'entrée' fast-tracking them into the 'main course' of inquiry into available data to drive decision making. Gut instinct alone should never be the 'main course'.

Pro Tip - From Hunch to Certainty:

In the case studies and in real life, the rapid circulation of opinions to foster shared agreements among school leaders without supporting evidence is known as 'group think'. We have a 'truth-default-bias's to believe what we are told without question which gets stronger both the longer we work with someone and with increased time pressure to respond quickly to emergent situations. A simple short circuit to the hidden trap of group think is for school leaders to ask the magic question *"How do we know that we know that?"* in response to someone sharing a viewpoint or explanation about an issue. This will quickly reveal the extent of evidence from 'hearsay' through to 'quantifiable fact'.

"In God we trust, all others bring data"
W Edwards Deming

Bringing It Together: 4 Questions for School Leaders

1.   When it comes to intuitive vs analytical thinking, what is the balance of your focus in your day-to-day work as a school leader?

2.   Do you over-rely on intuition and 'gut feel' when making rapid decisions? Do you consider your experience tips the balance (of making a good decision) in your favour?

3.   Do you look at data as a necessary part of the decision-making process and does this data encapsulate the full range of output, input and influencer variables so you can tell the difference between problems of 'capacity' vs problems of 'capability'?

4.   Does your school leadership team have a continuously updated school leadership dashboard that you regularly review and discuss at leadership team meetings and draw upon to guide decision making on important issues?

Click here to get a copy of our example 50:40:10 Leadership Dashboard for Primary and Secondary Schools and get in touch with us if you'd like to find out more about this and other High Performance Schools strategies you can implement to ensure every student and every staff member can flourish in your school!

Dr Pete Stebbins PhD