

## Key role of the principal: keeping the focus on learning

*Many are deterred from applying for the top jobs because they think it will distance them from learning – two principals argue that, on the contrary, leaders play an essential role in leading on learning.*

**Janet Nevin**, Principal, Ashton Sixth Form College

**Marjorie Semple**, Principal, West Thames College

Both Janet and Marjorie spoke persuasively of the importance of the principal's role in leading on learning in their colleges.

Janet started by declaring that being a principal is absolutely all about the process of learning. She told the audience that she enjoyed teaching enormously but also loves the job of being a principal. She referred to learning and teaching as the "joint anchors in the political storm" and the changes which distract us from the process of education.

She said that principals can provide the clarity needed in a confusing and obscure world. Her advice to delegates was "don't try to do the job perfectly" – beware of the "glass cliff" which may frighten women off. She agreed that some women do believe that being a principal will remove them from the role they came into FE to do – they don't want to let go of the dynamic experience of teaching and the buzz from seeing students achieve.

According to Janet, just as the CEO of any company has got to be passionate about their product, so learning has to be your passion if you are to be a principal. You can make sure the emphasis is on learning and teaching and that learning is at the heart of what you do. Janet referred to many of her activities which are intrinsically linked with learning, for example carrying out classroom observations, attending course team meetings, talking to students, asking about their learning, sitting on interview panels.

Lastly her advice was that you have to do the job in your own way – it can be done successfully in many different ways, but the most important thing is to bring your own values and attributes to the job.

Marjorie explained what it felt like to be a recently appointed principal, what made her go for the job and how she has been keeping in touch with learning. She spoke of her love of the FE environment – students who want to progress and who manage to change their lives through learning.

When the post of principal came up at her college, she was put off by the emphasis on finance and property, and also had doubts as to whether she was up to the job. But colleagues encouraged her to apply, she went ahead, was appointed and has not regretted it once.

Marjorie's belief is that as a principal she can have more impact on learning than as a VP. She admitted there are challenges in leading learning across more than one campus and went on to describe some of the ways she stays linked to learning. She makes sure she is very visible – walking around at the beginning and end of the day, in break times, talking to students and addressing the staff by their names. She meets all full time student at the beginning of their course and explains what she and the college expect of them, so they all know who she is and feel that they can approach her.

Key to the job is to show that you are listening, and to do this she involves staff and students in making decisions wherever possible. Her college has a lively academic board mainly made up of teachers who put forward ideas for improvements in learning and teaching. She continues to do some teaching - tutoring or covering classes to help out. Contrary to what she had thought, working on the college's capital project has turned out to be one of the best ways of getting resources right for students and developing proper learning environment for students.

Finally, Marjorie told the audience that as the principal you can make the greatest contribution to learning in the college and encouraged individuals to apply – the principal can and should be a leader of learning.