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Thoughts from Staff College.....the thirteenth in our series of Faculty blogs

Negative Capability and Deputies: A Leadership solution?

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I much enjoyed reading Ian Huntley's eloquently written blog from last month. I was struck by the mellifluous tones in John Keats' poem Autumn, which made me think about a concept which Keats called "Negative Capability". This is the ability of an individual to remain comfortable with uncertainty, especially important in decision making and when approaching wicked problems. For those of you who have experienced Staff College programmes, you will already know how we extol the concept of wicked, tame and critical problems, ideas developed by Keith Grint^[1]. As we reflect on another lockdown, consider your own ability to remain effective despite your current uncertainty? Spend less time trying to resolve it, especially as it will only ever get better, and spend more time working to remain effective despite all the chaos or complexity around you. If you are confronted with your own "wicked" problem, then think about how you are reacting to the agenda of others, or without the full consideration of a team approach. Individuals without Negative Capability are often, in their eagerness to be decisive, decisively wrong?

My second thought during this month of November, as we remember those fallen during conflict and wear our poppies, is the influence that Deputies have on leadership. Staff College leadership development provides an opportunity for us to learn how we currently lead and how we might need to change how we lead in different or new contexts. We introduce the concept of Deputies, which is often little-known let alone practised widely in the NHS. From my previous experience of Naval leadership at sea, (where worse things always happen!) the appointment of a Deputy is often instinctive as its importance is well understood. Whilst uncertainty is part of life, and something which you might expect in a maritime environment, the utility of Deputies should be better recognised. All leaders will know how lonely their role might be, perhaps often worried that they are not being told the whole truth? We also know how some leaders burn themselves out, not realising that their own resilience is fundamental to the effectiveness of the whole? As leaders, we might also expect self-doubt, especially in difficult and complex situations? So think carefully who you appoint as your Deputy: a confidante or critical friend to turn to: a trusted sounding-board: someone to prove your confidence and hence the confidence of your whole team: someone to develop as a leader in themselves and to inculcate this leadership responsibility throughout. Invariably when leading teams through complex problems you will need a strong and capable Deputy. Establish this role and you will increase your chances of success. Many great leaders learn their trade whilst operating as a Deputy. Some make it an artform, perfecting the reliable nature that respects and helps others and is there contributing full-heartedly towards the common purpose.

We hope that many of you will be able to join us at our annual memorial Aidan Halligan lecture later this month. Aidan was a Deputy Chief Medical Officer for England and,

as we remember his enduring memory, it is apposite to reflect on the influence that he had and still has from that role and in other positions of leadership during his life? I remember his calming and reflective nature, especially when times were stressed or complex. So, consider your own “negative capability” and your ability to remain comfortable with uncertainty. Think about the role which your Deputy might have and how, together, you will be able to confront the brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be?[\[2\]](#)

References:

[\[1\]](#) Keith Grint; Leadership: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford University Press; 2010)

[\[2\]](#) The Stockdale Paradox. “Retain the faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties AND at the same time confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be”.