

Five questions with...

# Paige Williams

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY PROJECT MANAGER AT GEELONG GRAMMAR SCHOOL, SPEAKER AT THIS YEAR'S HRIZON WORLD HR CONGRESS, TO BE HELD IN MELBOURNE ON 26-27 SEPTEMBER

**What do you do?** I am the project manager of a specific initiative focused on embedding positive psychology into Geelong Grammar School, the purpose of which is to establish the school as a 'positive institution'. I am working to imbed within the philosophy and practices of the school the tenets of positive psychology, appreciative inquiry and authentic leadership. This involves changing culture, structures, mindsets and behaviours.

**How does your work link in to the HR function?** Our aim is to have our people – our human resources – working at their best in the moment when we need them to be at their best. In positive psychology terms, this is called 'flow'. When people are in flow it leads to better decisions, better work being done and better energy levels. A central question to my work is 'How do our people experience Geelong Grammar School and how can we reflect the principles of positive psychology in that experience?' Many of the pathways that come from answering this question are directly related to the HR function, whether it is the way in which we think about and enact leadership, the conversations we have around review and appraisal, enabling our people to grow through the training and development that we offer them, right through to simple – but powerful – things such as the language that we use in our recruitment adverts.

**Do you think human resources has become more important within the education system in recent years?** Definitely. Some of this has been driven by the need to manage legislation around workplace agreements, but also schools recognise that people are the most important influencing factor on their core business – student learning. In education, organisations have to be human-centred to achieve successful outcomes. Research by John Hattie indicates that other than the student themselves, teachers are the most significant factor influencing student learning. Schools are recognising this through an increased focus on proactively managing their human capital and recognising that staff having a positive,

meaningful and engaging experience of schools as places of work, is as important as the student experience of it as a place of learning. This is a significant shift in awareness for schools, as they begin to understand themselves as organisations in addition to centres of learning, and has resulted in a more sophisticated view of the HR function.

**At HRIZON you will talk about the link between 'authentic leadership' and high-performing workplaces. Do you believe schools should be comparable to other organisations in terms of performance?**

Becoming a high-performing workplace is multifaceted – it involves achieving high-level productivity, high levels of employee engagement, providing fairness for those involved with the organisation and creating an environment that supports innovation. All of these factors are relevant to schools, however I don't believe a 'one size fits all' approach works. The way in which an organisation achieves these goals and measures their progress towards them should be appropriate to that specific organisation. Two schools may not choose to take the same approach or choose to measure progress in the same way, let alone a school and a business organisation. Productivity, for example, is a measure of efficiency, and while it is very important that schools are efficient, it is the effectiveness of teaching and learning that shapes our future generations. For other organisations, productivity may be critical to their survival and success.

**What is the biggest challenge you face in your role?** Continuing to encourage a shift in mindset that enables the school to see itself as an organisation as well as a centre of learning and so make the most of the opportunities that we have to develop as a positive institution.

Interview by Lorna Goodyer, managing editor, HRmonthly.

