

Identifying, recruiting and selecting leaders at network or individual school level: developing a bespoke programme for aspiring leaders

Background

As part of the response to the Local Solutions pilot project in Birmingham, NCSL fieldworkers and local authority officers have been working with a group of experienced headteachers to develop a bespoke leadership development programme for aspiring leaders.

This group of experienced headteachers had already been formed to explore new models of headship. The local authority had issued an invitation to those headteachers whose schools had achieved Investors in People status and had worked together on the Investors in People leadership and management strand. They were asked to investigate the changing context and nature of headship in order to prepare the city for recruiting leaders of the future. The composition of the cross-phase group was fairly fluid, with a maximum membership of around 40.

The headteachers expressed an early interest in becoming involved in succession planning. They had held their first meeting just before the introduction of the Local Solutions project, and were very well placed to get increasingly involved. As well as investigating the changing role and remit of headteachers in the future, they were keen to play an active role in identifying talent and offering development opportunities to staff from their own schools who showed leadership potential. Fieldworkers drew up a remit for the group of headteachers in order to clarify their role within this project, along with their ongoing remit for the local authority.

Following discussions, the headteachers offered to run a pilot programme for potential leaders. Recognising the need to identify talented teachers earlier in their careers, they wished to work with a majority of staff in their third to fifth year of teaching. They agreed to nominate up to two teachers each from within their own schools to be part of the cohort.

Who was involved?

15 local authority officers
40 current and experienced headteachers
21 aspiring leaders in their third to fifth year of teaching and other teachers showing leadership potential
30 governors
2 fieldworkers

Explanation of activity

The first cohort of 21 aspiring leaders attended a conference on 22 March 2007. Criteria for selection were carefully drawn up to address needs emerging from the detailed data analysis undertaken in Birmingham. Participants representing global majority groups, as well as from early years and 'hard-to-fill' areas were specifically targeted. The aim was to broaden participation in the programme once the impact of the initial programme had been fully evaluated.

The first cohort was involved in briefing sessions regarding the imperative for leadership succession in both the local and national context for leadership succession. The group comprised 15 women and 6 men, which reflects the demographic profile in Birmingham. Of these, 2 teach in special schools, 11 in the

primary and 8 in the secondary phase. A total of 17 come from white British backgrounds while 4 are from black Asian backgrounds.

Each member of the 'Cohort of 21' was involved in a self-evaluation of their own leadership characteristics. They explored these using the NCSL materials contained in the Framework for action, and evaluated their own performance as leaders, with each participant creating an action plan for his or her own development. Once the action plans had been drafted, the headteachers' group joined the cohort in order to disseminate their core offer of support to the group.

Each champion headteacher in the group had different skills, experience and development contexts, which were used as key leadership development opportunities within the programme. During the first training event, headteachers identified the core offer they could provide in response to participants' needs. These included shadowing, coaching, mentoring, and input on particular aspects of practice. These were then matched and circulated to the group, as a spreadsheet, alongside contact details for both parties. Visits were then arranged.

The following list contains some of the activities that emerged.

- Headteachers supporting the selection of the cohort of aspiring leaders, initially from their own schools and hosting activities in their own schools and, where appropriate, others' schools, and throughout networks and the city.
- Supporting the self-evaluation of aspiring leaders using NCSL materials and adapting them as required. For example, the Characteristics of leadership materials were used in one session of the conference to underpin a workshop, while NCSL Chief Executive Steve Munby's leadership themes from the Seizing success conference formed the link in another session.
- Helping to design and implement a bespoke/personalised leadership programme to overcome weaknesses or lack of experience identified through self-evaluation. Some examples include interviewing applicants, evaluating progress, monitoring, mentoring and coaching visits to other schools, shadowing, in-tray exercises, and initiating and developing partnership activities within the cohort.
- Championing the project with other headteachers and clusters. One headteacher leading a local consortium explained that they had already decided to provide some leadership activities for those teachers who were undertaking or who had completed Leading from the Middle. By working in partnership, it was decided that the consortium would focus the outcomes on good practice in designing and providing shadowing opportunities. This work is being documented to add to the local authority guidance, which is planned to be a feature of the strategic plan for leadership succession.
- Contributing to an initial half-day briefing to clarify the remit of the group, defining the project to ensure common messages and a shared vision and sense of purpose about the intended outcomes of the Local Solutions drive in Birmingham.
- Contributing, as appropriate, to the dissemination conference for the project by:
 - making a contribution to termly reports to NCSL and the local authority scrutiny committee

- making appropriate contributions towards evaluating the impact of the project and its effectiveness in securing a wide commitment to growing future leaders in Birmingham

Additionally, during the pilot programme, Birmingham found it had more limited opportunities for secondary delegates to visit a full range of secondary schools and to benefit fully from the workshop sessions. It addressed this for the second cohort by engaging the support of additional secondary headteachers.

Second cohort

Birmingham launched a second cohort in January 2008 with 31 teachers and a second launch conference. This time, the programme was advertised to all schools through the usual available channels. As a result, more applicants applied for the programme than could be accommodated. Strict selection criteria were applied, including the selection of suitable candidates from black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

The second programme was adapted to take into account the evaluations of headteachers and delegates throughout Year/Cohort 1. In particular, they amended one of the key sessions during the launch event to ensure that, this time, delegates were able to select from a range of development opportunities that had been pre-arranged. The headteachers had come together a week before the conference for a briefing session about the programme and were asked to identify their contributions at this meeting. These were then processed so that delegates could sign up for specific sessions at the first conference.

Outcomes and impact

- 8 participants from Cohort 1 have since gained promotion
- 14 participants from Cohort 2 gained promotion during the summer term of 2008 while one deputy headteacher coach gained a headship

Evaluations of the programme concluded that:

- The most positive elements and aspects of the project included the opportunity to visit schools and to shadow school leadership. The personalisation of the experience also emerged as a major strength. Other strengths included the opportunity to observe the inspirational role of the headteacher, and to begin to appreciate individual leadership potential.
- The least useful aspects included the heavy primary bias and the pitch of the preliminary session. This has been addressed in the roll-out of the second year.

Perceptions of headship

Evaluations of any changes to the perception of headship from the aspiring leaders involved were captured. Some statements included:

- "Headship seems much more appealing and interesting."
- "It has made me consider it more as a potential reality."
- "It appears more interesting than I initially thought. Meeting other headteachers has been really inspiring, especially with regards to their journeys to headship."
- "It has made me realise that headship is not quite as lonely and isolated as I had perceived it to be. I realise there is a support network and each individual has something to offer to make their leadership successful. It had seemed beyond me, but not any more."
- "I realise that the skills to be a headteacher are attainable and achievable."
- "More exciting and appealing, thanks to the passion shown by all of the headteachers spoken to."

Leadership potential

Participants were also asked about their perceptions of leadership. Comments included:

- "I feel now I have more leadership potential than before I started the course."
- "I now believe that this is something that I could do and that I would enjoy it, and it would allow me to achieve my goals personally and not just career wise."
- "I feel that deputy/headship is within my own capabilities now. Had felt that I had got as far as I could go for my skills, but see there is now much more out there."
- "I feel more positive and confident in my own ability now I have met similar people."
- "I have certainly spent more time thinking about my future and where to move to next, which I think is the most challenging part."
- "I feel more confident in taking areas of leadership in school."

A headteacher summed up the benefits of involvement in the project from the perspective of one of the New Visions of Headship group leading the project in terms of personal and professional development:

"This has given me a greater understanding of how we need to be more systematic in succession planning. It has strengthened my relationship with aspiring leaders in my own school and in working with others."

Perhaps the most powerful summary of the success of the project comes from one of those identified as having leadership potential:

"Why would anyone not want to be a headteacher when you can make such a difference?"

Any observations or key learning points?

It would have been better if the 'new models' group had initially had a clearer remit. As the group had only had one meeting, there needed to be a degree of clarification about the membership, which had not been finalised, making certain that other headteachers knew how the group had been chosen. The original remit of investigating new models of headship became subordinate to the offer to the cohort of aspiring leaders. However, the fieldworkers drafted a role and remit paper, accepted by local authority officers, which was presented by the head of school effectiveness at the March conference.

It would also have been better if the fieldworkers had been able to make closer contact with governors earlier.