National College for
School Leadership

Research Associate Report

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Threads, knots and nets

The impact of trust in leading learning networks

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Introduction

This report examines issues associated with promoting trust to support collaborative leadership within a Primary Strategy Learning Network. It explores the way in which a network of primary headteachers and their Gifted and Talented (G&T) co-ordinators in one local authority attempt to share the leadership of a school improvement project. The research draws on the leadership experiences and perspectives of both the headteachers and the co-ordinators in the context of promoting trust within learning networks.

Background

> "In a Learning Network, the threads stand for relationships, communication and trust. The knots represent what participants do together – the purposeful activity that joins them. The nets are the key points of dynamic learning – the meaningful work of the network." (Church et al, 2002)

A hallmark of current educational policy is the focus on collaboration in all areas of school improvement. Much of the current emphasis on collaboration comes from a focus on the needs of the whole child, as outlined in *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003a). The DfES prospectus *Extended Schools: Access to opportunities and services for all* (DfES, 2005) outlines a strategy to enable families to access a core of services developed by schools in partnership with others. Similarly, the introduction of Primary Strategy Learning Networks in 2003 (DfES, 2004) further promoted inter-school and cross-agency collaboration to improve the leadership of learning and teaching. In *Effective provision for gifted and talented children in primary education* (DfES, 2006), the importance of strong collaborative partnerships beyond the school was once again highlighted as a means of raising standards in schools.

The rationale behind this leadership strategy lies in the belief that networking in a co-ordinated fashion enables schools to achieve more together than they could in isolation. Collaborative leadership models highlight a range of factors that are important in promoting a networked approach. These include the presence of shared aims, effective channels of communication, differences in power and autonomy between schools, and preconceptions among different groups within each learning network.

Networked learning

In contrast to more traditional forms of grouping educational organisations and systems, the notion of networks stresses the idea of community. As the common element and principle of connection between institutions, agencies and people, Chapman and Aspin (2003) stress that networks "provide a new construct for conceiving of educational provision and a new vehicle for achieving change". The authors go on to claim that "networks provided a process for cultural and attitudinal change, embedding reform in the interactions, actions and behaviour of a range of different stakeholders." (pp 653–654)

Jackson and Temperley (2006) believe that:

1. In a network of schools, the strength of the internal learning culture in some schools enables other schools to learn from that through network activity.
2. A school's own professional learning culture is enhanced by networked learning. In other words, schools learn to collaborate more effectively internally by collaborating externally.
3. Permeability to learning from the external knowledge base (theory, research and the practice of other schools) is necessary to avoid stagnation and constant recycling of a school's existing knowledge base. (p 11)

According to Church et al (2002), in a network the threads stand for relationships, communication and trust. The knots represent what participants do together – the purposeful activity that joins them. The authors go on to claim that nets are the key points of dynamic learning – the meaningful work of the network. In an attempt to capture the creative spirit of a network, Church et al emphasise a number of key aspects of practice, summarised below:

- Make sure the broad consensus, the highest common denominator, the most we can realistically strive for, is clear.
- Keep central rules to a minimum – the objective is to support not strangle.
- Give trust-building and relational work priority, status and time. It is this that will strengthen the threads.
- Envision joint activities as more than just output activities – they are the knots that tie us together.
- See input and participation as a central objective – based on an understanding of 'contribution-brings-gain'. (p 17)

The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) document *Learning about learning networks* (2005) states that:

> "Networked learning occurs where people from different schools in a network engage with one another to learn together, to innovate and to enquire into their collective practices." (p 2)

The document goes on to claim that such activity tends to be purposeful, sustained and facilitated and that participants "learn with one another, from one another, and on behalf of others, both in the network's schools and the wider system" (p 2).

Primary Strategy Learning Networks

In 2004, the Primary Strategy began a programme to support primary school networks with the intention that, by 2008, the majority of schools would have the opportunity to be part of a network that promotes good teaching and improves pupil learning. By July 2006, 1,412 Primary Strategy Learning Networks had been established and 9,000 primary schools were in a network, representing 50 per cent of all primary schools.

According to DfES guidance, each should have "someone in a strong steering position from the outset". Although the person in this role is usually a network headeacher, the guidance indicates that the role "could be taken by a number of people including a teacher who is given time, funded by the network". Whoever the leader is, the DfES guidance suggests that network leaders "need time, vision, enthusiasm and strategic sense coupled with the support of the network, the school leadership and the LA". (www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary)

Trust in networks

Because trust is critical to collaboration in learning networks, it is consistently identified as a key driver in co-operative working within and across schools. Research into trust has identified a range of leadership behaviours that headteachers and other senior leaders may employ to provide effective leadership (Coulson, 1998; Evans and Wolf, 2005). It has also highlighted the significance of the school context as well as the role played by leadership culture in the development of trust over time (Dasgupta, 1988).

Defining trust

According to Bigley and Pearce (1998, p 405), social scientists have found the concept of trust too complex to be able to develop a universal definition. However, within the context of learning networks, Stephen Covey's (2006) straightforward definition is useful in defining trust:

> "Simply put, trust means confidence. The opposite of trust – distrust – is suspicion. When you trust people, you have confidence in them – in their integrity and in their abilities. When you distrust people, you are suspicious of them – of their integrity, their agenda, their capabilities and their track record." (Covey, p 5)

Key components of trust

Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (2003) emphasise that trust relationships involve risk, reliability, vulnerability and expectation. The authors cite five components, summarised below, that are used to measure trustworthiness:

- Benevolence: having confidence that another party has your interests at heart and will protect these interests.
- Reliability: how much you can depend upon another party to act consistently on your behalf.
- Competence: belief in another party's ability to perform the tasks required of their position.
- Honesty: the degree to which staff can be counted on to represent situations fairly so that colleagues trust them.
- Openness: how freely information is shared with others. (pp 181–208)

Trust lowers teachers' sense of vulnerability

In *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*, Bryk and Schneider (2002) discuss their 10-year study of more than 400 disadvantaged urban schools in Chicago. The authors argue that *relational* trust facilitates school improvement and that in school communities "where relational trust develops over time, achievement trends should also improve". (p 107)

Bryck and Schneider go on to point out that "regardless of how much formal power attaches to any given role in a school community, all participants remain dependent on one another to achieve desired outcomes" (p 125). Consequently, the authors claim, deliberate actions can go a long way towards building trust within a school community.

Swift trust

Time is an essential ingredient in forming trusting relationships. During a crisis, for example, there is usually little time to form trust relationships. In such circumstances, the establishment of 'swift trust' amongst individuals, teams and organisations that are strangers to each other is crucial.

Swift trust, a concept first developed by Meyerson, Weick and Kramer (1996, pp 166–195), relates to temporary teams whose existence is formed around a clear purpose and a common task with a finite lifespan. Its elements include a willingness to suspend doubt about whether strangers can be counted on in order to undertake a group task.

According to Coppola, Hiltz and Rotter (2004, pp 95–104), swift trust is built and sustained by a high level of activity and responsiveness coupled with a positive expectation that group activities will benefit all participants. Furthermore, it is underpinned by a number of variables including reputation, perceptions of adaptability, role clarity and technical expertise.

Professionalism and betrayals of trust

Paparone (2002) suggests that a key ingredient in building organisational trust is the prevailing professional context. Paparone claims that professional conditions are built by:

- achieving results (following through on commitments)
- acting with integrity (consistent behaviour)
- demonstrating concern (respecting the well-being of others) (p 47)

Furthermore, according to Paparone, betrayals of trust can be categorised as "contract-type violations", "communication-type violations", or "competence-type violations". The author argues that: contract-type violations may harm expectations, boundaries or consistency; communication-type violations may hinder members' willingness to share information or give feedback; competence-type violations can lead to a disregard for other's knowledge and skills as well as their abilities or judgements. Paparone concludes that:

> "Betrayals of trust can tear an organisation apart and rebuilding betrayals of trust uses up significant organisational resources, especially time." (p 49)

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were used to generate most of the data for the report. The interviews, which involved four headteachers and their G&T co-ordinators, took place in autumn 2006, about a year after the project was set up. To confirm the main findings, a validation meeting was arranged in December 2006 with a network headteacher and a G&T co-ordinator, together with an experienced external learning network facilitator. The names of the schools and participants have been made anonymous in order to preserve confidentiality.

Context of the study

The main study was conducted in a learning network in a local authority in the north east of England. The network, which focused on problem-solving in mathematics for Year 6 G&T pupils, was selected from the DfES *Primary Strategy Learning Networks Directory* (DfES, 2006).

Before undertaking the main fieldwork, a number of focus meetings and trial interviews were held in a learning network in an east London borough that had similar statistical characteristics and pupil profiles. This was to help identify key issues as well as to ensure that the main interviews were both focused and relevant to the development of trust within a learning network.

Findings

Each school is unique in character and context. However, as the participating staff shared their leadership experiences within and across the learning network, the following six common factors emerged that facilitated the successful development of trust:

- leadership
- joining
- nurturing
- resourcing
- communicating
- learning

These topics are developed further in the next section.

Interviews

Leadership

In *Managing to collaborate: the theory and practice of collaborative advantage* (2005), Huxham and Vangen emphasise that although embracing, empowering and involving members are important facilitative aspects of leadership, they do not in themselves make things happen. Highlighting the need, in appropriate circumstances, for a more directive role in collaborative leadership, the authors stress that both roles are essential to making progress:

> "They should not be seen as alternative ways of leading but rather as alternative ways of acting as aspects of a leadership portfolio. This then implies that those who wish to take an active lead need to be skilled at operating from both modes and managing the interaction between them."
> (p 228)

This research found that, in the early days, each of the headteachers spent a considerable amount of time establishing a shared understanding about the planned teaching and learning activities to be undertaken across the network. Headteacher B explained that when the nine schools first discussed day-to-day planning issues, there were concerns about the practicalities of managing such a large group of schools with a variety of strategic and operational agendas.

> "We agreed that nine schools was too cumbersome to organise effectively. Because there were some natural leadership divisions, we therefore decided to divide the learning network into three subgroups. One head in each subgroup was nominated to act as the lead head within a small central core group to plan and organise activities on behalf of others in the network."

In the initial discussion, the strategic group of three headteachers discussed procedures such as planned release time in order to encourage and inspire the co-ordinators to become active and committed participants. However, the data also indicated that although a certain amount of whole-school network activity took place afterwards, a good deal of the day-to-day organisation gradually began to centre around individual subgroups, some of which were evidently more committed than others. Co-ordinator C commented:

> "Our three schools bonded very well and our focus was very clear. I don't think there were any dissenting views or negativity – that was the strength of it. The headteachers transmitted their enthusiasm and commitment to the co-ordinators and they provided time and opportunities for the other co-ordinators and myself to work together. We were very fired up and committed to the network and so, for us, its success became a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Headteacher C emphasised that, in her view, difficulties within other subgroups were mainly to do with the commitment of individual headteachers, as well as with internal pressures rather than with personal chemistry or the ability to work collaboratively. Headteacher C mentioned that a newly appointed headteacher, who had taken over a school in "serious weaknesses", was keen to be in the network as part of his school's agenda for raising standards. But with an inspection coming up, this headteacher's short-term priorities quickly moved elsewhere. Consequently, he began to experience difficulties attending network events and, during the course of the year, he gradually ceased being an active and effective network member.

Headteacher B indicated that, alongside the daily grind of managing a school, she found it frustrating attempting to balance the varying interests of a range of headteacher colleagues. She maintained that:

"You cannot command and control or be the boss in the same way that you manage staff in your own school. Although you do your best to lead from within, it is tempting to keep your head down and just to do something yourself in your own subgroup, rather than spending valuable time motivating and challenging others or trying to keep reluctant partners on board."

Headteacher C indicated that, with hindsight, it might have been better to honestly address some of the leadership questions at the outset, such as why schools had applied to join in the first place, and whether networking was the best option for some headteachers compared with other leadership strategies for raising standards. Headteacher C also felt it might have improved the levels of trust within the group if the headteachers had more openly discussed each school's role in relation to the network funding they had received, as well as leadership responsibilities to the rest of the group. In her view, this might have contributed to a more professional discussion about the possibility of non-active schools withdrawing if they remained uncommitted.

Reconciling different views and building consensus

It is clear from interviews that both headteachers and co-ordinators found dealing with complexity and ambiguity, and focusing on a whole-network identity, difficult leadership issues to address. The result was that the 'wrong persons' appear to have ended up in the network for the best of reasons. Although headteachers who were already busy in their own challenging schools felt unable to spend extra time supporting inactive colleagues, they were nevertheless reluctant to remove them from the network, even though they did not have the capability to contribute or make it work effectively.

In *Beyond authority: Leadership in a Changing World* (2007), Julia Middleton highlights the importance of developing leaders who can take a wider leadership responsibility for problems other than their own, and who can still lead effectively when their legitimacy is in question. The author argues that although nobody wants to be a busybody, organisations need leaders who:

"understand the value of networks which extend beyond the traditional confines – and, more importantly, know how to lead them. The opportunities (and threats) ahead will not come neatly parcelled to fit the… culture… in which we have arranged ourselves. They will cross boundaries and come through walls – and our leaders need to be able to do this too". (p 3)

Summary – Leadership

When designing the most appropriate leadership model and creating an aligned team focused on common goals, it is helpful to reflect on whether network leaders paid attention to:

- establishing shared understanding about network organisation
- reconciling different views and building consensus
- encouraging and inspiring colleagues
- balancing strategic and operational issues
- dealing with complexity and ambiguity
- focusing on a whole-network identity
- holding less-active members to their commitments
- ensuring hard-to-reach schools are engaged and supported
- persuading non-active schools to withdraw if they remain uncommitted

Joining

It is generally agreed that learning networks are characterised by a commitment to raise standards, promote good practice and enhance professional development. In *Making Sense of Networks*, David Hopkins (2004) suggests that a number of key conditions, summarised below, need to be in place if teachers who join networks are to realise their potential as agents of educational change:

- consistency of values and focus – a common purpose focused unrelentingly on the learning and achievements of students
- clarity of structure – clear operating procedures for ensuring that maximum participation is achieved within and between schools
- rewards relating to learning – participants need to feel that their involvement supports professional development as well as student learning
- dispersed leadership and empowerment – the network needs to contain skilful people who work well together (p 5)

Perspectives on joining

It is clear from the interviews that although individual headteachers had a choice about joining, the local authority also provided a strong steer towards becoming involved. Furthermore, even though most headteachers were receptive to network opportunities, their schools were at various stages of development and facing different types of challenges at the time of joining. For their part, the co-ordinators only became actively involved in the joining process once the headteachers had already committed their schools to joining.

Each of the co-ordinators reported that they weren't directly involved or consulted about the joining process. Their active involvement only began once the headteachers had decided to form a network. Soon afterwards, however, the co-ordinators were invited to a meeting of the participating schools where they had an opportunity to discuss the key objectives with the headteachers. Then together, both groups assembled their ideas about the overall shape of the network.

In contrast to the headteachers, three co-ordinators had little previous experience of working within a collaborative partnership. Although Co-ordinator C had been involved in a one-off project with one school, in her view:

> "That was quite a small-scale thing and we weren't accountable to others as far as outcomes were concerned."

Network outcomes

In response to a question about the outcomes headteachers were trying to achieve, Headteacher A commented that:

> "Joining a network was something I had been keen to do anyway. The Primary Strategy Learning Network provided an entrepreneurial opportunity to attract some new funding (including an additional £2,000 for a focus on mathematics) for something we had already decided to put in the school development plan."

According to Headteacher B, the leadership development potential for senior staff in a network, as opposed to schools trying to do it on their own, was a more compelling reason for joining than funding. Headteacher C was interested in the potential of the network in raising self-esteem and morale at a time when schools in the area were "getting unfavourable media reports".

Headteacher A regarded joining the network as an innovative way of creating staff development that was driven by the schools themselves, as opposed to the local authority. Headteacher D saw the network mainly as an opportunistic way of building on the leadership development they were already undertaking:

> "At the time, we'd just come out of a difficult period and we felt we still had a long way to go. It was crucial that whatever we participated in was going have a direct and tangible impact on learning and teaching in our school, as well as being an extension to what we were already doing anyway."

A recurring theme among both groups was that, because they belonged to a small local authority, there was already a strong culture of working co-operatively in informal partnerships coupled with a tradition of sticking together in adverse circumstances. Headteacher A felt trust had already been well established among most of the headteachers:

> "Because most of the heads knew each other well, there was already an openness and a willingness to share what was going on in our schools. This was the most important issue for me because in a network you've got to be able to trust people with your failures as well as your successes."

To sum up, this research found that the anticipated outcomes of joining were to:

- develop new perspectives and eventually achieve higher standards
- access a wider spectrum of ideas and experience
- achieve standards by combining each school's skill set with others
- achieve key objectives beyond the capacity of an individual school
- maximise costs and resources

Risks involved in joining

Each of the headteachers reported having initial concerns about the ability of the whole group to work together. However, although they accepted that there might not be enough leadership support or trust in all the schools for the network agenda to take hold, they still felt the risks were worth taking. Headteacher C was concerned the distance between schools might make it impossible for them to work together effectively. Headteacher A remarked that from the outset she was worried that even if just a couple of the nine schools involved weren't fully committed, the network could soon start to fall apart.

Headteacher C indicated that although she was prepared to commit her own and her teachers' time to the network, it was crucial that those she would be working with would share her strength of commitment. Headteacher D believed that, for her, time was at a premium because of their very rigorous and structured agenda to move the school forward. It was essential, therefore, that the school's investment of time and money was "going to reap tangible rewards as early as possible".

Another professional risk commented on by the headteachers concerned the sharing of sensitive data between the nine schools. According to Headteacher B, they gathered all the statistical data for the nine schools and entered this information into spreadsheets to analyse comparisons about achievement across the nine schools. Headteacher B went on to remark that:

> "Obviously, that was leaving ourselves wide open, seeing other schools' data alongside our own… that element of trust, being non-judgemental, saying this is where we are as a school. We are all at very different places but we want to move forward as a network… and that had to be clearly established before we could go any further."

Co-ordinator A indicated that she wasn't really aware of what was involved in being in a network and, therefore, didn't contemplate any risks. She reported that in any school activity there is always a risk that some schools won't pull their weight but, in her view, they had to accept that. Co-ordinator D felt there was a potential risk a school might not achieve what they were anticipating. But, in her view:

> "You just have to take that on board if you go into a network because nobody knows what's round the corner."

Co-ordinator C summed up joining as follows:

> "Yes, it was a total unknown, we didn't have a clue how it was going to work out, how we would communicate, how we would keep the momentum. It was difficult to anticipate problems because we had no idea – no agenda, no timetable, just a year's activities planned in outline form."

Funding issues

Finally, each of the headteachers acknowledged that, towards the end of the year, they were aware that two of the nine schools had more or less withdrawn from the network due to other pressures that prevented them from attending. They, nevertheless, felt that belonging to the network was a valuable investment in terms of time and effort, as well as representing "good value for money" in terms of budget priorities. However, each of them remained lukewarm about the practicalities of withdrawing funding from non-participating schools.

Summary – Joining

In identifying potential partners and discussing and testing joint working opportunities, the following points should be considered:

- Have all participating staff been actively involved in the decision to join the network?
- Have individual schools asked themselves:
  o what outcomes are we trying to achieve?
  o what are the advantages of networking versus doing it ourselves?
  o what will other partner schools bring to the network?
- Have network leaders considered at the outset that:
  o there might not be enough support within all schools for the agenda to take hold?
  o some schools may have their own varying strategic or operational agendas?
- When discussing funding, has:
  o an overall accountability strategy been agreed?
  o a transparent strategy for schools falling by the wayside been agreed, including the possibility of withdrawing funding from non-active members?
- Does belonging to the network represent good value for money?

Nurturing

Because headteachers are the key players in a learning network, they have the potential to opt out of the process if they believe there is not enough in it for them and their schools. Consequently, maintaining headteachers' enthusiasm and commitment, as well as keeping other key staff on board, are essential facets of network support.

Accepting responsibility for effective working relationships

Interviews with both groups indicate that, at the outset, the core learning and teaching values set out in the DfES bid were clearly articulated to the whole network by all the participating headteachers. However, once the nine schools divided into three subgroups, evidence suggests

that none of the headteachers considered themselves specifically responsible for the network's overall effectiveness or for nurturing or supporting non-active members. Furthermore, because co-ordinators were not actively involved in the joining process, later on they did not feel empowered to accept responsibility for nurturing working relationships with co-ordinator colleagues across the entire network.

Within her budget co-ordinator remit, Headteacher B tried to develop an informal role in nurturing network relationships. But she felt that because this aspect of networking had not been precisely defined, it highlighted one of the most significant leadership aspects of network development:

> "Driving our whole network forward and encouraging co-ordinators to play their part was largely down to the commitment of each individual headteacher in their own school. As the budget holder, I could try to chivvy along less-committed colleagues and remind them about agreed commitments. But I could only do so much."

Headteacher B went on to argue that, according to normal custom and practice, headteachers only have authority over staff in their own school. So she believed that, ultimately, the network is only as effective as each school taking part will allow it to be:

> "Realistically, it has to be driven forward from within each school – that's the key."

An expectation that conflict might arise

In discussion with the headteachers, it was evident that in the early days there was little expectation that conflict might actually arise in the network. According to Headteacher A:

> "The honest answer is it never occurred to us that we'd have any genuine conflict. We felt that the key strategy was to be flexible and adaptable to meet problems that arose and recognise that, at different stages over the year, some people could give more than they could at other times."

Headteacher C was also unaware that conflict might arise within the network because she felt people were very much on board. However, she went on to point out that:

> "Obviously, within the network I was conscious that some schools picked it up and ran with it and of course there were others who were more reluctant to get fully involved."

Managing conflict and holding colleagues to account

Responding to a question about agreeing an exit strategy in advance for schools not contributing effectively, Headteacher A replied: "We never even thought about it because, in my view, if you're in it you stay in it, whatever turns up." Headteacher A suggested, however, that with hindsight, an agreed "dipping in and out" strategy might have been helpful for some headteachers. In her view, individuals could then more openly admit to the rest of the group when they were having difficulty contributing. Headteacher A went on to point out that:

> "This would have enabled the rest of the group to graciously accept the contributions that colleagues had made to date… In our working environment, it would be counter-productive to expect one head to pull rank and inform a colleague that he was not pulling his weight. This would have altered the dynamics of the network and soured professional relationships that had been carefully established over many years."

Headteacher C acknowledged that, towards the end of the year, it became evident to others that two of the nine schools had effectively withdrawn from the network due to other pressures that prevented them from attending. However, she appeared reluctant to get

personally involved with this issue. Instead, she was satisfied that her own subgroup was working very successfully and so she took the view that, in the situation they were in, the actions of others didn't significantly affect the initiatives she was directly involved in.

By and large, the co-ordinators were also lukewarm about an exit strategy. However, Co-ordinator B indicated that one co-ordinator appeared uncomfortable about visiting co-ordinators in other schools. Because this particular school had not undertaken agreed tasks, they didn't have a positive working relationship with the rest of the group. Co-ordinator B therefore felt that, in this context, a clearly negotiated exit strategy might have been beneficial to the whole network. He also indicated that since the local authority had actively promoted the learning network at the beginning, it might have been possible for them to provide external support and to help manage unresolved conflicts relating to individual schools.

Facilitation

Although the subgroup leaders had an informal role of encouraging and problem-solving, interviews with both groups indicate that the network did not deliberately set out to enlist the support of a facilitator to provide challenge and support, or to ignite enthusiasm within the network. In *The art of network facilitation* (NCSL), Ann Kilcher maintains that:

> "When groups are immersed in their work, sometimes they can't see the wood for the trees. Seeking outside assistance… usually clarifies direction, accelerates the process, enhances the journey and increases the sense of collective accomplishment and enjoyment." (p 2)

Kilcher then goes on to argue that facilitators help groups work together to reach a set of objectives or goals. They also, in the author's view, focus discussions more clearly and clarify understanding, whilst encouraging, sharing and problem-solving, as well as guiding, coaching, suggesting, negotiating and empowering the group.

Summary – Nurturing

The following are important considerations in protecting the health and vitality of the network:

- Do all network members accept responsibility for effective working relationships?
- Is there a clearly understood expectation that conflict might arise within the network?
- Are there established procedures for managing conflict, such as reviewing working relationships at each meeting?
- Is there an agreed process for handling unresolved conflict, such as bringing in an external facilitator?
- Are changes to the scope and aims of the project discussed and reviewed in advance?
- Has the need for facilitation skills training been considered?

Resourcing

Because financial management has increasingly been devolved from the centre to schools, individual headteachers now have considerable flexibility in relation to the management and organisation of pupils' learning and teaching, as well as to the professional development of staff. In this devolved context, resource allocations are primarily designed to fit within one school. However, when a network of schools is formed, designated resources need to be managed collaboratively. In this section, two aspects of the headteachers' leadership role in resourcing the learning network are considered:

- resourcing joint initiatives

- resourcing the networking process itself

Discussions with both the headteachers and the co-ordinators indicates that financial arrangements were successfully managed internally by the network. At the outset, the headteachers reached mutual agreement about an overall financial framework and a named headteacher took a hands-on role in co-ordinating resources. The network also agreed to fund additional administrative support on a part-time basis by using one of the co-ordinators. Network costs were then carefully identified, in accordance with the DfES funding bid, and appropriate sums were allocated to various budget headings.

Headteacher A commented enthusiastically on the resourcing arrangements:

> "As far as I could judge, resourcing was never a problem in any way. One head accepted responsibility for finances and we paid another teacher who normally worked two days a week for the additional time she spent getting day-to-day network activities organised. This was a very satisfactory arrangement all round."

Headteacher B explained how they had decided to fund the key headteacher meetings at a conference centre because they felt it was important to get away from school in order to concentrate on network business, and to liaise more effectively with local authority officers and other specialists supporting the network. As well as clearly identifying their own budget priorities, the headteachers took careful steps to duly acknowledge the contributions to the venture – both tangible and intangible – that the co-ordinators provided. Headteacher C stressed the importance, from a leadership perspective, of transparently demonstrating how much they valued the co-ordinators' contribution:

> "We felt it was important to show that we appreciated the extra effort that our busy co-ordinators were making by properly funding them to do what we were asking them, and ensuring they were doing it in work time. You can't run a network on the cheap or as an optional extra. You have to give teachers sufficient time to do things properly."

The co-ordinators wholeheartedly endorsed the headteachers' leadership role in resourcing the network. Co-ordinator D commented:

> "Resourcing was never a problem. Release time for co-ordinators was never an issue. We had some meetings in school time and some twilight sessions. It wasn't something that we were expected to do out of school hours."

Co-ordinator B also acknowledged the "trust development" benefits of giving co-ordinators planned release time away from school:

> "At all times, the co-ordinators felt that there was a strong commitment from the heads as well as a strong feeling of trust in relation to what we were trying to achieve within the network. It was highly beneficial that we were able to meet together as necessary to plan and push forward in this way."

Another key resource priority for the headteachers was funding staff development. In the early stages, the lead headteachers shared the task of organising and hosting meetings, and distributed agreed action plans to other headteachers within the network. Headteacher B explained how the lead headteachers had arranged for the co-ordinators to visit different schools to see at first hand what was happening, and to take ideas about curriculum initiatives back to their own schools. In her view, this promoted trust and commitment and also ensured they were effectively using the network to invest in the professional development of their staff.

Headteacher C explained that although they could have bought in external curriculum consultants, as some networks do, she believed this would only have had a short-term impact:

> "We wanted the network to have a longer-term impact on curriculum development, to influence our thinking as well as teaching and learning activities in each school. So we paid quite a lot of money to release people to be trained and cascade the training as much as possible."

Bearing in mind that there were difficulties about engaging some of the headteachers, it is noteworthy that none of the funding was earmarked to resource the collaborative process itself, or for the development of facilitation skills training, referred to earlier on, to openly address participation issues.

In response to a question about this, Headteacher B pointed out that the headteachers believed the emphasis in the DfES bid was primarily on funding staff development activities directly related to pupil achievement. Consequently, they had concentrated on buying in specialist expertise in relation to learning and teaching activities such as pupil data analysis, rather than diverting funds towards other forms of managerial support.

In *Leading the Strategically focused school: success and sustainability*, Davies (2006) emphasises that sustainable strategic change should enhance and develop its resource base and not depreciate its human resources. The author goes on to emphasise that "leaders have to ensure that the expectations they put on individuals do not wear out their most valuable resource, that of the teachers." (p 146). The key resource that a network brings to learning and teaching is the quality of its teaching staff. According to Davies, by carefully focusing identified resources on the strategic and leadership development process, a network has the potential not only to raise standards, but also to develop its own leadership capacity and capability for the future.

Summary – Resourcing

Ensuring that appropriate resources are allocated to essential network activities requires the following to be considered:

- Have network members discussed both these aspects:
  - resourcing joint initiatives?
  - resourcing the networking process itself?
- Has a clearly understood financial accounting model for resources been agreed?
- Have all network costs been identified and appropriate funding agreed by all members?
- Does a named network member have a hands-on role in co-ordinating resources?
- Has administrative support been funded for this role?
- Have network leaders duly acknowledged the contributions – both tangible and intangible – that all participating staff provide?
- Has the network collaboration process itself been allocated appropriate resources?
- Has funding been earmarked for the development of facilitation skills?

Communicating

In *Managing to collaborate: the theory and practice of collaborative advantage* (2005), Huxham and Vangen indicate that although communication between members of a core group within an organisation is likely to be time-consuming, it is "essential in terms of spotting early signs of disagreement and to gain trust, commitment and support" (p 67). Stressing the importance of two-way communication, Elizabeth Lank (2006) points out that there is a regrettable tendency to think of it as a process that merely "gets information out of people". She goes on to point out that

"offering people the facility to ask questions, provide feedback, comment and amend are all important parts of collaborative communication." (p 110)

Discussions with network headteachers indicated that, although responsibility for communication was informally assigned to one headteacher, a planned communication strategy to cover the overall communication needs of the network was not specifically developed at the outset. Headteacher B explained:

> "We didn't assign communication to any named individual. One head took a lead, partly because she was the budget holder as well as one of the experienced heads who brought the nine together. She kept the rest of us informed about the administration, meetings, booking rooms and stuff like that, by default really. We didn't plan it that way but that's how it turned out."

The co-ordinators each felt there was an effective communication process in place about curriculum initiatives being undertaken, including emails, feedback at staff meetings and 'learning walks'. However, Co-ordinator B felt that providing more structured opportunities at meetings to comment on the general progress of the network itself, in terms of issues such as individual teacher participation, could have been an important dimension of promoting trust and developing an effective two-way communication process. Co-ordinator C commented that:

> "There was plenty of information about what was going on in the children's project activities. But I wasn't aware of exactly what our overall communication strategy was. Although I knew what was going on in our subgroup, I wasn't clear about what was happening in other parts of the network. With hindsight, for me, that was a fundamental weakness of the whole initiative."

Headteacher B described how they had set up an email user group at the beginning so that headteachers could contact each other. However, if she were to do it again, headteacher B maintained she would not only aim to nominate staff with specific responsibility for communication, but also use newsletters and progress reports to improve communication. She went on to explain that:

> "Our group of three worked well but one of the other groups didn't seem really sure about what they were doing. We should have picked up that communication problem earlier in order to support them and perhaps stop them falling by the wayside."

Elizabeth Lank (2006) stresses that information and knowledge are the lifeblood of any collaborative venture. She goes on to stress that:

> "Many ventures have faltered as a result of poor communication. Having at least one person with responsibility for communication and information flows will significantly assist everyone else involved." (p 105)

Summary – Communicating

When establishing information flows to support desired outcomes, the following factors should be taken into account:

- Has a communication strategy been developed covering the key communication needs of all network members?
- Has accountability for communication been assigned to named individuals?
- Is there a need to summarise information for members, for example, in newsletters or progress reports? If so, who will be responsible for this?

- Are emails, websites and newsletters being used appropriately to provide information and to publicise the network's overall progress?
- Is there supportive, two-way communication with schools that are falling by the wayside?

Learning

David Kolb and Roger Fry (1975, pp 35–36) argue that effective learning entails the possession of four different abilities that follow from each other: "concrete experience" is followed by "reflection" on that experience on a personal basis. This may then be followed by the derivation of general rules describing the experience, or the application of known theories to it ("abstract conceptualisation"), and hence to the construction of ways of modifying the next occurrence of the experience ("active experimentation"), leading in turn to the next concrete experience.

There are three key learning spheres that are useful to consider in relation to network leadership initiatives:

- individual learning
- team learning
- organisational learning

Individual learning

It is clear from the interviews that the learning network provided a stimulating experience for the individuals concerned, enabling them to work alongside colleagues with different skills, experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, the data indicates that during the year, specific network tasks offered rewarding experiences and opportunities for both the headteachers and the co-ordinators. As a result, contacts between staff from different schools were consolidated and extended, which in turn began to lead to improved standards across the network.

As Elizabeth Lank argues, although individual learning cannot necessarily be managed from a strategic point of view, it is an important gain from collaborative activities (p 114). From the interviews with both the headteachers and the co-ordinators, it is evident that the network offered valuable developmental opportunities, which generated and sustained individual commitment and enthusiasm. This in turn helped to generate trust, as well as promoting a personal sense of well-being.

Team learning

From the data, it is also evident that the aim of learning from experience, which was clearly set out in the Primary Strategy bid, generated a strong team-learning culture. This was evident in the subgroups as well as in the whole-group activities, such as the network conferences, which, according to Headteacher A, provided opportunities to learn from experience and to improve the overall process of working together. Headteacher B explained that, at each step along the way, the headteachers reviewed progress, listened to staff and altered plans as necessary in order to move forward. In her view, that not only generated trust but it also gave the co-ordinators confidence and encouraged them to see themselves as potential leaders in the future. Co-ordinator B explained that:

> "The co-ordinators led meetings at the in-service centre attended by the headteachers as well as local authority and university specialists in order to report on what we'd achieved with the pupils. At these events, we reviewed together what had

worked best, what we might have organised differently, and how we could make further progress in the future."

David Gurteen (2000) emphasises the importance of using an "after action review" (AAR) to improve performance and to provide an opportunity to learn from the daily experience of working together. He describes AAR as a discussion of an event that enables the individuals involved to better learn from their daily experience:

> "By taking a little time out, by investing a little time, it is possible to review events and actions on a regular basis and continually learn from them… AAR asks the questions: 'What happened? How did it happen? Why did it happen? What was learnt?'… the spirit should be one of openness and learning. AARs are not about problem-fixing or allocating blame." (pp 1-2)

Organisational learning

Earlier in this report, it was pointed out that in order to promote trust and raise achievement, "learning on behalf of others within the network and in the wider system" is an important dimension (Westwell, 2005). Bearing in mind the Primary Strategy's firm focus on raising pupil achievement, it is hardly surprising that, during the first year of the project, time for reflection and review about network processes was to some extent traded for what were considered to be more pressing priorities: the learning outcomes for pupils.

Discussions with the headteachers and co-ordinators support the view put forward by Elizabeth Lank (2006) that organisational learning is often neglected because people:

> "feel they are too busy to share with their colleagues, they may feel that their colleagues are not interested in what they have learnt; no one takes the initiative to organise a knowledge transfer process".

Consequently, the author argues, one of the major benefits of collaborative working – learning how to collaborate – can be lost, and the participating organisation "reduces the return on its investment". (p 116)

Building on Kolb's and Fry's work, Honey and Mumford (1986 cited in McGill & Beaty 1995 p 177) identified four learning styles:

- activist
- reflector
- theorist
- pragmatist.

The authors argue that learning is enhanced when participants think about their learning style so that they can build on strengths and minimise weaknesses to improve the quality of learning (p 177).

From the data, it is evident that both the headteachers and the co-ordinators enjoyed the learning experience itself, and that they spent a considerable amount of time and effort reflecting on the learning that took place within the network. The data also shows that both groups were effective at making connections and abstracting ideas from the experience, and that they clearly enjoyed the planning experiences that were identified during the period of this research.

Summary – Learning

To make the most of opportunities to reflect on and to share leadership learning, the following considerations need to be taken into account:

- Has the aim of learning from experience been agreed at the outset and written down in the initial agreement?
- Is time set aside at each meeting for reflection and review about the process of working together, and action taken as a result?
- Do team members use processes such as after action reviews to help them with the learning process?
- Does the network consciously aim to move beyond individual and subgroup learning to learning on and behalf of the whole network?
- Are there agreed audit procedures in place to evaluate the adult learning process?
- Do members evaluate the network process itself – what worked well and what did not – in terms of collaborating effectively?
- Is leadership progress measured just as thoroughly as pupil progress?

Reflections

In *Building leadership capacity – helping leaders learn*, John West-Burnham (2004) argues that:

> "Trust is the 'social glue' of organisational life. Organisations that are high on trust tend to out-perform those that are not. Trust is the basis of personal and organisational effectiveness. Developing personal potential, securing commitment and engagement, maximising learning are all products of trust." (p 1)

The lessons in this small case study of one learning network cannot necessarily be generalised. Nevertheless, despite its relatively small scale, a number of clear findings and common features emerge. Firstly, from the initial joining stages, working out the values and vision that underpin the network are crucial leadership dimensions of network development. Moreover, sharing these perspectives and giving as many participants as possible a stake in the network helps to ensure that the network continues to flourish and makes an impact on achievement.

The study demonstrates that belonging to a network enables teachers with different experiences to propose activities and become actively involved in carrying them out. However, given the voluntary nature of network participation, headteachers who manage to find a 'fit' between their own school and the network tend to play a more active role than those preoccupied with competing priorities. Furthermore, when networked schools set their own change agenda in response to local needs and actively do things together, they can significantly affect the experiences of those around them.

Although no blueprint for developing an effective network is proposed, the research indicates that a key aspect of successful leadership is inspiring trust in others. In turn, this presupposes a commitment to open dialogue to develop a transparent communication culture within which trusting relationships can thrive. Equally importantly, the research found that effective collaboration is more likely to flourish when it focuses on communication and nurturing processes, as well as taking positive steps to develop the capacity to 'learn about learning'.

Finally, school networks that regard shared teaching activities as the "threads and knots that join people together" help to promote communication and trust, as well as generating powerful opportunities for individual adult learning. This, in turn, "keeps the net tensioned" and further develops purposeful leadership well beyond the boundaries of individual schools.

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