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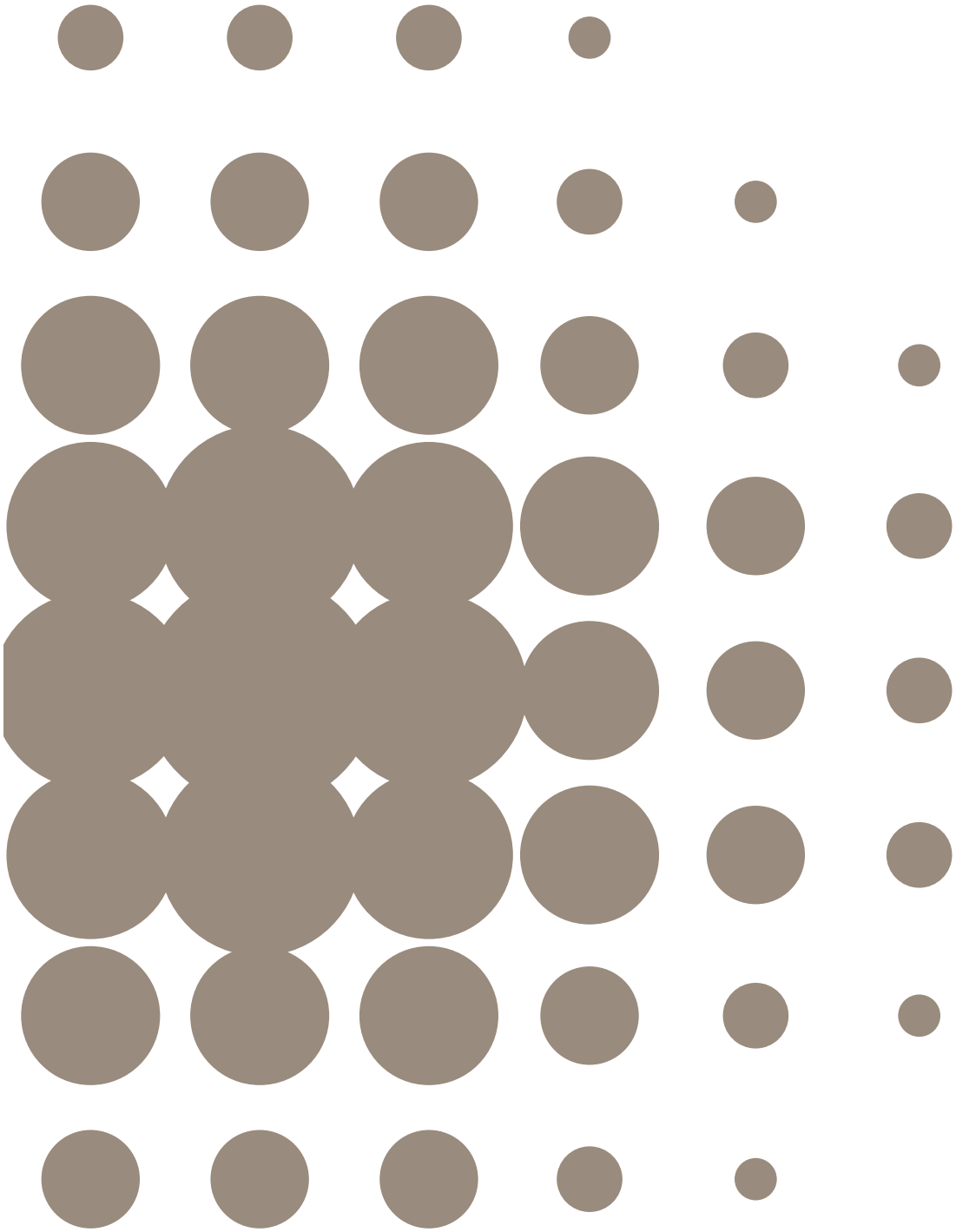
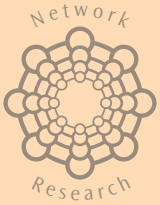
Network Research

System leadership in action:

# Where do system leaders come from?






# Where do system leaders come from?

## Tracing the development of new patterns and practices of leadership in school-to-school networks

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## Foreword

In this thinkpiece we set out to explore the interface between the practice of what we have called 'networked learning' and the practice of what has been identified as system leadership in action.

We know that networked learning activity promotes and fosters leadership with a high values orientation. Networks of schools create joint work arrangements (interdependent working and professional collaboration) that are developmental of leadership, making leadership more widely available and developing future leaders. In fact, learning with and on behalf of others is one example of what Michael Fullan has called 'system leadership in action'.

But networked learning is not just a type of learning, or a particular combination of participants. Unlike routine networking, it doesn't happen by accident. Shared purpose, active initiation and implementation intentions are required. It entails three distinct learning processes:

1 **Learning from one another** – where groups capitalise on their individual differences and diversity through sharing their knowledge, experience, expertise, practices, and know-how.

2 **Learning with one another** – where individuals are doing the learning together, experiencing the learning together, co-constructing the learning, making meaning together. Collaborative practitioner enquiry and collaboratively learning about recent research are good examples of this activity.

3 **Learning on behalf of one another** – this is where the learning between individuals from different groups or schools is also done on behalf of other individuals within their own schools and the wider network or system.

When successful, networked learning tends to be purposeful, designed and sustained over a period of time. For this reason the characteristic leadership behaviours that we know to be the distinctive features of successful school networks are the first places we would search in order to understand more about the practice of system leadership and the roles of system leaders.

This is not an entirely new hypothesis, of course. It resonates strongly with work that Ann Lieberman undertook in her study of the National Writing Project (Lieberman & Wood, 2004) – and it is a finding that is consistent with the history of policy in the UK. Collaborative policy initiatives and improvement programmes eg TVEI, EAZs, EiC and IQEA have consistently proved to be a breeding ground for innovative and committed school leaders.

Ann's work in this field has been internationally regarded for decades. Her work on networks and on teacher leadership under the auspices of the Carnegie Foundation in the US continues to be profoundly influential. We are privileged that she has agreed to be a partner in this publication.

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# Toward a theory of network leadership: what we know so far

From what we know so far from research, development and practice, there are some important 'conceptual hooks' that seem to anchor our growing understanding of the power of networks as a significant form of organising.

It appears, for example, that when practitioners form a work group with others across the system, it enables that new group to establish a different way of working together, an environment that accepts and encourages practitioners' ideas as the initial source of knowledge. It appears to build the capacity of some practitioners to assume and to learn about leadership, even as they practise it in their networks.

There are some characteristic behaviours that we can begin to identify that are the very things that encourage practitioners to improve their practice as some of them learn the skills, abilities and competencies of leading others. They are:

- **Becoming a member of a learning community –** as networks develop they conjoin the idea that both relationships and ideas are important and that practitioners, like their students, need a community that respects their knowledge even as other ideas are also put forward.

- **Providing an enquiry stance on practice –** this stance is far different from the idea that there is a solution. It implies talking about context, analysing ideas and data, legitimating the potential for all practitioners and the idea that learning to teach is a lifetime affair.

- **Working with colleagues –** developing ideas with colleagues helps provide practitioners with opportunities to be both expert and apprentice – practitioner and learner. It legitimates a different way to think about continuous learning. Learning how to do this 'social work' is critical to understanding how to facilitate for others (Grossman et al, 2001).

- **Engaging in the practice of leading –** as members in networks participate with their colleagues, they learn the language of participation as well as how to organise practitioners to work on their own learning. In this way practitioners participate in a 'safe' environment as they learn to lead with trusted colleagues.

- **Becoming more cosmopolitan –** as practitioners reach across schools and communities, they gain opportunities to see the world much larger than their classroom and learning often takes on new meaning.

- **Building a professional identity as a leader –** because networks provide time and opportunities to practise a variety of roles, some practitioners begin to change the way they feel about themselves as practitioners and take on an identity as a leader. When this happens, it appears to become easier to step outside one's school and think more broadly about one's participation and influence with others. Because networks involve people working and learning in new and different ways they provide opportunities for practitioners, first of all, to notice that they have these skills and abilities. Because networks provide a context of collaboration and challenge they generate opportunities for practitioners to experiment with these skills and abilities and to use them over time.

## Networks as a force for educational reform

Why would networks be the places where such leadership capacity is built? What is it about networks that both demands and cultivates a different style of leadership amongst participating practitioners?

Over the last several decades there has been increased attention given to practitioners and their need to know more and do more to upgrade their practice to meet the needs of a growing diverse population. Seemingly simple to the public eye, reformers, policy-makers and researchers find this to be a very complex problem. It entails not just the learning of strategies, activities and subject content, but a way of thinking about practitioner learning, leading and development over a career within a context that helps support these ideas over time.

The increasing pressure on schools to change is worldwide as they are being asked to re-form themselves and build a pedagogy and practice that attends to a growing knowledge society. At the same time there have been demographic shifts in population, advances in technology, greater expectations of what schools should teach and pressure to ensure that all students participate in some form of post-secondary education (Robertson, 2004).

Networks that intentionally try to build a context for professional learning and support are one way to embrace this complexity and many of them have been successful in the attempt. But we know little about them. How do they provide opportunities for learning? How do practitioners learn not only about their own practice but about facilitating learning for others? What appear to be the necessary conditions that support professional learning and leading that sustain over time? Answers to these questions will help us to understand how networks fit into the reform picture and how they build practitioners' capacity for continuous learning while at the same time creating the conditions for learning to lead.

## Characteristics of networks

In an early study of 16 networks in the US it was found that, regardless of their differences, these reform networks had agendas that were more challenging than prescriptive; learning that was more indirect than direct; formats that were more collaborative than fragmented; leadership more facilitative than directive; thinking that encouraged multiple perspectives; values that were both context specific and generalised; and structures that were more flexible and developmental (Lieberman & Grolnick,1996: Veugelers & O'Hair, 2005).

When we get beneath these generalities we find that networks appear to be an important adaptation to the rapid changes that globalisation is bringing to all countries of the world. They have some common characteristics that can be described and understood which may give us a clue as to the conditions needed for practitioner growth and development and the experiences that provide for leadership learning, conspicuously absent from most of the research on practitioner leadership. These characteristics are:

### Purposes

Practitioners have tremendous claims on their time, but appear to commit themselves to networks because they have a compelling purpose and this seems to be so whether or not purposes are intentional or grow up spontaneously. Some begin with lofty purposes, others with informal conversations. Some start with a charismatic leader, while others grow up leaders as they go (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996). The critical thing is that networks work to the degree that they bring people together with an idea that is attractive and engaging.

## Collaboration, commitment and consensus

Networks derive great power and energy in that they give their members a voice in creating a group in which their professional identity and interests are valued. Most practitioners have spent their professional life being self-sufficient in their classroom but are dependent on outside sources for expertise. Practitioner networks deliberately shift the way practitioners are involved. They provide an interplay between developing relationships with one another and developing ideas that form the basis of the 'work' of networks. Collaborative relationships build trust, which is essential to the development of ideas – and ideas build network interest and increased participation. It is this cycle that eventually builds commitment to these flexible, borderless organisational forms and begins to provide a foundation for leadership learning.

## Activities and relationships

Activities serve different levels of interrelated purposes. Presenters provide information and inspiration, often validating others' experiences. Collaborative activities attend to participants' needs and interests as they provide alternative ways of thinking. At the same time they build an identification with a larger group of peers committing themselves to purposes larger than their own classrooms – a calling for leadership. Simplistic schemes and prescriptions rarely get at the kind of problems that practitioners describe, but peer presentations and participation in discussions offer insights and experience with others who have comparable goals and constraints (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

Often, collaboration through activities helps develop the skills of communication, negotiation and accommodation that participants need to translate their ideas for change outside the network. As these skills develop, so do the relationships among the members of a network and these relationships are the very things that help commit people to the ideas and practices of the network.

Networks make use of electronic networking, conferences, workshops, practitioner research teams, small informal groups and study groups as well as more formalised presentations and courses. What is different in networks is the emphasis on opportunities for members to talk to and learn from one another and the relationships that form as a result. Participation is active – practitioners are presenters one day and audience or discussion leaders the next.

The relationships that develop through network participation serve as a community for support when practitioners go back to their classrooms. One network leader referred to the network activities as *"welcoming and forgiving"* as opposed to *"individual accountability"* and *"a prescribed way of doing things"* (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996). Engaging educators in activities in which they learn to work interdependently, reflect on their practice, value their own (as well as others') expertise, play leadership roles and learn to respond flexibly to unanticipated problems is central to both the purposes and the processes of school reform and a network form of organisation. In its way, this is close to the kind of work that practitioners find in their own classrooms with their students.

## Cross-cultural brokering, facilitating and keeping the values visible

Building the capacity for leadership may be the most under-studied aspect of networks, yet it might just be one of the most profound indirect impact measures for networks. Networks grow leaders – and not just that, but leaders with values that relate to wider system effects and who care beyond their classroom or their school. Most reform networks provide numerous opportunities to learn new roles, establish relationships and engage others in ideas about how to facilitate for learning. In important ways leadership involves both backstage and on-stage work both for those in formal network positions as well as those who learn through their participation in the network.

## Account of practice: learning from a national network in the US

In the National Writing Project (NWP), a national network made up of 185 local networks throughout the United States of America, leadership is an important part of each local network. After an invitational five-week seminar that takes place every year at every site, the site directors encourage practitioners to become teacher consultants (TCs). These TCs go on to take leadership in organising professional development in their own and other districts. They are paid for their work, which often goes on after school. Because the NWP is now over 30 years old, networks have a variety of arrangements for TCs who sometimes take a year or two off from their teaching work to be full-time TCs, before going back to their school. Sometimes these TCs go on to work in the district or the state. But how they learn to lead and what skills, abilities and understandings they have is still not well understood and often invisible to others. A few studies have now begun to document what practitioners learn and how that learning translates into leadership understanding.

In a pilot study of practitioner leadership in the NWP in 2004, we found that when practitioners wrote about ways in which they had learned to take on leadership in their local network, they could better pinpoint the elusive nature of their learning and how it was manifested in their leadership. Twelve practitioners wrote vignettes[1] reflecting on a time when they had learned something about their own leadership. They described how they learned to lead: by becoming learners themselves; by not being told what to do; through colleagueship; by learning to listen to practitioners' language (for one practitioner that meant *'show, not tell'*); organising others. Another practitioner learned that *"In a perfect world with perfect people, the perfect research group would exist."* She learned that good leaders need to be flexible as they *"guide"* and *"support"* learning. Others learned how to be sensitive to the practitioner culture through apprenticeship and being given a variety of opportunities to learn.

## Learning leadership through becoming a practitioner scholar

From 1999 to the present time, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has been developing a programme investigating how practitioners could develop a 'scholarship of teaching'. The programme began with the idea that scholarship was made up of three defining characteristics: scholars make their work public; open to critique; and presented in some form where it can be passed on and built upon by others. The big idea of the programme was for practitioners to study their own work and make it public and available to others. Its intent was somehow to codify the 'wisdom of practice' (Shulman,1987).

Data have been collected from the participants since the beginning and several small studies have been completed. A serendipitous finding has been that in the act of producing some piece of their own work and making it public, practitioners have become more articulate about their practice and have used this enhanced articulation in leadership roles they have sought and been given. In one study where two of the practitioners were followed for a year in their various settings, it was found that they learned, as they discussed their own work, to change their delivery dependent upon the audience and used the experience of studying their own work as a means of engaging different kinds of audiences in different contexts (Eiler-White, 2004).

As we learn more about the conditions that support, nurture and encourage practitioners' learning and leading, we will be able to be more intentional about how this can be sustained over time. As we codify the stories that practitioners tell we will be able to unpack the many experiences that motivate them to continue to enquire into their own and others' practice, not just for a project, but as part of the process of developing a professional identity as a learner and as a leader.

[1] A vignette is shorter than a case study and involves a practitioner writing about a series of events which illuminate acts of leadership (Miles, Lieberman & Saxl, 1981). Practitioner leadership is now being studied by the NWP using vignettes, interviews, case studies and survey research. There are currently over 4,500 teacher consultants in the NWP.

# Conclusion

When practitioners get opportunities to lead, they help create an environment for learning that can influence an entire school community. Novice practitioners find sympathetic and knowledgeable colleagues to work with, examples of practices to emulate, and habits of enquiry that will last throughout their career. Veteran practitioners open up to issues outside their classrooms that affect what goes on inside. They find new reasons to share their hard-earned knowledge and identify with a larger community.

In networks that link practitioners across schools, practitioner leaders help shape a community – indeed, make it more of a learning community – leading to the recruitment and retention of more and better novice practitioners, and invigorating the professional lives of experienced practitioners while raising the quality of learning for both students and the adults who work with them.

# End Note

This think piece was commissioned to contribute to and complement the energy and rigour of existing discussions of system leadership. In recent publications, which address the growing international interest in 'system leadership', attention is almost exclusively paid to the 'leadership' aspect of system leadership. Commentators explore the challenges facing system leaders and the skills they will need to respond positively to them. They look closely at current arrangements for leadership development and learning and question whether these are likely to yield the kinds of leadership practice that will meet both enduring and new system challenges.

In this think piece, Ann has contributed something new and different to the debate. She has shifted the focus to the 'system' aspect of system leadership. Ann has for many years studied how networks of practitioners and of organisations, principally schools, contribute to the professional learning and development of participants. For her it is networks that are the system in system leadership. Her discussion of the characteristics of networks, and in particular their contribution to system reform and professional learning, has brought a fresh and interesting perspective into the international debate about system leadership.

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