NCSL
National College for
School Leadership

Research Associate Summary Report

Ciaran Clerkin, Former Headteacher, Selwyn Primary School, Newham

Threads, knots and nets

The impact of trust in leading learning networks

Spring 2007

Background

A hallmark of current educational policy is the focus on collaboration in all areas of school improvement. Much of this comes from a concentration 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) outlined 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, 2003b) 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.

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).

In *Trust in Schools: A core resource for improvement* (Bryk and Schneider, 2002), the authors argue that trust lowers teachers' sense of vulnerability as they engage in the uncertain task of school improvement. According to Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (2003), trust relationships involve risk, reliability, vulnerability, and expectation. The authors cite five components 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

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, 2006, p 5

The contemporary leadership environment in primary schools increasingly puts teachers into new situations where they must quickly establish purposeful relationships with colleagues whom they may not know very well or have not met before. As well as senior leaders and classroom teachers from other schools, this context includes curriculum specialists such as primary strategy consultants.

Generally speaking, trust among peers is a well-established value within the teaching profession. However, with the advent of a growing number of dispersed groups and temporary teams formed to tackle challenging issues, this dynamic is changing. Therefore, in the current learning and teaching environment, establishing trust at short notice has become an important leadership issue.

Swift trust, the idea of this was first developed by Meyerson, Weick and Kramer (1996, pp 166–95), and relates to temporary teams whose existence is formed around a clear purpose and a common task with a finite life span. Its elements include a willingness to suspend doubt about whether others who are 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.

Methodology

This report examines issues associated with promoting trust to support collaborative leadership within learning networks. It draws upon the leadership experiences and perspectives of primary headteachers and gifted and talented (G&T) co-ordinators and reviews the literature about promoting trust within learning networks.

Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data for the report. The interviews, which involved four headteachers and their G&T co-ordinators in one local authority, took place during autumn 2006. To confirm the main findings, in December 2006 a validation meeting was arranged with a network headteacher and a G&T co-ordinator together with an experienced external learning network facilitator.

Main findings

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

- **leadership models:** designing the most appropriate leadership model and creating an aligned team focused on common goals

- **joining:** identifying potential partners and discussing and testing joint working opportunities

- **nurturing:** protecting the health and vitality of the network

- **resourcing:** ensuring correct resources are allocated to essential network activities

- **communicating:** building information flows to support desired outcomes

- **learning from experience:** reflecting on leadership lessons learnt and sharing these within and beyond the network

Table 1 provides a checklist to help leaders promote trust by addressing each of these aspects when developing their learning networks.

Table 1 Checklist for leaders to promote trust in learning networks

Leadership	Joining	Nurturing
Have network leaders paid attention to:	Have all participating staff been actively involved in the decision to join the network?	■ Do all network members accept responsibility for effective working relationships?
■ establishing shared understanding about network organisation?	Have individual schools asked themselves:	■ Is there a clearly understood expectation that conflict might arise within the network?
■ reconciling different views and building consensus?	■ What outcomes are we trying to achieve?	■ Are there established procedures for managing conflict such as reviewing working relationships at each meeting?
■ encouraging and inspiring colleagues?	■ What are the advantages of networking versus doing it ourselves?	■ Is there an agreed process for handling unresolved conflict such as bringing in an external facilitator?
■ balancing strategic and operational issues?	■ What will other partner schools bring to the network?	■ Are changes to the scope and aims of the project discussed and reviewed in advance?
■ dealing with complexity and ambiguity?	Have network leaders considered at the outset that:	■ Has the need for facilitation skills training been considered?
■ focusing on a whole network identity?	■ there might not be enough support within all schools for the agenda to take hold?	
■ holding less active members to their commitments?	■ some schools may have their own varying strategic or operational agendas?	
■ ensuring hard-to-reach schools are engaged and supported?	When discussing funding, has:	
■ persuading non-active schools to withdraw if they remain uncommitted?	■ an overall accountability strategy been agreed?	
	■ 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?	

Resourcing

- 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

- 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 publicise the network's overall progress?

- Is there supportive, two-way communication with schools that are falling by the wayside?

Learning from experience

- 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 (see below) to help them with the learning process?

- Does the network consciously aim to move beyond individual and sub-group 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?

Conclusion

Although the lessons in this small case study of one learning network cannot necessarily be generalised, nevertheless common features emerge. Moreover, the evidence provided by the participating headteachers and G&T co-ordinators clearly indicates that promoting and sustaining trust is a crucial leadership dimension of school improvement.

The study demonstrates that when school leaders set their own change agenda in response to local needs and share responsibility for managing the change process, they can significantly affect the experiences of those around them. Although no blueprint for developing an effective learning network is proposed, the research clearly indicates that a key aspect of successful leadership is inspiring trust in others.

In turn, this presupposes that planned opportunities are created for open and honest dialogue aimed at developing a culture within which trusting relationships can thrive. Equally importantly, the study demonstrates that learning networks that seek to create trust have the potential to generate powerful opportunities for adult learning as well as promoting effective leadership well beyond the boundaries of individual schools.

References

Bryk, A S & Schneider, B, 2002, *Trust in Schools: A core resource for improvement*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation

Coppola, N W, Hiltz, S R & Rotter, N G, 2004, Building Trust in Virtual Teams, *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 47(2), 95–104

Coulson, A. (1998) Trust and contract in public sector management In *Trust and contracts: relationships in local government, health and public service*, (Edited by Coulson, A.) Policy Press, Bristol, pp. 9-34.

Covey, S M R, 2006, *The Speed of Trust*, New York, Simon and Schuster

Dasgupta, P. (1988) Trust as a commodity In *Trust: making and breaking cooperative relations*, (Edited by Gambetta, D.) B. Blackwell, New York, NY, USA, pp. 50-72.

DfES, 2003a, *Every Child Matters*, CM 5860, Norwich: HMSO

DfES, 2003b, *Excellence and Enjoyment: A strategy for primary schools*, Nottingham, DfES

DfES, 2005, *Extended Schools: Access to opportunities and services for all*, Nottingham, DfES

DfES, 2006, *Effective Provision for Gifted and Talented Children in Primary Education*, Nottingham, DfES

Evans, P & Wolf, B, 2005, Collaboration rules, *Harvard Business Review*, 83, 96–104.

Meyerson, D, Weick, K E & Kramer, R M, 1996, *Swift Trust and Temporary Groups. In Trust In Organisations: Frontiers Of Theory And Research* (eds Kramer, R M & Tyler, T R), pp 165–95, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications

Acknowledgements

Research associate reports available in Spring 2007

■ **Lifting the lid on the creative curriculum**
How leaders have released creativity in their schools through curriculum ownership

Tim Burgess, *Deputy Headteacher, Holy Trinity Junior School, Surrey*

■ **Getting out through the middle**
The role of middle leaders in the journey from failure to success

Jenny Francis, *Former Headteacher, Collenswood School, Stevenage*

■ **Hidden gold**
Schools managing knowledge capital during periods of change

Sean Heslop, *Headteacher, Tiffin Boys' School, Kingston upon Thames*

■ **The strength of weak school ties**
The importance of 'weak' relationships in sharing good practice between schools

Paul Lawrence, *Deputy Principal, Comberton Village College*

■ **A better way?**
Exploring the challenge of leading curriculum change at Key Stage 3

Richard Steward, *Headteacher, Woodroffe School, Lyme Regis, Devon*

Research Associate Programme

To download this publication, please visit
www.ncsl.org.uk/publications

We welcome enquiries about the Research Associate programme. For further information about:

■ current projects

■ previously published reports

■ becoming a research associate

Please visit the website:
www.ncsl.org.uk/researchassociates

Disclaimer
In publishing Research Associate reports, NCSL is offering a voice to practitioner leaders to communicate with their colleagues. Individual reports reflect personal views based on evidence-based research and as such are not statements of NCSL policy.