NCSL
National College for
School Leadership

**Inspiring leaders;
improving children's lives**

Stepping up, stepping out:
learning about leadership
in perspective

NCSL's Leadership Network in conference

Stepping up, stepping out: learning about leadership in perspective

In 2007 NCSL's Leadership Network annual conference 'Stepping up, stepping out' brought together over 500 school leaders and others in education-related roles to explore their learning about school leadership in the current context and share perspectives drawn from research, policy and practice.

This booklet provides a selection of short think pieces which illuminate thinking on the leadership challenges faced by school leaders in the 21st century, outline strategies for addressing these and invite you to pause for reflection on the issues raised.

Edited by Karen Carter and Tricia Sharpe

Strategic leadership in action; using strategic intent

Reena Keeble

Reena Keeble, Headteacher of Cannon Lane First School and a Regional Leader of the London Leadership Network, explores the concept of 'strategic intent'. She shows how powerful this can be for all members of the school community.

Headteachers are faced with constant change. As Bush and colleagues (1994) point out headteachers are 'expected to absorb and accept the agenda for change and to succeed in ways which satisfy learners, parents, governors, and teachers and, above all, to comply with the demands of government'. If schools are to survive and be sustainable in the long-term then headteachers need to be strategic. One approach, although not the only approach by any means, in making sense of continuous change in education, is to adopt the use of the concept of strategic intents.

From my own research into how headteachers implement change, I found strategically focused heads were more likely to employ strategic intent as an approach in dealing with change. Hamel and Prahalad (1994) define strategic intent in terms of the 'three Ds – direction, discovery and destiny'. Strategic intent could be best explained as a big idea which conveys a sense of direction to everyone in the school, a long-term view about the position that the school hopes to build over a period of five years or so. Take for example a school's strategic intent 'everyone should be using ICT with confidence in all subjects' – this does not tell you how to do it (the operational aspects), but it does involve everyone in the school taking part and contributing in their own way. There may well be an element of discovery by staff, pupils and governors along the way as they explore new and innovative ways in working towards this strategic intent. As everyone in the school is working to the same direction, staff, pupils and governors will perceive the strategic intent to be worthwhile and hence the strategic intent will have a sense of destiny for all those in the school.

The advantage of strategic intent as an approach is that while it is stable over time and provides consistency for the staff, pupils and governors in terms of direction, discovery and destiny, it leaves room for reinterpretation as new opportunities emerge. Turning strategic intent into reality requires everyone in the school understanding the exact way in which his or her contribution can help towards the achievement of the strategic intent. Each individual needs to see a link between his or her job and the attainment of the emotionally compelling goal. Strategic intent then becomes personalised for every individual in the school.

One way of articulating strategic intents is through creating opportunities for individuals in the school to engage in formal, and more importantly informal, strategic conversations. The headteachers in my study created space for the formal and informal conversations by creating events and systems through which views could be exchanged outside the immediate pressures of the day-to-day events. Communication is a key factor to the success of using a strategic intent approach.

My study found where headteachers were using strategic intents, they tended to be reflective. This requires individuals to work out their own meanings about how they were contributing towards achieving the strategic intents. This process involves learning at both an individual and whole-school level. At an individual level, strategically focused leaders are open to learning themselves. This is referred to as the 'absorptive capacity' of leadership, the ability to learn. Learning occurs through studying, through talking, through doing and through using. Strategically focused leaders need to have the capacity to recognise new information, assimilate it and make sense of it in order to apply it towards new ends in their schools.

At a whole-school level, using strategic intents enabled the headteachers to not only create learning opportunities for their schools to question their own practices and where appropriate, change their future direction, but also to experiment and make mistakes along the way. Strategic intents constrain the where, but not the how. Absorptive capacity requires constant experimentation and a willingness to tolerate small failures.

Learning in itself of course, does not necessarily produce an outcome. It is only when learning is

specifically targeted towards the creation of a plan to win, and when the information generated through learning is used to support the creation and implementation of such a plan – only then does corporate learning produce real value.

The process of developing and working towards achieving the strategic intents emphasises the importance of involving all those in the school. This requires the individuals to have the conceptual tools for strategic thinking about their own work. By helping their staff to understand and relate to their school's strategic intents in a meaningful way, the headteachers were able to build a greater sense of commitment and alignment amongst their staff. Appointing the right people for the job was regarded by the heads in this study to be absolutely crucial in ensuring alignment with the school's values and aspirations. Alignment, however, is not the same as agreement and many headteachers acknowledged the need to have individuals on their staff who would question and challenge. This is best summed up by one headteacher:

"We're certainly not looking for clones, we like a little bit of grit in the machine…and a bit of difference, as long as it is reasonable, it is creative, it's dynamic."

Having big ideas is not enough; headteachers need to be able to demonstrate results. At some stage, the headteacher will need to operationalise the strategic intent. One way of achieving strategic intents is by setting small challenges so that they become milestones to achieving the overall arching strategic intent. Challenges, in many ways are like strategic intents; they are more prescriptive about ends rather than about means, allowing individuals to discover the specifics of the 'how' along the way. In our example of 'everyone should be using ICT with confidence in all subjects' the mini challenges might consist of becoming familiar, using and keeping up-to-date with appropriate software, continuous professional development, implementing a rolling programme of replacing hardware, appointing key staff, applying for external quality marks to validate the quality of ICT teaching and so on. By achieving the mini challenges on the road to the strategic intent, the

headteacher can be seen to be acting and individuals can see the impact of their own contribution towards the strategic intent. Thus they are more likely to experience success and consequently become more motivated to achieve further challenges. Using a strategic intent approach frees the school from drawing up detailed operational plans, although you may choose to set out some of the mini challenges beforehand.

In conclusion, headteachers who are strategically focused put a great emphasis on improving their school's organisational capacity through the use of strategic intents by developing four key areas:

1. communicating

2. learning

3. aligning

4. executing

Reflection point…

What is your response to the concept of strategic intent as presented here?

In what ways is it relevant to your own situation?

How might you move towards this approach?

Use the space provided at the back of this booklet to record your thoughts and ideas.

References

Pietersen, W G, 2002, Reinventing Strategy; Using Strategic Learning to Create & Sustain Breakthrough Performance, New York, John Wiley & Sons

British Education Leadership, Management and Administration's Annual Conference, Stone Staffordshire, October, 2004, The Performance of Leaders: Aims, Impact and Development.

Bush, T, Hamel, G & Prahalad, C K, 1994, Competing for the Future, Boston, Harvard Business School Press

Linked resources

For more detail on Reena's approach, see NCSL's *Ldr special supplement, Stepping up, stepping out* (2007) available online at **www.ldr-magazine.co.uk.**

Professional learning communities: messages for system leadership and succession planning

Louise Stoll

In this think piece, Louise Stoll, Visiting Professor at the London Centre for Leadership in Learning, Institute of Education, considers the mutually supportive relationship and congruence between professional learning communities, system leadership and succession planning.

The idea of professional learning communities is stimulating considerable interest internationally. They are an important means to establish lasting new collaborative cultures that focus on building capacity for continuous and sustainable professional learning that is directed towards enhancing pupil learning. A professional learning community (PLC) is an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision. Supporting and working with each other, inside and outside their immediate community, they enquire into their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils' learning. Leadership is critical to developing and sustaining PLCs. But, what might this mean for system leadership and succession planning?

In 2006, I was involved in a collaborative research project on creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities. Drawing on findings from that project, other projects in which I have been involved, and research and development with which I am familiar, I speculate in this piece on possible connections between PLCs, system leadership and succession planning, looking at eight characteristics displayed in PLCs.

PLC characteristics, system leadership and succession planning

Shared values and vision – working with others to create a shared sense of purpose and direction is at the heart of successful leadership and PLCs. System leaders demonstrate this in their own schools, often in extremely challenging situations, as well as with new partners on initiatives that depend on forging shared values and vision. Colleagues who are new leaders benefit from opportunities to participate actively in shaping values and vision, as well as taking responsibility for initiatives that help turn the vision into reality.

Collective responsibility for learning means caring deeply about and committing effort towards ensuring all pupils' learning. System leaders are committed to success for all children and young people; they don't just think about their own schools. They give to others beyond their schools and learn on behalf of others in their own schools, feeding back their experiences for colleagues' benefit. Promoting new leaders' development means enabling them to look beyond their classrooms, year groups or subjects and consider moral purpose related to all children and young people. Collective responsibility is built by experiences such as participating and leading cross-curricular or key stage groups, team teaching, shadowing others with different responsibilities and exchanging assignments.

Collaboration focused on learning involves intensive interaction that engages colleagues in opening up their beliefs and practices to investigation and debate. Collaboration that makes a difference involves examining and extending existing ideas, building in time for dialogue and practising conflict resolution. Failure and uncertainty are shared and discussed with a view to getting help and support. Effective system leaders develop skills to help peers who may be struggling and invite colleagues to shadow them to extend their own capacities. Collaborating with wider community members may mean that system leaders have to reconsider their own assumptions about successful collaboration.

Professional and collective learning – learning is central to PLCs and to leadership. All leaders need to demonstrate they are learners. System leaders working with other leaders and community partners get involved in collective learning, arriving at shared meaning and increased common understanding as members of the community make sense of their experience, information and data, interpret it communally and, ultimately create new knowledge together. When system leaders are out of their schools, an opportunity is provided for potential school leaders to step up and learn about and reflect on leadership.

Reflective professional enquiry – successful leaders are like PLCs – enquiry-minded. They

gather necessary data, ask questions, always seeking deeper understanding about issues affecting pupils' learning. System leaders look at other leaders' practice through an external lens and know that their various connections provide useful sources of evidence to help colleagues answer questions related to their purpose and focus. Leaders intent on building leadership capacity create and promote a culture of enquiry in their schools, stimulating and encouraging teachers to engage differently with their practice.

Openness, networks and partnerships – schools operating as PLCs seek learning from individuals and organisations outside their boundaries. The changing context of leadership also means that leading and managing collaborations with other agencies and schools is a reality. System leaders epitomise this; they want and need to look beyond their schools. Leaders in development also learn from active involvement in leadership learning with colleagues in other schools. This may offer them opportunities to take on community and network leadership roles.

Inclusive membership – PLCs value all of their members. There is no hierarchy; everyone is an active and committed member of the community. Diverse views are encouraged, helping enrich the dialogue. Structures and processes facilitate everyone's equal involvement. System leaders pay attention to developing facilitation skills that promote and value dialogue, and strategies such as appreciative inquiry, open space and action learning sets. In growing new leaders, teachers may be identified who may not naturally put themselves forward, as well as members of support staff with potential to take on leadership roles in a changing system.

Mutual trust, respect and support – PLCs are characterised by trust, respect and support between colleagues. System leaders working as School Improvement Partners (SIPs) and critical friends, for example, know how important it is to build trust if they want colleagues in other schools to engage in honest self-evaluation and

be willing to be challenged by a peer. Such trust takes time to develop, especially in a climate where competition is encouraged. Modelling trust, creating a culture where teachers feel free to experiment and take risks, and encouraging innovative strategies all help to grow leadership.

Conclusion

Effective PLCs reflect and reinforce the features of system leadership and succession planning: openness, growth, enquiry, learning and, ultimately, collective responsibility for making a difference. What can be a more important connector?

Reflection point…

How far and how successfully do your own professional learning communities model the eight characteristics identified here?

How can you encourage these communities to work more effectively to establish system leadership and succession planning?

Use the space provided at the back of this booklet to record your thoughts and ideas.

References

Stoll, L & Louis, K S, 2007, Eds, Professional learning communities: elaborating new approaches, in Professional Learning Communities: Divergence, Depth and Dilemmas, Maidenhead, Open University Press/McGraw Hill.

Bolam, R, McMahon, A, Stoll, L, Thomas, S, Wallace, M, Hawkey, K & Greenwood, A , 2005, Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities, DfES Research Brief RB637, University of Bristol. www.dfes.giv.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RB637.pdf

Linked resources

The publication *Professional Learning Communities: Source materials for school leaders and other leaders of professional learning* can be downloaded free of charge from **www.ncsl.org.uk/publications.**

Deep leadership; the redesigning of education

Kai Vacher

In this piece, Kai Vacher, Head of Innovation and Personalising Learning at the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT), identifies the challenges and leadership implications of personalising learning.

Working with primary, secondary and special schools, the SSAT and NCSL are embarking on a national development and research project to investigate the leadership required for personalising learning.

What do we mean by this well used, but often misunderstood, phrase 'personalising learning'? Since the SSAT began working with schools on personalising learning in 2004, our definition has been: 'Meeting more of the educational needs of more students more fully than ever before'. A tall challenge, but one that school leaders, teachers and students are embracing, resulting in some very positive results.

To develop personalising learning in a school we believe that deep leadership is required. Deep leadership is one of the four 'Deeps' identified by the SSAT in its second phase of work with schools on personalising learning.

At its core, deep leadership is about redesigning education so that, through a culture of personalisation and co-construction with shared leadership, the school secures deep experience, deep support and deep learning for all its students.

Through our development and research work with schools to date, there are three lessons on the leadership of personalising learning that seem to be emerging.

Personalising learning as the priority

First, schools that are making the most progress with the nine gateways framework and the four deeps are placing personalising learning at the top of their agenda and making it their strategic intent. Once school leaders do this they are faced, almost immediately, with three challenging and important questions:

1. Is my school designed for personalising learning? If it is to be my strategic intent, do I need to re-organise my school?
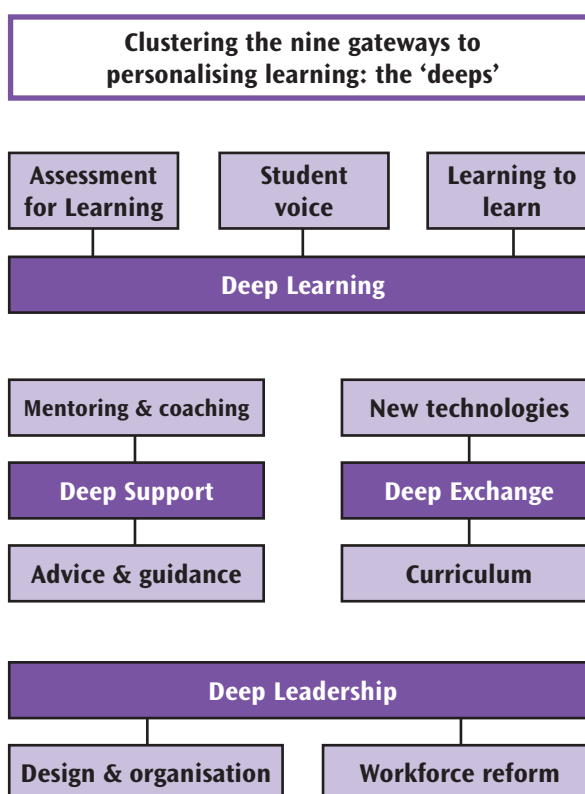
2. How do I encourage and support my colleagues to be innovators?

3. Linked closely to the previous point: how do I move from a culture of compliance to a culture of creativity in my school?

Building complementarity across strategies

The second lesson is that whether schools adopt the nine gateways or the four deeps, a key challenge for leaders is how to build complementarity across them.

For example, a school starting out on the journey of personalising learning might want to begin with developing student voice, one of the nine gateways, and so sets up a team of three staff led by an assistant principal. The school then decides to develop a second gateway, Assessment for Learning, using a similar structure but using different members of staff. However, one team member, not the leader, is a member of both teams. When a third gateway, learning to learn, is set up similar cross-membership is built into the design. The student voice team has continuing links with the teams responsible for the two associated gateways.

Clustering the nine gateways to personalising learning: the 'deeps'

Assessment for Learning	Student voice	Learning to learn

Deep Learning

Mentoring & coaching		New technologies

| **Deep Support** | | **Deep Exchange** |

| Advice & guidance | | Curriculum |

Deep Leadership

Design & organisation	Workforce reform

This may seem like a basic lesson already learned by many school leaders. However the tendency for schools and organisations to operate in silos is familiar to many leaders. This is detrimental to developing personalising learning and it is an issue that has to be addressed if progress is to be made.

Achieving change in classrooms

The third lesson is that, despite significant change in many aspects of schooling in England in the last 20 years, there has been relatively little change in what goes on in many classrooms; or, to quote a headteacher: *"Everything has changed but nothing has changed."*

Experience from the business world suggests that organisational designers need to consider how tightly or loosely coupled their organisation is. In schools, we can distinguish between two types of coupling: professional coupling and institutional coupling.

Professional coupling manifests itself in how autonomous a teacher is. Traditionally teachers were loosely coupled, as the judgment of a teacher was usually weakly monitored by senior management and many teachers worked in isolation from colleagues. However, the national curriculum, national testing and the introduction of national strategies has had a big impact, with teachers, schools and the education system as a whole becoming more tightly coupled.

Institutional coupling refers to the nature of coupling between administrative structures. Historically, this has been tight coupling, with, for example, schools divided into age cohorts and year groups; with the school year divided into terms with set holidays in between; and with each term divided into weeks and days.

The third lesson is that school leaders need to consider how tight or loose the professional and institutional coupling should be to achieve improvements in personalisation. Should we, for example, organise professionals into more tightly coupled learning communities so that they can share innovation more effectively?

On the other hand, some of the administrative structures need to be more loosely coupled to secure personalisation. For example, do year groups need to be abandoned to accommodate a stage not age curriculum? How we achieve the appropriate balance between tight and loose coupling of different components of the 21st century school is a major challenge for school leaders.

Next steps

Clearly we are at the early stages of the personalising learning journey and there is still a great deal to learn. To support schools to develop next practice in deep leadership the SSAT and NCSL have set up a development and research network in each region, facilitated by a school, to explore next practice in deep leadership for personalising learning.

Reflection point...

What is your response to the ideas presented here: the definition of personalising learning, the four deeps and the nine gateways?

What developments do you see as necessary in your own situation to achieve change?

Use the space provided at the back of this booklet to record your thoughts and ideas.

References

Hargreaves, D, 2006, A New Shape of Schooling, London, SSAT

Hargreaves, D, 2006, Deep Leadership, London, SSAT

Linked resources

For more information on personalising learning, the nine gateways, the four deeps or the Development and Research Network please log on to **www.ssatrust.org.uk**.

Reflection point notes

Reflection point notes

Use the space provided to record your thoughts and ideas.

Reflection point notes

Use the space provided to record your thoughts and ideas.

To order a copy of this publication please email **ln@ncsl.org.uk** quoting the reference number PB232 or alternatively it can be downloaded from **www.ncsl.org.uk/publications**.

PB232/book2