Network leadership in action:

What does a network leader do?

One of the distinctive features of successful networks is dedicated facilitation and leadership. This may come from one person or from a small team, depending on the scale of the network and the nature of its activities.

As part of the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) has been conducting research amongst network leaders and others in leadership and support roles in school networks to find out how they have interpreted their roles. What has emerged is an understanding of the key issues facing leaders and an appreciation of the complexity and importance of their role in school networks.

The tools in this series have been generated largely through the work of the Networked Learning Communities programme over the past two years. They draw upon the findings of a research seminar, the outcomes of a collaborative enquiry undertaken by Ron Ritchie and the NLC steering group, and from collaborative work with Demos.

Key roles
This tool is structured around a series of key roles. Although they might not all become critical immediately after the launch of the network, they may become issues if they are not planned for at the beginning. This approach was informed by the question 'What would I have liked to have known before I started?'

Reflective questions
The reflective questions are designed to challenge thinking about the systems and processes of a network to enable the key roles to be tackled successfully.

Possible starting points
These provide suggestions and ideas about how you might approach the questions. Sometimes these are quite formal, where they have been synthesised from a discussion or taken from some of the outcomes generated. Occasionally they are statements or direct quotes from an individual.

Examples from practice
Also included are some examples from practice to illustrate how network leaders and others in leadership and support roles in school networks have tackled certain issues and challenges.

For more information about
networked learning communities visit:
www.nlcexchange.org.uk
www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc

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Networked Learning Communities

	Key roles	Reflective questions
Communication	A core activity for a network leader, communication in a network is multidirectional and complex. Multiple and diverse audiences, contexts and purposes demand a broad repertoire of communications skills. Listening carefully to a range of perspectives across the network is especially important. Clear and transparent communication around the network's aims, values and activities are crucial to building ownership and participation.	■ How will participants in the network know where and how to access information? ■ How will you ensure that everyone in the network has access to the same information and in good time? ■ Who will decide what to share and how? Who will quality assure? ■ How will you discover whether everyone has received and understood a message? ■ How will you open up previously unavailable communication channels within and between schools in the network?
Knowledge management	If communication is the 'how' then knowledge is the 'what'. A network needs data, information and intelligence around which to plan, work and learn. It will generate new knowledge around the learning focus and the structures and processes that support it. Effective networks draw extensively on knowledge from external sources such as evidence from research and from others' practice. A network leader will be proactive in identifying and accessing knowledge sources within and beyond the network.	■ How much do network participants know about their own schools? About other schools in the network? ■ What opportunities will you create for participants to share information? ■ Who will decide what is relevant or appropriate or accessible? ■ How will new data, information and intelligence come into the network? How will they be used? ■ What will participants do with their new ideas ad findings? How will the network evaluate them? How will the network implement them? ■ How will you share learning across different kinds of schools?
Changing relationships	Working in a network can change relationships. Existing structures based on power and hierarchy are challenged as in school and school-to-school collaboration introduces new models for lateral working and creates new leadership roles. Leadership becomes a distributed process to which everyone can contribute rather than a starring role for key individuals. Relationships between organisations (school-school, school-university, school-Local Authority) change too, and it is important that everyone is clear about the implications of these changes. A network leader brokers and sustains these relationships, carefully building trust and security as a foundation for innovation and experimentation.	■ Who are the key stakeholders in the network? Do they know that they are? Do they know each other? ■ How will you help participants to be clear about what precisely their role is in the network? ■ How will you discover what motivates different people to become involved in the network? To stay in the network? ■ What opportunities are there for different groups to have a say in decision-making and leadership in the network? ■ What strategies do you have for creating new opportunities for collaboration, new spaces for dialogue and new relationships?
Building capacity	By articulating the extent to which the agreed values, priorities and activities of the network coincide with the existing values, priorities and activities of schools and individuals, a network leader supports participants to find ways to build networked learning into their daily professional lives, rather than seeing it as an add-on or as more work. Although some of the motivation to participate comes from being part of something new, participants need to be able to build on what they know and can do already. This is true for organisations too.	■ What opportunities will you create for participants to build coherence and connectedness between network activity and their ongoing commitments? How does the network add value for them? For their school? ■ How will the network be open about its aims and values? How will you know whether others share them? How will you celebrate and build on diversity? ■ How can you mobilise the network to support schools and individuals through turbulent times? What role will the network play in supporting schools through inspection, for instance? ■ What opportunities will you create for participants to connect their experience to the 'big picture' (e.g. policy, the future of the profession, moral purpose)?
Planning for sustainability	A network leader will plan for sustainability from the very earliest days of establishing a network. On one level this means thinking ahead about how projects and even the network itself will survive over time and through changes of personnel and policy. On another, it is to do with building reach and ownership. In each case, creating extensive, purposeful and interdependent collaboration is both a good insurance policy and a strategy to promote ongoing development of the network. Interdependent working and learning arrangements bring about internal pressure and mutual accountability for sticking to agreed actions, timelines and deadlines. Colleagues don't want to let each other down.	■ What kind of learning focus will encourage participants to work together, encourage creativity, challenge and innovation at many levels? What is the network's 'big idea'? ■ How will you support participants to draw on their experience in the network to influence decision-making in their own school? ■ What role will enquiry play in the network? ■ How will headteachers be supported to demonstrate their ongoing commitment to the network? ■ How will new colleagues find out about the network? How can they get involved? ■ What will you do when a key individual – a leader or activist – leaves the network? ■ What will you do when a project or enquiry comes to a natural, or a sudden, end?

Media are important (websites, newsletters, bulletins, notice boards) but most of all, especially at the beginning, create time and space for dialogue through:

■ residentials
■ taking groups to conferences (including travelling together)
■ organising study visits
■ learning lunches
■ arranging/having purposeful conversations between/ with colleagues
■ changing existing meetings e.g. staff and headteachers meetings, training days

Other suggestions:
■ Encourage email and enewsletters.
■ Establish telephone chains.
■ Use video – a lot.

If you do design new communications systems, try to build in a feedback loop. You can track and evaluate communications better if there is a mechanism and a reason to reply.

Some ideas and processes are incredibly complex. Generating models and graphics helps to build understanding and ownership and gives you a way of exploring and communicating ideas in an accessible format.

Auditing and baselining activities are helpful. They help us to articulate where we start from and, later, how far we have travelled. Decide what is important and relevant and audit those things. Evaluate what you value.
Other Suggestions:
■ shared reading groups
■ regular presentations, facilitated seminars
■ research of the month
■ shared training days
■ presentations in each others' schools
■ support for writing up enquiry outcomes e.g. collaborative writing workshops

The quality of outcomes and output is important to credibility and sustainability inside and outside the network. Value the outputs, but be prepared to take them seriously enough to challenge and quality assure them. Collaboration is an effective moderation strategy. Introduce an editorial role for the steering or headteacher's group.

■ Networks benefit from activities that value participant voice. We have to bring people together differently to convene different kinds of groups. Perceptions of cliques, elitism and cosiness can quickly undermine the credibility of the network.
■ Identify at the beginning those people outside the network who might be strategically significant to the network or might benefit from connection. Keep them informed. Invite them to events and meetings. Send them network reports and other outcomes.
■ A network needs sponsorship as well as ownership. Headteachers may not necessarily be the most active participants in a network, but they are critical to its success. Make sure they know this from the outset. Find different ways to involve them.

■ Model the behaviours that you want to encourage in the network. Take risks. Enquire.
■ Get the difficult questions out of the way early. It is hard to have conversations about money and who does what, especially if you are working together for the first time, but these are the things that can trip you up later if there is a lack of clarity. It is worse to have to go back and re-establish lost trust or to try to build it later.
■ Coaching is a good way to bring different people together. Coaching about teaching and learning can span departments and schools. Leadership coaching brings about strategic collaboration. To be effective, these relationships should be voluntary and should suspend existing hierarchies.

One of the most important things you can do is to support schools as they match network activities with existing plans in their SDP and/or Ofsted action plan. Allocating resources and inviting participation will be more straightforward after this.

Suggestions:
■ Think of national initiatives and enforced change as vehicles for developing the network.
■ Tackle long-standing issues or problems through the network as well as introducing new ideas.
■ Reorientate existing resources rather than automatically looking for additional ones.

■ Interpret training and roll-out strategies e.g. PNS consultancy, in ways that make sense for the network.
■ Establish study groups to focus on particular issues on behalf of schools in the network.
■ Encourage participants to think differently about professional development and learning – promote coaching and collaborative enquiry.
■ Negotiate accreditation for network activity with a higher education institution.

■ Avoid building dependency. Distribute leadership of the network. Before an event or meeting, ask yourself "will it still happen – will it still be good if I don't turn up?" If the answer is no you probably aren't collaborating enough.
■ Presentations at conferences and contributions to publications are opportunities to publicly acknowledge success. They will motivate others to participate and sustain effort.
■ Every activity, meeting and report should focus on learning. "Did we learn? What did we learn?" should be constant review questions. If an activity doesn't have a learning focus is it worth the use of precious time?
■ Not everyone is interested in everything but most people are interested in something. Give colleagues a range of opportunities and they will choose to participate.

■ Never start any project with just one teacher. Only fund collaborative projects from network resources.
■ Make joint appointments (ASTs, ICT technicians, research co-ordinators) across network schools. Issue contracts for two or three years rather than leaving them vulnerable each year. Commit to projects which extend beyond current guaranteed funding periods.

Working with staff from other schools widens your knowledge and experience and provides a real opportunity for professional dialogue around teaching and learning.

The key is that we have structured time and a purpose for the dialogue, rather than just snatches of conversation which, in school, is sometimes all you have time for.

Finding time to meet in the first year was just a nightmare so, at the beginning of our second year, we got all the deputies, heads and other network leaders together and set dates for the next 12 months.

We delegate communications roles to members of the steering group so that someone has a clear responsibility for setting an agenda, taking minutes and sharing the outcomes of the meetings, especially the decisions, widely.

We always try to record new learning amongst the leadership team. Keeping a kind of history of the group means we can always keep track of where our ideas and knowledge came from and how they have developed over time.

Each of us brings to network meetings something that we have read that we think might be of interest or helpful to the others. It means that every time we meet we talk about some new research or policy development. You learn a lot. We've been doing that for nearly two years now.

Some of our closest and most 'networked' times have been when we've been going through review processes. We hate doing them – of course we do – but when you look back, the talking and planning needed to review a network's progress really connects you and helps you to build a shared understanding of each other's goals and values. And you build a secure evidence base for moving forward into the future.

We realise now that we should have involved a headteacher in the leadership of the network from the start. We started out with a co-leadership of two deputies, but now, with a head, we're a strong team.

Our network sits within a larger cluster. It became clear quite early on that we could have a problem with other cluster schools' perceptions of what was going on in the network. Now we have a planned strategy of involvement and communication for the cluster and we are back on track in both groups.

We had to work hard to raise the awareness of our Local Authority to what was going on in the network. We struggled with financial and contractual issues for a while, but now they're on board, things have become much more straightforward.

We have really built on the motivational aspects of being a network. It's given teachers a new lease of life and even though there is 'extra' work, there is so much to be gained that we never seem to be short of volunteers.

What's been very interesting is the way that people's ideas about CPD have changed in the last couple of years. I can't remember the last time I was asked about sending someone on a course. These days our teachers mostly hear about what's going on in another school through the network and go on a visit. When there's a learning need that we can't respond to, we gather a group together and get someone in to work with them. But it's happening ad hoc and in pockets and we think we can do better. This year we plan to develop a network CPD strategy to try and build on the good work that's gone before.

We're using a combination of coaching and enquiry to improve the experiences of children in a deprived area. Teachers get free time and extra payment for their work so enquiry is seen to have a high profile. We do really useful things. Were not doing stuff that goes straight into a cupboard. We're leading real change.

We have learned a lot about distributing leadership. Two people might well be enough to lead a network efficiently, but our more complex solution, leadership by cluster groups with shared responsibility, has given our network stability and a broad appeal.

The network is only fully funded for another year, so we had started to think very hard about what we could reasonably expect to sustain and to plan an exit strategy for the rest. The heads were so disappointed at the mere suggestion that we might wind up the network, that we are now in conversations about new ways we might finance the network, including what money they can put up from their schools. I would never have believed when we started that we could possibly be in this place.