

Network leadership in action: Sharing leadership

“Educators and policy-makers alike seek a framework for leadership that will produce sustainable school improvement. The development of leadership capacity can provide such a framework...broad-based, skilful participation in the work of leadership.”

Linda Lambert

One of the distinctive features of successful networks is dedicated leadership and facilitation. This may come from a number of different sources as it is recognised that leadership can be fostered at all levels beyond those in positional roles and that future leaders can be grown through engagement with network activity. Through shared and distributed leadership, new opportunities for leadership are provided and new types of leaders emerge.

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 and leadership practices. What has emerged is an understanding of the key issues facing leaders at a variety of levels within schools and an appreciation of the complexity and importance of their leadership roles in learning networks.

This publication in NCSL’s *Network leadership in action* series explores the theme of ‘sharing leadership’ in schools and networks. It draws upon accounts of practice generated by NLC co-leaders and the findings of an NCSL Leading Practice seminar involving 100 school and network leaders. Those who participated in the seminar did so in order to explore and better understand what the theory of sharing leadership means to them in practice.

The content of this leaflet – which is designed as a discussion tool – reflects the presentations, discussions and observations of the seminar participants. It includes reflective questions taken directly from their conversations and examples from practice drawn from network co-leader contributors.

Key characteristics

This discussion tool is structured around four different, but not exclusive, dimensions of leadership which, when taken together, provide a basis for exploring and understanding the nature of sharing leadership in a networked context:

- 1 leadership learning
- 2 distributed leadership
- 3 enquiry-based leadership
- 4 leadership for moral purpose

Reflective questions

The reflective questions are designed to challenge thinking about the systems, processes and leadership practices that exist in schools and networks which enable leadership to be shared successfully.

Possible starting points

The suggested possible starting points provide prompts to considering where different approaches to sharing leadership might be most usefully developed within a network.

Examples from practice

The examples from practice illustrate how network leaders and others in leadership and support roles in school networks have tackled the issues and challenges associated with developing shared leadership in action.

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Booklet 1

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"We need to work together, and you all need to be leaders yourselves sometimes. I can be the goose flying out there ahead, but sometimes I need to drop back and you need to be out at the front."

Network headteacher

Key characteristics

Leadership learning

Leaders must be able to identify what it is they have to do to improve their schools. The process of generating solutions benefits from the contributions of 'critical friends' who can extend the knowledge and practice base and apply alternative critical thinking.

Leadership learning involves school leaders coming together as a cross-school group to examine and progress their own learning within the context of the network. Members learn from each other and can access external practice, ideas and research.

Sessions are characterised by the group setting its own agenda based on mutually agreed priorities, creating tools to enable robust dialogue, thinking about shared solutions and actually working this through together. There may be non-negotiable areas, and leaders must be clear and open about this. The outcome might be plans for individual schools or for new joint learning provision for pupils and staff.

This is leadership with a learning orientation and with a sharp pupil learning focus at its heart. Often referred to as learning-centred leadership, it requires *'an individual and collective responsibility to enhance everyone's knowledge, skill and understanding.'* (Geoff Southworth, 2002)

Distributed leadership

A key purpose of distributed leadership is to build the leadership capacity in a school or across the network. It is a strategy for growing leaders of the future. This might apply to professionals, para-professionals and to students within the school environment. The roles of 'co-leader' and 'lead learner' lend themselves to this approach. Middle leaders and others not in formal positional leadership roles – such as teachers or learning support staff – often have leadership responsibility invested in them for leading team tasks, projects or processes. They work with colleagues across their own school and with those in other schools. Responsibility is given and accountability accepted. Leaders like this, have high credibility with teachers and generate trust, because they are fellow practitioners in the classroom.

Critical factors in effectively distributing leadership in networks are the choice of the leader, leadership time for

planning and action, and terms of reference for operating. Headteacher commitment and willingness to recognise and value the leadership of others are essential. The supportive provision and co-ordination of resources (eg time, financial, human, material resources) may be important to lubricate activities.

The leader must have autonomy but may also benefit from support, for example from a coach or mentor. Senior leaders must be open to the involvement of other leaders in decision-making. Achievement of impact and sustainability require the senior leadership of the network, its schools and its school systems to flex to accommodate outcomes.

Distributed leadership requires that *'Leadership for learning must be a shared community undertaking – leadership is the professional work of everyone in the school.'* (Linda Lambert, 2003)

Enquiry-based leadership

This approach to leadership is about demonstrating and enacting a commitment to collaborative enquiry. Practice becomes evidence-based and data-driven.

Schools within the network mobilise a resource for 'learning about learning' through establishing joint enquiry groups. The approach is bottom-up. Teachers and other staff are charged with the task of finding better ways of doing things and providing data to illuminate what works and what does not. Experience has revealed how this, in effect, can both re-professionalise teachers and emphasise the value of learning support colleagues by drawing on their experience, expertise and professional judgement.

Key requirements are time to enable agreement on common focuses and to plan and act, the autonomy of the enquiry groups and a commitment by headteachers and senior managers to accept and implement recommendations – otherwise ownership and enthusiasm are eroded.

Enquiry-based leadership *'develops the capacity not only to cope with a rapidly moving knowledge base, but the capability to create, shape and move it forward, and in doing so develop the kind of transformative learning organisations and communities needed in the future.'* (Karen Carter & Gillian Ireson, 2003)

Leadership for moral purpose

Within the learning principles of the network, there has to be a shared commitment to the success of all its children. More than this, networks are nested in local, regional and national systems, and the health and success of the whole is contingent on everyone's interest in, and care for, the totality. There is a permeating sense of individual and collective responsibility for the wider needs and best interests of children across the learning community as a whole.

There is an African philosophy – *ubuntu* – that promotes the realisation of individual potential through service to others. Ubuntu emphasises interdependence, collective spirit and singleness of purpose, and it has helped African villages survive in a hostile environment. In the UK, networks are helping schools to better articulate a moral purpose. Learning becomes a reciprocal activity with students' needs as the primary driver.

Shared leadership for moral purpose requires that *'It must transcend the individual to be an organisation and system quality in which collectives are committed to pursuing moral purpose in all their core activities.'* (Michael Fullan, 2003)

Reflective questions

- What are the fundamental beliefs that enable school leaders to step out of insularity and work collaboratively?
- What are the most supportive conditions to ensure that relationships and trust can be built?
- What can be done if trust is too fragile or undermined?
- What processes work best for sharing priorities and setting an agenda?
- What should be in the terms of reference?
- How do you practically have meetings where learning takes place?
- How can solutions generated by the group be effectively transferred and developed?
- Does the investment of and outcomes for each individual and school have to be equal?

- Who is the best choice for developing leadership capacity? Is using volunteerism and working from enthusiasm the most effective method?
- How do you persuade people to take on leadership roles? What are the necessary conditions?
- What is the best process for making the appointment?
- What should delegation mean? How does delegating leadership differ from distributing it?
- Is it easier for staff to try out new methods and gain confidence through experience in another network school? Does this affect to advantage their prestige in their own school?
- What are the roles of senior leaders and the headteacher?
- How should succession planning be managed?
- How do you get professional learning to permeate through to classrooms? Does a distributed leadership approach make learning transfer more likely?

- How important is external help in identifying high leverage questions?
- Is this a good way to motivate classroom teachers?
- How easy is it for headteachers to keep their hands out? Can they have a helpful role in facilitating, monitoring and disseminating?
- How can these best be managed without affecting staff ownership of the groups?
- Will anything actually happen if the headteacher is not engaged?
- How can you get all staff on board at some point? Is there a role for governors?
- Where can specialist support for conducting and writing up enquiry be accessed?
- Is writing up enquiry an essential component? Would this promote motivation to complete, underline accountability and enable dissemination?
- How do you transfer enquiry outcomes to impact on learning in the classroom?

- How does 'moral purpose' speak to us about why we are doing things?
- Does working in a network enable schools and staff to have a moral purpose, which may be difficult to engender on one's own?
- Is wanting to work collaboratively a 'moral purpose'?
- How is the culture of caring about pupils in other schools created?
- How can we make collaboration rather than competition an operational reality?
- How can opportunities be created to enable this new kind of professional learning from and with each other to take place?

Possible starting points

This approach to sharing leadership would be useful where:

- headteachers and other school leaders individually find themselves more concerned with management and struggle to find space to be learners themselves
- there is a sense that potential is being lost for drawing on the strengths of network members
- there is a desire to share ideas and strategies in a more structured way
- the network schools have some issues and concerns in common
- challenge from peers is regarded as constructive

This approach to sharing leadership would be useful where:

- there are talented individuals within the school or network without the opportunity currently to develop their leadership potential
- the school or network wants to develop a staffing strategy of 'growing your own'
- headteachers feel relatively comfortable in supportive roles – or feel it is important to become more confident about delegation
- network schools have some shared priorities and focuses for enquiry and development
- the network has aspirations to service its CPD needs through more effective joint dissemination of practice

This approach to sharing leadership would be useful where:

- network schools have some shared priorities and focuses for enquiry
- there is a need to give a sharper edge to school improvement efforts
- teachers are looking to improve their classroom practice in a particular area and would benefit from working collaboratively and sharing ideas with others
- schools and the network are looking for opportunities to involve learning support assistants or those in other support roles
- headteachers are looking to build leadership capacity amongst their staff and are willing to let others take the lead on within-school and cross-network projects

This approach to sharing leadership would be useful where the network would benefit from articulating its moral purpose:

- Has the network discussed its shared values? Is there a statement of these?
- Do they reflect the dimension of moral purpose?
- Can the network point to evidence that these values are enacted through practice?
- What evidence is there that moral purpose is alive and felt?
- How can these beginnings be encouraged to influence or permeate the wider community?



Leadership learning forums: a new way of learning together – Leading into Learning NLC

As part of our network of nine high schools we wanted to establish leadership learning groups with a strong focus on learning for school and subject leaders at various levels. The Learning Forum evolved as an approach to enable a focused exchange, where network members were able to come together to learn more about each other's practice and ideas.

Effective dialogue happened slowly. Members needed time to develop trust in each other, a capacity to challenge and confidence in setting the forum's learning agenda. A key factor was establishing a climate of genuine professional learning. It proved important to be robust in examining knowledge and what it meant and to be open-minded about shifting end points to collaborative activity – as the journey is constantly changing.

A shared agenda is set in advance of each forum and a set of prompts used to promote more effective knowledge sharing:

- Have you heard that...?
- I have used and would recommend...
- Something we do at our place...
- Would you like a copy of...?
- Would you like to come to...?
- Can you help me by...?

School leaders involved in this form of shared, collaborative leadership learning come to trust each other and are used to 'telling it as it is' when talking to fellow professionals.

The transformative potential of distributed leadership? – WACO (Walsall/Coventry Consortium) NLC

WACO has six cross-school theme groups, each led by a 'middle' co-leader. None was an 'expert' in their theme so they had to develop their knowledge, skills and confidence in order to support and develop network theme 'champions' drawn from other schools. Co-leaders held their own regular meetings and were able to help each other through the process of development.

Theme group members conducted research, enquiry, piloting, evaluating and disseminating. As they gained confidence, theme champions as well as the co-leader were able to become local 'experts' and share practice across their own and other schools. 'Talking about Teaching' (TAT) sessions, Hotspots and CPD workshops are now led by these staff rather than senior managers.

Many staff involved have achieved promotions. Several co-leaders are now in senior positions.

Co-leaders have a pivotal role in leading the network's activity within and across schools. Within their theme they are responsible for:

- framing the focus, setting objectives and agreeing learning activities
- motivating and developing the cross-school theme development group
- managing a budget and researcher use
- reporting to the network's Research and Development Group
- disseminating practice across the network

Within their school they are responsible for:

- liaising with the headteacher and leadership team to advocate and negotiate priorities for development
- leading the School Improvement Group and co-ordinating theme activity across the school
- disseminating practice across the whole school

Building leadership capacity through enquiry – Hartlepool NLC

The network's schools all felt they had a strong teaching force but were stuck on a plateau in terms of their school improvement efforts, particularly with regard to raising standards of pupil achievement still further. To improve, they sought to identify some 'high leverage' questions that could be researched through cross-school enquiry groups. Each group took on an issue and had a lead learner – a teacher not a headteacher – to co-ordinate activity. Enquiry group members were volunteers.

Work was not time constrained and recognised that different issues would take different amounts of time to work through. Network funding paid for staff release which helped them to feel valued. Each group reported termly, and there has been an annual conference for all staff.

Network schools are now judged to be amongst the 'most improved' nationally. Ninety per cent of promoted posts are from within the network.

Characteristics of effective enquiry-based leadership in practice were identified as:

- planning a specific focus of enquiry that has high leverage
- being explicit about the learning we wanted to engage in
- engaging with public knowledge to affirm, support and challenge the learning of enquirers
- ensuring that all enquirers are volunteers
- investing in time and space for learning
- providing enquiry tools to colleagues in the enquiry groups that add to their own understanding of the work and their ability to do it
- developing ways of keeping track of the enquiry activity happening in and across schools
- being in a position to push enquiry outcomes into corners of the network where it can be used by others

Towards Ubuntu: a learning journey to Cape Town – Macclesfield Performing Arts NLC

Five pairs of headteachers from a number of NLCs visited 11 schools in Cape Town, South Africa. They adopted an 'appreciative inquiry' approach to identifying 'the best of what is' in the leadership practice they observed during their study visit. In the schools visited, leadership for moral purpose was highly visible. Learners were always placed first. There were some classes of 85 because headteachers did not want to turn students away.

UK headteachers found leadership underpinned by a strong, shared moral purpose – success for all children – explicitly evidenced in the schools they visited. This proved to be an inspirational force for addressing shared leadership issues in their own school communities and networks.

Lessons learned:

- Pupil learning – our observations confirmed how pupils' (learners') ambitions can overcome severe disadvantage and how high expectations clearly impact on student learning.
- Leadership learning – our own sense of moral purpose was strengthened. Subsequent network-to-network visitations in the UK which we have undertaken, have confirmed the power of collaboration.
- Networked learning – we left feeling a deep sense of awe, a refreshed sense of vocation and a determination to support our new partners. The experience of visiting South Africa challenged our own perceptions of effective education and has allowed us to change mindsets and broaden perspectives in our own communities.