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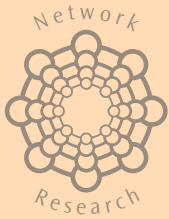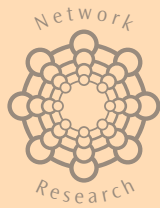
System leadership in action:

What does a system leader do?

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A discussion tool

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with Ann Lieberman

This booklet provides a discussion tool designed to support groups to explore together the practice of system leadership. The concepts and illustrative examples are drawn directly from the experiences and perspectives of system leaders who generously agreed to share their insights and practice as part of an enquiry led by NCSL's Networked Learning Group in partnership with Ann Lieberman, Senior Scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The authors would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved for their contribution.

Key roles
The tool is structured around a series of key roles. These roles are not conceived of in a traditional or hierarchical sense, but rather as different contexts or opportunities for action where system leadership becomes visible.

Reflective questions
The reflective questions are designed to challenge thinking about system leadership to enable the key roles to be tackled successfully.

Some suggestions
These provide ideas about how you might approach the questions. They attempt to move towards what might be called a system leader's perspective on the particular practical and strategic challenges of networked and system leadership.

Messages from practice
Also included are some examples from practice to illustrate how system leaders have tackled certain issues and challenges.

	Key roles	Reflective questions
Making the most of complexity	A significant characteristic or skill of system leaders is their positive response to complexity. They see it not as confusing and threatening but as an opportunity, a necessary condition even, for effective leadership. They adapt their practice according to context and work hard to make connections and create momentum in the most challenging circumstances, especially when, as is so often the case, they have none of the usual protocols or authority that come with institutional leadership at their disposal. A shared strategy seems to be the adoption of models and mantras that act as reference points to help them to communicate and to stay consistent to principles and values.	How can you begin to build common vision and purpose across multiple contexts and from a range of perspectives? Where would you start? What experience do you have in coaching or mentoring others? How effectively do you deploy those skills in your leadership practice? How carefully do you listen – really listen – to what others are saying? And not saying? How well do you understand the extent to which you rely on positional power to get things done within your own insitution? What would happen if you had none?
Leading learning	Even the most senior system leaders with roles that generally keep them out of the classroom demonstrate a clear commitment to and deep understanding of children's learning. It seems axiomatic to them that development and capacity building strategies should be geared to improving pupil learning and that leadership is synonymous with the leadership of learning. One of the ways this plays out is in their approach to enquiry, which features highly as both a personal leadership strategy and in their models for capacity building and improvement. Another is in their attitude to risk. System leaders are risk-takers and innovators, which does not mean that they are rash or that they rush to action. Mostly this characteristic manifests as an ability to experiment with different approaches in disciplined and informed processes and to learn from the outcomes, including the mistakes. Crucially, system leaders both model this behaviour and create opportunities for others to do it too.	To what extent is your vision for school, network and system leadership articulated through a real understanding of those aspects of your leadership most likely to impact on pupil achievement? What role does enquiry play in your leadership practice? From whom do you learn? With whom do you share that learning? How do you stay up to date with evidence from research and practice about what works in teaching and learning and in leadership? How do you make such intelligence widely accessible? How do you make explicit the connections between opportunities for leadership learning, continuing professional development and improved pupil learning in your context? What changes when you include pupils in your vision for system leadership?
Modelling moral purpose in action	System leaders are adaptable and pragmatic, but this does not extend to diluting core principles. Values and beliefs are explicit motivators. System leaders identify a sense of security about 'doing the right thing' as the source of the confidence that they need to have to do their work. Unsurprisingly, doing the right thing relates to the entitlement of the young people in their care to equal access to safety and opportunity. System leaders understand and deploy the power of moral purpose to motivate and mobilise others, but they can also be ruthless in their decisions, for instance in excluding people or schools from networks, where it is clear that those values are not shared.	What matters? And who decides? How sure are you that your priorities are the right ones? Who critiques them? Where are your 'lines in the sand'? In negotiations, how will you decide where you can and will compromise and where you must be strong? What is the best thing you do? What is the practice or achievement of which you are most proud?
Building leadership capacity	System leaders are reflective and self-aware. They are conscious of their leadership practice and its effects for others. This degree of metacognition enables them to articulate thinking and planning processes in a way that stimulates their own learning at the same time as inviting others to contribute. In this way system leaders model leadership practice and create opportunities for collaborative activity and learning around them. System leaders grow and nurture networks as their preferred working environment – their system. They also understand that distributed leadership is needed if a network is to function effectively. So system leaders learn to 'talent spot' and then to support colleagues to lead development work. The career histories of system leaders often include episodes in which they assumed or were offered a leadership role in a network, where they began to learn how to adapt their leadership practice so that it could transfer across multiple contexts.	How do you identify colleagues with leadership potential in different settings? What do you look for? What is the difference between distributed leadership and delegation? To what extent can and do you distinguish between the two in your day-to-day practice? What principles do you apply to designing a network? Are there different kinds of network for different purposes? Do you behave differently in them? What opportunities do you create for colleagues to travel around the system? How do you support them to make sense of and to share their experiences as they do that?
Growing independence	System leaders are influential individuals who make valuable contributions at local, regional and/or national levels. They are advocates and role models and are recognisably educational leaders – leaders of their profession – as well as of their own institution. However, system leaders are careful to explicitly and self-consciously avoid the dangers of dependency and hero leadership. Creating varied opportunities and building the leadership capacity of colleagues is one way that they achieve this. Another is by brokering connections to other powerful individuals and institutions on behalf of the network(s) that they lead.	How would colleagues describe your leadership contribution? Are they more likely to attribute success to you or to claim it for themselves or each other? What is your role in day-to-day decision-making in the different contexts in which you work? Do things go well when you're not around? What importance do you place on introducing new ideas and people into your context? How do you decide who gets access to new opportunities? When conferences and study visits arise, how often do you take up these opportunities yourself and how often do you step aside to let others represent the work? How confident are you that the work you are involved in will continue if you move on?

Some suggestions

Accept different roles in a variety of networks to understand the world from multiple perspectives. Be a follower as well as leader; a learner as well as a teacher.

Listen carefully and learn to notice subtle differences in the way people are using key terms – 'diversity, 'inclusion' 'special needs'. These are not fixed and its important to share a common understanding of critical concepts and ways of articulating them.

It can be difficult to agree on process when so many people have their own ideas of how to go about things. Try starting by agreeing the outcomes you want and reverse engineer processes and protocols for achieving them, processes that can then be collectively owned.

Recognise that the benefits of being in a network are not felt equally by all partners all of the time.

Create opportunities for colleagues to contribute to others' learning as well as responding to their own and their own school's learning needs. Prioritise this kind of activity. It builds capacity for the donor at least as much as for the recipient.

Identify continuing professional development (CPD) and leadership learning programmes and adapt them to the network context. Re-negotiate foci and assessment protocols to suit your situation. Develop your own programmes and have them accredited.

Make leadership opportunities for students across the network a priority. Fund them. Celebrate them. Use them to increase the mobility of adults and young people around the network.

Facilitate a strategy planning session to negotiate a networked approach to CPD. See how much support you can secure for a connection to a shared learning focus. Explore pooling and redistributing resources – monetary, material, time and human – to service identified learning needs.

Any benefit to your school that comes at the expense of another means that somewhere, somehow children are losing out. If you damage people around you your work is unsustainable. You can be competitive in partnership instead of with each other.

Plan collectively how you are going to work with Ofsted and local authority inspectors. You will feel more confident about explaining the untidiness that comes with collaboration if you are prepared and have evidence about what's working and good ideas for dealing with what's not. You need to be able to say *"I know what's happening here is good"*.

Mutual respect and reciprocity are part of the moral purpose issue. Intimate and intricate relationships arise when people commit to working together for a common cause. Be honest with yourself and with colleagues. Think about what you can do to gain colleagues' trust and treasure it.

Confidence is essential if you are to open yourself up to new experiences and learning. Recognise that colleagues who are closed or who exclude themselves from such opportunities may lack confidence, rather than ambition or imagination. Its a good place to start when thinking about working with other professionals.

Inviting contributions and creative solutions to setbacks, looking on the bright side, and remaining resilient and optimistic in tough times all help to generate a positive climate and attract participation.

Be clear about the different kinds of facilitation that you should offer in different settings. Some groups need a bigger presence. Others need you to back off. Contact someone beforehand and make sure that you are up-to-date with what a group is trying to achieve. Try not to be the only person who facilitates. Work with others and encourage colleagues to facilitate their own activities.

Its easy to identify the natural enthusiasts in schools, and tempting to gravitate towards them. Sometimes building out from an energetic centre is a good idea. But you run the risk of missing valuable experience and insight from less vocal colleagues. Take time to get to know the quiet ones too.

Attract other system leaders to become involved in the work of the network to bring in new ideas and resources. It will extend the sphere of influence of the network and create new opportunities for new system leaders to take up.

Use the buying power of networks to afford the best consultants and thought leaders you can find. Colleagues will be inspired and motivated and feel highly valued.

Find out about opportunities for international study visits for heads and teachers. Travelling, living and studying together away from the local context is a unique learning experience that will fuel the network well into the future.

Notice when colleagues adapt and redesign models and practices. Value and learn from the difference they generate and support their creativity. Challenge yourself to learn to live with chaotic and uneven development trajectories even when you're in very accountable environments. The more you control the more people will depend on you for success.

Messages from practice

Its important to wear lots of different hats. How you might inform and work alongside parents could be very different from how you work alongside chief executives of primary care trusts for example. You need to think about the information that a particular group needs to take control of their situation. And you need to have some resilience, so that if things don't work out the first time, you can pick yourself up and try something else.

Sue Egersdorff

My role is persuasion, brokerage, ideas generation, maintaining the relationship with the College and other networks. Mostly, I try to keep people excited and take the lids off their imaginations. It is important to be able to build trust: it is all about relationships. To do this kind of role you need a thoughtful energy; enthusiasm balanced by rigour. You have to be able to steel your nerves and say, *"Let's just do it!"*

Graham Tyrer

Sometimes you meet a brick wall and it would just be easier to back off. But you end up finding other ways around it or cracks in the wall. Because ultimately the common purpose we all share is the benefit to the pupils, the learning of the pupils, and if you do find you've got a particularly difficult situation with a senior management team, and you know you have access to resources and benefits, you've got to find other ways, you've just got to find a way around it.

Stefani Shedden

The leadership role that I have had within the network evolved from distributing leadership within my own school. When you move from a hierarchy to a flat structure anybody, including new staff, can come up with ideas and feel they can take them forward. It was the young staff who were telling me they were really excited about being part of a network. What they were not sure about was the overall vision. We needed to have a vision not just for our own school but for the whole partnership. If we're all trying to achieve excellence, can we describe what that is going to look like, so that we know that we're getting further towards it?

Robin Cowen

I think I see my role now as making lateral connections. I was talking with somebody in the local authority about knowledge management and he asked if the network would like to be a trial site for an open source technology. So now we're testing the software in a group of schools and trying to work alongside the e-learning strategy that's going on in the authority, because this is going to roll out across every school. There's a conference shortly, where we'll be challenging people to think about how they will implement and use the environment themselves.

Nikki Thomas

This job is too big and nobody can do it properly by themselves. You have to pull together knowledge and ideas and resources and people from lots of places to get things done. As a leader that can sometimes feel uncomfortable, but its the job I love.

Hilary Craik

Forget any notions you have of personal authority when you take on this job. It's all about how you develop the authority of others. You offer challenge, you offer support and you offer space for thinking – especially for thinking about why things didn't work.

Robin Cowen

I do this for the same reason I've always done it: the nourishment. I wouldn't be a successful head without this. This is the best form of professional development I've ever had. It prevents staleness and allows me to develop as a leader and to develop my own leadership team.

Ray Tarleton

I am constantly surprised every day, when I go into other organisations, other schools. I work with some people who are very clear about the way things have to be, but everything as I go on is getting greyer and greyer. I just don't know anything for sure anymore. I suppose that's what you call an enquiry mindset.

John Baumber

I try constantly to keep an open mind. It's like an obsession, a thirst for a particular kind of knowledge; a practice-based knowledge. I want to become an ever more effective leader af learning and to do that I need more and different experiences; a way to develop and test out new practice.

Robin Casson

What are you working for and what are your non-negotiables? What are the things that are absolutes and, sorry, you're totally inflexible about them? There need to be some, but you need to be jolly sure which ones they are and how many there are.

Sir Alan Steer

The message has to be about children and I take my sustenance from that. If I believe somebody has got in their hearts the needs of children then we're going to get along and I'm going to find them inspiring. If they just tell me how to deliver a strategy then I'm afraid I'm not interested.

Sue Egersdorff

In a network, there's no accountability structure. Whilst you can all say, *"I feel very responsible for the network"*, at the end of the day there is no mechanism for tracking that or holding anybody accountable. What does hold it together is this moral purpose thing; the thing that brought you together in the first place. It's the commonality of experience and focus and the journey we've been on that holds us together.

Nikki Thomas

We bought in a consultant to support teacher researchers in their work to manage changes in practice that were the natural outcomes of their research through collaborative coaching. They were anxious about the leadership this implied. They said *"we're not heads, we shouldn't be here."* But I encouraged them and pointed out all the different ways in which they were already leaders in their schools. And then as people have seen the benefits, they have been more open and receptive to trying new things.

Sallyanne Stanton

Students are the biggest untapped capacity in schools. People complain about what they lack – time and resources and so on. What might be possible if they learned to unleash the potential of students to engage in school improvement?

Louise Raymond

When I have been thinking about people to work in the network, age has never been a barrier. If you're good enough, you're old enough. In the 14 Plus Partnership of four high schools, there are lots of opportunities for people to take on leadership roles in student leadership, in inclusion, in ICT, in engineering, where people were exhibiting outstanding practice in school. But if they've only been teaching for two years there can be issues about how they are regarded by other teachers in their own school. Its much easier for a young teacher to develop their leadership skills in another school than it is to do it in their own.

Robin Casson

When you put talented people in a room together and empower them to be creative, there's no end to what they'll come up with.

Martine Sinker

I'm a very hands-on person and its really hard for me not to keep sticking my nose into things that other people are well able to lead without me, but I am constantly learning about taking a more strategic and executive role.

John Baumber

When the Primary Strategy Consultant Leader Programme came in, we decided not to operate in the normal way, where you are allocated a couple of schools and are expected to turn them around in three or four meetings, after the local authority and the head haven't managed to do it in the previous few years. We decided we'd set up networks. So we pooled all the money and divided it up among nine Primary Strategy Teams in the city. In my group there are nine schools and we're in our third year. It means that about half of the schools in the city can be involved and we are able to disseminate learning from our NLC much more widely.

Sallyanne Stanton

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Networked Learning Communities

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