Networked Learning Communitites

| learning from each other | learning with each other | learning on behalf of each other |

What Does a Network Leader Do?

NCSL National College for School Leadership

Big Issues

Reflective Questions

COMMUNICATION

A core activity for the network leader; communication in a network is multifaceted, multidirectional and complex. For much of the time you will be creating channels or corridors for information to move from one part of the network to another, rather than communicating directly with participants, although you will need to do that too.

Systems are important, but they can be unwieldy and can become a barrier to good communication, especially as you are communicating abstract ideas as well as concrete information.

How will participants in the NLC know where to get information?

How will you ensure that everyone in the network has access to the same information?

Who will decide what to share? Who assures quality?

How will you discover whether everyone has received and understood a message?

How do you open up previously unavailable communication channels (within schools and between schools)?

KNOWLEDGE

If communication is the 'how', then knowledge is the 'what'. Knowledge is the curriculum for your communications and the currency for the NLC. The network will access data and information and process it into knowledge. It will also create new knowledge both around its learning focus and around process.

Equally important is the network's need to access what it already knows and (sometimes more importantly) what it doesn't know about what is already going on in participating schools. Later, it will be helpful to know what is going on in other networks.

How much do participants in the NLC know about their own schools? Other schools in the network?

What opportunities will there be for participants to share information?

Who will decide what is relevant or appropriate or accessible?

How will new data and information come into the network? How will they be processed?

Where will participants go with new ideas and findings? How will the network evaluate them? How will the network implement them?

How can you share learning across schools?

RELATIONSHIPS

Working in an NLC can change relationships. Existing structures based around power and hierarchies are challenged as different opportunities bring about new collaborations across departments or across schools. Leadership starts to look like a process to which everyone can contribute, rather than a starring role for an individual. Relationships between organisations (school – school, school – university, school – LEA) change too and it is important that everyone is clear about the implications of these changes. Safety and risk are important here. Trust is key. If you are going to encourage innovation and facilitate change, most people will need to start from a position of relative security and trust.

Who are the key stakeholders in the NLC?

Do they know that they are? Do they know each other?

How will people know what their role is within the network?

How will you discover what motivates different people and organisations to become involved in the network? To stay in the network?

What opportunities are there for involving different groups in decision-making in the network?

What strategies do you have to create to facilitate new collaborations, new spaces for dialogue and new relationships?

CONGRUENCE

This is a way of analysing the extent to which the agreed values, priorities and activities of the NLC match the existing values, priorities and activities in participating schools and, at a deeper level, those of participating individuals. Although part of the excitement of an NLC is being inside a change process, participants need to be able to manage that change in a way that adds value to their other roles in the organisation. Looking for congruent strands of activity – making connections – empowers them to do this. In this context, it is not limiting but liberating. It encourages participants to incorporate networking into their daily professional lives instead of perceiving it as an add-on.

Where are the opportunities to establish coherence and connectedness between participants' on-going activity and network activity? How does the network add value for them? For their school?

How will the network be open about its values? How will you know whether these match schools' values? Individuals' values?

How can participants be supported during difficult or turbulent times (OFSTED, big staff changes) by their involvement in the network?

How will participants assess value for time in their contributions to the network?

What opportunities are there for participants to connect to the big picture (policy, the future of the profession, moral purpose)?

SUSTAINABILITY

On one level, this is to do with how projects, and even the network, survive over time through changes of personnel and policy. On another, it is to do with ownership and motivation. In each case, creating extensive opportunity for purposeful, productive collaboration is both a good insurance policy and a futures-oriented strategy to promote development of the network.

A key role for the leader is ensuring that collaborations are truly interdependent, as this creates the internal pressure and accountability to succeed. Mutually agreed timelines and deadlines can then structure and facilitate success in a meaningful way, rather than being an external pressure that is more readily ignored.

Can you find a common focus that encourages people to work together, encourages creativity, challenge and innovation at many levels?

How will participants in the network influence decision-making processes in their own school?

How can headteachers demonstrate their ongoing commitment to the network?

How will participants publicise their commitment to the projects in which they are involved?

How will new members of staff find out about the NLC? How can they get involved?

What happens when a key player in the network leaves?

What happens when a project or enquiry comes to a natural (or a sudden) end?

Possible Starting Points

Media are important (web sites, 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 staff
- Adapting the nature of existing arrangements, eg staff meetings, training days

Other suggestions:

- Encourage email
- Establish telephone chains
- Get early adaptors to work as advocates/ambassadors in a school
- Use video – a lot

If you do design new communications systems, try to build in a feedback loop. You can't assume that every message will reach its target audience, but you can get a feel for their responsiveness if there is a reason and a mechanism for reply.

Establishing a community of understanding is important. Using models and pictures of abstract ideas can help to ensure that everyone is talking about the same thing before you go too far down different routes.

Auditing and baseline activities are helpful. They establish a starting point that helps us to understand where we came from and how far we have travelled. They provide information from which to explore meanings about specific contexts – and to involve a range of voices. Decide what is important and relevant and audit those things. Evaluate what you value.

Suggestions - beginning:

- Conditions surveys to discover perceptions
- Values workshops to access beliefs, to air differences and to value voice
- Leader visits every school and interviews key players (formal or informal)
- Each school/enquiry submits status reports (written or verbal)
- Develop a register of good practice within a school/across the network

Later:

- Shared reading groups
- Regular presentations, facilitated seminars
- Research of the month

- Shared training/staff days
- Presentations/workshops in each others' schools
- Help with writing up/ghosting
- An obligation to disseminate

Key factors are the quality, authenticity and credibility of outcomes from the network. Value the outputs, but be prepared to take them seriously enough to challenge them. Refer findings back to the literature and analyse the conflict as well as where they correspond.

Networks value activities that promote participant voice. We have to bring people together differently – avoid the usual suspects. Cosiness undermines the credibility and power of the network. Focus and challenge are key.

Identify at the beginning those people outside the network who might affect it later. Keep them informed. Invite them to events and meetings. Send them bulletins.

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. The way headteachers learn together and what they learn should support network activity.

Leaders need to model the behaviours that we want to encourage in the network. Take risks. Enquire. Network. Have the courage to say when something isn't working. Humility and authenticity are determining factors in successful facilitation.

Get the difficult questions out of the way early. It is hard to have conversations about money and who does what, especially when you are all new to each other, 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 build it later.

Setting up coaching pairings is a way of bringing people together differently. Partnerships with a teaching and learning focus can move ideas around and across departments in a school. Partnerships with a process focus bring together heads, deputies or co-ordinators from different schools. The important thing is that these relationships are voluntary and that they suspend hierarchies.

One of the most useful things a leader can do is support schools as they match network activities with existing projects in their SDP and/or OFSTED action plans. Allocating resources and identifying key players will become more straightforward after this.

Suggestions:

- Think of national initiatives and enforced change (eg KS3, NLS) as vehicles for development in the network
- Tackle long-standing issues/problems through the network as well as introducing new ideas

- Re-orientate existing resources rather than looking for additional ones
- Interpret training and roll-out strategies in a way that is appropriate to the network (eg joint rather than individual responsibility)

Encourage participants to think differently about continuing professional development and learning.

Suggestions:

- Negotiate accreditation across schools with an HEI

- Encourage participants to consider Performance Management as an opportunity – reward network contributions
- Encourage participants to choose a role in the network that fits well with the direction they want their career to take (eg curriculum leadership, ICT, pastoral responsibility)
- Establish enquiry and study groups within and across schools and appoint leaders to support these

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When you are putting something together, ask yourself *'Will it still happen – will it still be good – if I don't turn up?'* If the answer is 'no' then it probably needs more work.

We regularly need to ask ourselves *'Why don't we just give up?'* The answers are all the reasons that we will keep going.

Public manifestations of the changes that we have made to our practice and to our organisations are motivating.

Accountability contributes to sustainability. The accountability of mutual high expectations is highly motivating.

Every activity, meeting and piece of writing, even the steering group, should focus on learning. *'Did we learn?'* and *'What did we learn?'* should be constant questions. If the activity does not have a learning design, is it worth the use of precious time?

Not everyone is interested in everything, but most people are interested in something. Give people a choice.

Think about sustainability when making key appointments and beginning initiatives. Have them run for two or three years rather than leaving them annually vulnerable. Make commitments to projects beyond the life expectancy of external funding – it shows that the network believes in them.

Never start with just one teacher and only fund interactions.

Examples of Practice

"After we got started, we found that the most efficient and satisfying way of planning and problem solving was to get people in the same room with a tight focus and just do it. We had to find the time for this from somewhere, so we 'stole' it from staff meetings and training days. This year we planned a joint training day for all the schools in our network, bought in a speaker using network funds and ran workshops in the afternoon to plan joint projects about what we heard."

"Last year, I took 10 teachers from eight schools who had Best Practice Research Scholarships to the Birmingham Thinking Skills Conference. It was an excellent conference, but some of the best bits were the conversations in between workshops, over lunch and in the car and on the train travelling home."

"Recently, we invited heads to a meeting and got them to work in cross-school groups on an activity based around discovering the structures in schools that enable teachers to share their school-based research and to implement findings and recommendations. Although they were specifically sharing information about their own schools, through the activity they also communicated ideas about working across the network."

"In September last year, a new facilitator was appointed. She decided that the only way she was going to get to know all the schools and understand where they were with their thinking was to visit them. She made an appointment with every headteacher and got them to talk about their school, what their plans and problems were. In most schools she was given a tour and got to talk to some staff and pupils. When we could organise it, she took another head, an AST or someone from the team with her to share the visit. The whole process took about four weeks in total, but she built up lots of good will."

"We set up a register of good practice where teachers in each school were invited to offer one area where they felt they were strong and would be prepared to share ideas with a colleague. What we'd really like to do next year is to get teachers and schools to identify each other's good practice. It's a really good way of moving ideas around the network and different groups get to meet each other."

"There's a group of volunteers from different schools who meet every half term. The facilitator gives them a new publication that has been recommended by their university partner or one of them has come across on an MA. When they next meet they discuss the text, putting together all their information and ideas and talking about connections to their own experience. The facilitator summarises their discussion and agrees it with the group. Then, over the next half term they have a responsibility to share their findings in school. The summary goes on the network web site and in the newsletter."

"After a while, we found that a lot of the things we were doing in schools were starting to cut across stuff that the LEA was doing, or that the schools were already involved in projects with a university. It was beginning to feel like we were all in competition when really we needed everyone to be successful to make things right for the schools. We decided to get all this out in the open and began a series of meetings between different groups, always including headteachers. It's taken us most of this year, but I think things are on a better footing now. We are planning projects together for next year and we consult more widely than just the schools before we take decisions that might affect other organisations."

"It's really hard for the headteachers in our network. On the one hand we have set things up so that the teachers and pupils own the enquiries and activities, and on the other we are forever telling the heads that they are responsible for making sure they work. At the very beginning, we did a workshop where heads were asked what they think a headteacher in a successful network would do. We took their comments away, processed them and fed them back in a leaflet. It was very simple, but powerful too. Not all the heads do all the things in the leaflet, obviously, but it refreshes the commitment they made three years ago."

"Loads of our schools had provision for gifted and talented pupils as a priority in their SDP but they were a bit at sea as to how to move forward. We put together a network bid for Best Practice Research Scholarships and invited schools to nominate someone to participate. Ten schools took us up on the offer and all the bids were successful, so next year we have bought in expertise about gifted children from Oxford Brookes and a freelance researcher and we are putting together a team to facilitate the research that includes the LEA advisor for SEN and an AST."

"What has been really interesting is to watch the way that the schools have started to join things up. One school gave responsibility for CPD, including the budget, to their school improvement group. Another has decided that their NQT induction programme next year will be based on a coaching model that we have been piloting. Whenever we come across something like this we ask the school to talk about it at network meetings so they are all learning from each other about systems that help this to work at a school level as well as good ideas for the classroom."

"A deputy headteacher called me and said they had seen a fantastic conference but it was expensive and they couldn't afford to send the teacher. She asked me if the network would pay half. I thought about it for a while and eventually agreed that if the teacher could find partners from two other schools to go too, we would fund 50 per cent of all three places. They are still talking about the conference at meetings and wrote an article together for our newsletter."

"When the schools signed up for the second time, they were asked to pay for only one year but to commit to two. All of them did it. It took a lot of negotiation, but it gave us a mandate to plan in longer-term developments that had more of a chance of making an impact. It also meant that we were able to commit to joint projects with a longer lead time with other organisations so we can now generate income to fund more activities within the network and provide more opportunities for our teachers and pupils."

What Does a Network Leader Do?

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

In preparation for the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme, NCSL has been conducting research amongst leaders of existing networks in education to find out how they have interpreted this role. What has emerged is an understanding of the key issues facing leaders, some ideas about how the programme might support them and an appreciation of the complexity and importance of their role in NLCs.

This document has been generated largely from the findings of a research seminar involving facilitators from schools, universities, EAZs, statutory bodies and other organisations involved in networks. They were invited to contribute lessons and share ideas with leaders of new NLCs.

The Networked Learning Communities Team at NCSL would like to take this opportunity to thank the group for their generosity and openness in sharing their ideas and experience with us.

Big Issues
This document is structured around a series of big issues, which, although they might not arise immediately after the launch of the NLC (sustainability for instance), may become problematic 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
Networked learning is about sharing existing knowledge differently and creating new knowledge together. An appropriate vehicle for sharing this knowledge is a set of questions designed to challenge thinking about the systems and processes of a network so that they might enable the big issues to be tackled successfully.

Possible Starting Points and Examples of Practice
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. Also included are some examples of good practice to illustrate how leaders have tackled certain issues and challenges.

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