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# talk2learn highlights

Inspiring leaders;  
improving children's lives

Issue 8a

In case you missed it...

Recent highlights from NCSL in Dialogue, talk2learn's  
online community for national education debate

Also available as a podcast

## From effective to exceptional

### What distinguishes an exceptional school leader and how important is personal style?

These themes were explored in a talk2learn hotseat for NCSL's Leading from the Middle programme with Kathleen Butler, an international authority on professional development in education. School leaders were eager to know more about adapting Kathleen's insights to their own context.

Starting a new job, Joanne Hunt from Lancashire wanted to introduce changes without ruffling feathers. New leaders have to tread carefully, Kathleen agreed:

"The exceptional leader is respectful that he/she is joining an established culture and takes the time to learn about the culture, the people, and the needs before making any significant changes."

Alastair Wood, a primary head, wondered whether it was possible for leaders to alter their core style: *"Clearly we all have styles which we operate from and return to at times of stress."*

To what extent can we learn other styles? And would the learned style ever succeed the dominant?"

It is possible to incorporate other styles into one's own, Kathleen acknowledged, but not fundamentally to replace one with another: "In the long run, healthy and productive growth occurs when we work with, rather than replace, our own style and then learn how to broaden ourselves with other styles."

But how do exceptional leaders react when others leaders don't share their aspirations? This was a point raised by several contributors. Steph Jones felt that an essential factor for exceptional leaders was a conscience about their influence on others: "What can we do to compensate in a school where the leader lacks that conscience?"

Lead by example, said Kathleen: "Find the pockets in which you can make a difference for each other and for children and use them to build momentum towards a better way. One question that always seems to stop poor leadership in its tracks is Can you help me understand how this decision is good for children?"



One contributor was interested in problems faced by leaders in a wider leading learning community?

*"What benefits can the exceptional leader derive to avoid feeling that all they do is give ... as the focus is so often upon supporting the weaker members?"*

The exceptional leader always has all children in mind, said Kathleen not just their own: "The exceptional leader would build relationships with the leaders of a weaker or needier school in an attempt to create peer networks where collaboration could benefit all teachers."

Deputy Carolyn Palfreyman was keen to know more about Kathleen's view that exceptional leaders' schools do not fall apart when they move on.

Such leaders create different legacies in schools based on their own strengths, said Kathleen: "Ultimately exceptional leaders help staff become the true leaders in a school, but in very different ways."

If you are not yet a member of talk2learn and would like to join, more information is available at [www.ncsl.org.uk/onlinecommunities](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/onlinecommunities)