

Distributed leadership

Ann Palmer, Principal, City of London Academy

After leading one community school to an outstanding Ofsted, Ann Palmer was appointed principal of City of London Academy in 2008. Her leadership team includes three vice-principals, five assistant principals, and a business and project director. Distributing leadership allows her to focus on her vision while providing all staff with access to someone at the top.

With such a large leadership team, good, clear communication is of paramount importance in order to succeed with school improvement. Information on teaching and learning, pastoral and whole-school matters is channelled from the classroom to senior leaders and then to Ann. Leaders are also charged with growing leaders within their teams.

Ann has a strong belief that leaders need to be good practitioners. “My leaders have a small proportion of their time in class as ultimately we know that is where standards are going to be achieved. If you are saying to staff improve your teaching and learning, but your leaders are themselves dysfunctional in class, then that sends a strong [negative] message.

“I also believe that every teacher is a learner and a leader, from NQTs onwards. I have quite a young current leadership team and one of the things I do is ensure they are learning what is happening in terms of research on leadership. So in the autumn term in leadership team meetings, we had 15-minute items where each leader had to research on leadership and come up with activity that would grow the team.”

Even with a strong leader, you cannot assume that a team will automatically knit together or grasp the leader’s vision from the start, she added.

“When I was talking about a new vision, new buildings, new curriculum, and standards going up quickly, they couldn’t see the vision that I was selling. We visited four new schools in Holland and the people in those schools sold the ideas to them. They came back a different team because it wasn’t my vision but a vision they were sharing with me.”

Chris Stone, headteacher, The Arthur Terry School, Sutton Coldfield

Chris Stone has been headteacher of The Arthur Terry School in Sutton Coldfield for nine years. It is his second headship and the school is judged ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted.

Chris admitted that he began as a heroic headteacher, but has had to rethink his style over 15 years as a headteacher.

“I realised that the gung-ho style wasn’t going to work; I wasn’t going to sustain it and it wasn’t going to change things the way I really wanted them to change.” He sees distributed leadership as the way to take a successful school to the next level of achievement.

To make distributed leadership authentic there has to be trust on both sides – headteacher and staff, he stressed. “It also won’t work unless people around you, including yourself, are competent. It’s no good going in thinking you can go in and do this and then finding out that the people around you are not very good, or you are not as good as you thought.”

In his own school, Chris emphasises the need to build capacity to the extent of overstaffing some areas and appointing talented staff, even when there is no immediate vacancy: “For example, we didn’t really need a new assistant head last Friday but we appointed two, nor a science teacher, but I appointed one.”

An emphasis on developing leadership potential in staff all the way through means the school now has a very young staff.

On the question of work–life balance, he stressed the need to distance oneself from the notion that the key is being central to everything that happens in a school. “This job is great – it’s a fantastic role and an honour to do it – but you can’t believe that you are so important and so central to all that happens that everything needs you; it doesn’t. It’s not about being superhuman.”