Leading staff and effective teams

Thinkpiece
Mohammed Ali, possibly the greatest heavyweight boxer of all time, once said: “I hated every moment of training, but I said, ‘Don’t quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion’.”

To be an outstanding leader in one of today’s schools or academies you need to ensure pupils and their learning are supported by the very best teachers, by people who can, in fact, be described as ‘champions’ in our schools. These people achieve the highest standards in their performance through engagement in ongoing professional development that is sharply focused on improving specific aspects of their practice and that will, in turn, have significant impact on their pupils’ learning and achievement. These teachers need leaders who are themselves learners and, as Robinson et al (2011) found, who demonstrate that they learn with and alongside their staff.

This thinkpiece focuses upon the task that heads and principals face in establishing and implementing effective professional development that improves teaching and pupil attainment.

The six linked areas that are examined in this thinkpiece and throughout the module represent the major leadership activities aspiring heads need to engage in to secure a whole-school culture of continuing professional learning. In every sense, the staff are a headteacher’s most valuable resource – and your success as a headteacher depends on your ability to lead staff and teams effectively.

*Six areas of leadership*
In order to make the most of all the talent and expertise in your staff team, as an aspiring head you will need to:

- know how to improve the quality of teaching through effective professional development
- know what kind of professional learning has the most impact on teachers’ practice and pupil outcomes
- understand how to build professional learning into a programme of school-wide professional development that addresses school improvement priorities
- be able to link this programme into the performance management cycle
- identify talent in your staff and support its timely development
- distribute leadership in a way that builds powerful and effective teams
- build leadership capacity across your school so improvements continue and are sustained over time

The module will take you through a learning journey that considers each of these important dimensions and how they link together. This thinkpiece raises some challenges to consider as you study the module.

Using professional development to improve teaching

In his first speech as HMCI in February 2012, Sir Michael Wilshaw set out his principles for outstanding leadership in schools, saying:

- you and your senior team have to show your passion and commitment for teaching in everything you say and do
- you need to be committed to good-quality professional development
- you monitor the quality of teaching effectively and ensure performance management is robust in rewarding those who teach well, and doing something about those who consistently underperform

In that same speech he warned that we have “tolerated mediocrity for far too long”, claiming that it has “settled into the system” in our schools. It is a sobering thought that we may be short-changing our pupils by not addressing and improving the quality of the teaching they receive. After all, each pupil only has one chance at a good education at school and that chance must be the best it can be.

So, in leading staff and teams, just how important is professional development to headteachers and what do we expect it to do for our schools and academies and, crucially, for our pupils?

For decades, schools have had expectations placed on them that all staff will engage in worthwhile training or professional development. We know that the nature, frequency and effectiveness of that professional development varies enormously from school to school and that it is sometimes seen as an exercise that has to be seen to be done rather than:

a right and responsibility... linked to school improvement and better outcomes for children and young people.

Earley & Porritt, 2010:viii
Ofsted (2006) described the most effective practice in schools as:

*a logical chain of procedures which place continuing professional development at the heart of schools’ planning for improvement*

*Ofsted, 2006:1*

and emphasised in its later report in 2010 that in the best schools there is:

*a shared understanding of the crucial contribution that professional development makes to improving the quality of care and welfare and to raising standards.*

*Ofsted, 2010:5*

There can be no doubt that professional development and professional learning are essential features of a successful learning organisation. When applied, however, in an unfocused and disconnected way, without extensive consideration to individual and corporate needs, it can feel a waste of time and indeed, it probably is. In schools and academies where professional development is effective and has an impact on both individuals and on the organisation, the following characteristics are present:

− Everyone in the organisation is a committed professional who takes responsibility for his or her own professional learning.
− There is shared commitment to, and belief in, the concept of professional learning and development as a vehicle for achieving improved practice.
− Improved practice is linked inextricably to school improvement and improved outcomes for pupils.
− Professional development is strategically planned, implemented and evaluated in terms of its impact on pupil outcomes.
− A range of professional learning strategies are used and selected for their appropriateness, for example, whole-staff or individual training, coaching and mentoring, shared activities such as observation, planning, demonstration and instruction, and action research.
− There is a commitment to collaborative joint practice development – learning from the experts within the school and from other schools.

The successful leader ensures all these features underpin all professional development that takes place in the school and:

− models an approach towards his or her own professional learning that provides a reference point for all other staff
− raises the profile of professional development by paying attention to, taking an interest in, and giving value to, the quality of what is happening in the classroom and how that is affecting the pupils’ achievements

As a senior leader, how do you approach professional development?
Evaluating the impact of professional development on school improvement

Evaluating the impact of professional development on pupil outcomes is a challenge, as studies over the years demonstrate. Ofsted’s 2006 report *The Logical Chain*, for example, identified that much of the professional development in schools is not evaluated in terms of its long-term impact on an individual’s professional practice. The subsequent report in 2010, *Good Professional Development*, confirmed that the weakest aspect of professional development remained the extent to which schools evaluated its impact on school improvement. The latter report found that evaluation often consisted of short-term feedback on the quality of training and upon anecdotal evidence relating to how the training was used or applied.

There is perhaps also a presumption that just because some training or input is to take place, improvements in practice will follow. We know, however, that a new idea or strategy that is being offered may well be a potentially good one, but before it is incorporated into existing practice teachers will want to be sure it adds value to their professional expertise and to the pupils they teach.

Improving existing practice is not just a matter of introducing something new; it involves exposure to different practices through a range of strategies, dialogue, reflection and practical, evidence-based research. If you want to measure impact you need to be clear about what you are aiming to achieve, your starting point – or baseline – and the measures or indicators that will demonstrate impact. Only then can some procedure for systematic measurement of the impact of professional development activities be constructed. As Earley and Porritt said:

*Taking the time to be clear about current practice and pupil learning (baseline) and the impact on practice and learning that you want to achieve within a desired timescale before engaging in sustained CPD activity is, we believe, crucial to evaluating impact. The most significant benefit to such clarity is to enable an effective match between the need for improvement and the type of CPD activity that will best match such change.*

*Earley & Porritt, 2010:143*

In order, therefore, to ensure that professional development has a real and purposeful impact, the evaluation needs to start at the planning stage, as part of your strategic planning for school improvement. You need to know how professional development links into the school’s improvement priorities, what the starting point is and what impact you are looking for. It can be helpful to apply a systematic process for planning professional learning based on the following stages:

- identification of need, either:
  - individual, through performance review
  - group or departmental priority
  - whole-school priority
- input: eg training, coaching or observing others, working together etc
- action research: trying out a new idea or strategy
- monitor: gathering information about how the new idea or strategy impacts on pupil outcomes
- evaluate: consider the information gathered and determine the effectiveness of the new idea or strategy
- review: compare the new outcomes with the old. What kind of improvement is there, if any?
- decide how to proceed: should we:
  - adopt the new practice?
  - adapt it and then adopt it?
  - discard it (because it did not improve outcomes in the way we had hoped)?
This process can be applied to individual and whole-school learning. Applied across the school, it will help aspiring heads to think about professional development in a more strategic and systematic way – and make sure professional learning and development is focused on the school’s improvement priorities.

Reflect on the professional development you have been responsible for organising over the past six months and identify:

− how it links to the school’s priorities
− how much impact it has had – can you support your assertions with evidence?
− how you would approach it differently next time to achieve even more impact

Succession planning and talent management

As we look ahead into the next century, leaders will be those who empower others.

Bill Gates, co-founder of the Microsoft organisation

When considering our own success as a leader we might say that it can be measured in the number of leaders we have developed beneath us. Identifying and growing future leaders in our schools is a critical activity if we wish to establish and sustain organisational development and ongoing improvement.

How can we tell if we are looking at a future leader? Do they act differently? Talk differently? Stand up and shout “I want to lead… choose me”? Probably not. In reality leaders may come from where we least expect them and many believe that the seed of leadership is within us all, there to be nurtured and developed through practice. So who and where are they?

Spillane (2006) offers the view that:

Leaders are agents of change – persons whose acts affect other people more than the other people’s acts affect them.

and that:

Leadership refers to activities tied to the core work of the organisation that are designed ... to influence the motivation, knowledge, effect or practices of other organisational members.

Spillane, 2006:10 11

Fink suggests that we should be concentrating on looking for ‘leaders of learning’ who have:

a level of sophisticated knowledge that requires an in-depth understanding of the teaching-learning process gained through experience, study and reflection

Fink, 2010:2
Spotting potential agents of change is not perhaps as difficult as we may think. They do not, however, always make themselves known and may not always be aware of their own potential or inclination to take up the leadership mantle, even on a relatively small platform. Perhaps they are best noted as those who are demonstrating a willingness to innovate and to learn from experimentation and their own action research in the classroom. They engage in the pursuit of excellence in their own practice and are open and enthusiastic about sharing excellence in practice between themselves and others. They understand the importance of team aims, beliefs and values and work tirelessly towards achieving the organisational vision. They provide a role model but, more than that, they provide a blueprint for learning and so for improvement. They are, or they become, ‘warm bodies’ or ‘leaders of learning’ (Fink, 2010) because through their everyday actions they empower others by making them think and therefore learn.

These leaders of learning might be recently qualified teachers but because we are not looking at them in any way other than to consider how we might offer them support, we miss how much they are bringing to the school in terms of their capacity to lead and support others. There is a particular reward and pleasure in working alongside a member of staff and witnessing their growth and excitement as they become more engaged in, and confident about, the development of their own ethos and practice.

Who are the change agents in your school? What about teachers new to the profession – can you recognise leadership talent in them?

Perhaps we should also consider how we are selling the idea or prospect of being a leader. Many teachers perceive leadership as involving too much paperwork or as being remote from the classroom and from teaching the pupils. Some see leadership as being seated absolutely in the inner sanctum of the senior leadership team (SLT), the mighty beast of knowledge, power and decision-making, which would always remain completely beyond their aspirations or dreams of progression. Some do not relish the idea of putting their heads above the parapet, only to take their place among those first in the firing line of accountability, and they need strong and regular encouragement to meet that responsibility and to develop the courage to embrace it.

Some market research undertaken by the National College in 2007 showed that when asked what they thought about their job, headteachers invariably said: “It’s the best job in the world” and “I wouldn’t change it for anything”. Middle leaders, however, were more negative about headship, saying, for example, “It’s too much pressure… the head is always working”.

It was clear that how heads feel about the job and the perceptions teachers have about headship are very different. We know about the power of modelling and the significant influence it has on others’ behaviour and attitudes. It is useful to think about the negative messages middle leaders must be picking up that turns them off senior leadership and headship.

So what kind of leadership role model are you? Reflect on your past week at school and the leadership activities you were involved in.

- How do you think staff perceived your leadership?
- What did you do that would have encouraged teachers to want to be a senior leader?
- Can you recall anything you did that would have put them off the role?
- Why not ask them to see if your recollections match their perceptions?
Spillane purports that one should think of the challenge of leadership development as one of developing the practice of leadership within the organisation and this is illustrated to positive effect in so many of our schools and academies. Some examples of good practice in this respect can be found in the National College’s *Identify and grow your own leaders* (2010), which refers to the Hay Group’s (2007) list of what senior leaders saw as early warning signs of leadership:

- confidence and credibility
- the ability to see the big picture, to make connections and think of the whole organisation
- mastering the basics of their role quickly and looking for more
- getting involved (doesn’t look the other way or walk past incidents)
- initiative and self-motivation (the sort of people you can’t stop from leading)
- intellectual curiosity and capacity (sees the common threads)
- resilience and empathy (to survive the pace of acceleration and learn from others)

What are the early warning signs you look for? Are there staff in the team you are currently responsible for showing signs of leadership?

What about staff you think have potential but are unsure? How can you encourage staff to think positively about making an impact at leadership level?

What about fast-tracking some of that talent – do teachers need to serve their time before taking on promoted posts or are some teachers capable of progressing rapidly in their careers to take on senior responsibilities relatively early on in their careers?

Where people work in an organisation where they feel recognised and valued for the quality work they do they will want to continue to perform well and contribute to that organisation. They will strive to remain as part of a culture where success is shared and celebrated and where there are opportunities for them to grow and develop. They will want to continue working in that school or academy and will perhaps find it hard to move on to new opportunities. Teachers who work in chains and federations do have opportunities to gain a wider variety of experience beyond a single organisation, as do those middle and senior leaders who are working as specialist leaders of education.

It starts with recruitment, of course – ‘getting the right people on the bus’. In the National College publication *Prepared to lead: how school, federations and chains grow education leaders* (2011), the head of Twynham School describes how recruitment is seen as the first step in identifying leaders of the future and how prospective employees are introduced, through the advert and through the first meeting with the headteacher at the recruitment point, to the two pillars upon which all aspects of the school and professional development rest: those of learning and relationships.

Further guidance on attracting, developing and growing our next generation of great school leaders is offered in the following National College publications:

- *What are we learning about...identifying talent?* (2009)
- *What are we learning about...attracting talented candidates for headship?* (2010)
Improving team work and developing high-performing teams

In one his speeches to the annual Seizing Success conference, Steve Munby, Chief Executive of the National College addressed the theme of resonant leaders, describing them as those who:

- are able to strike a pure note, so they, their teams and their organisations resonate.

Munby, 2011

This conjures an image of leaders not as people apart from the rest, not above nor separate from the many, but among them and working with them generating waves of impact and activity. In practical terms what does resonant leadership look like?

Steve provided five characteristics of resonant leaders:

- They know themselves and develop their own leadership styles.
- They motivate and energise others.
- They focus on improvement.
- They collaborate.
- They develop a compelling narrative.

Are you a resonant leader? It will be useful to hold onto these five characteristics as you consider the ways in which you can lead the development of high-performing teams.

As a head you will be responsible for all the staff teams in the school – this may be a small or large number of teams depending on your context. Whilst you will have influence over individual members of staff, it will be important for you to build a strong and effective senior leadership team – who in turn will be leading other teams.

What do high-performing teams look like? What do they do that works so well?

First, high-performing teams are held together not just by common tasks, but by common purpose and vision or what Hargreaves and Harris (2011) describe as ‘sharing the dream’. Commitment to tasks is high where the individuals within the team are able to personally relate to the vision and mission and understand the part each of them plays in achieving it.

Second, high-performing teams are made up of high-performing individuals, who are committed to self-improvement and learning. They know their individual strengths and skills and what they can contribute to the team in order to achieve high-quality outcomes. They constantly reflect upon their own performance, seek to improve it and encourage others to do the same.

Third, the individuals within the high-performing team do not seek self-glory but team glory, often sacrificing the opportunity to score the winning goal in order to achieve team victory. To this end they collaborate closely and share responsibilities and tasks in a way that benefits the whole team. This means the team operates in an efficient and effective way.
Fourth, high-performing teams have key, or inspirational, players within them who lead by example and provide a benchmark for others to emulate and surpass. Recall the London 2012 Olympics – there will be a number of examples where inspirational players have raised the performance of other team members.

Inspirational players are powerful people with powerful ideas. They live the dream, make it happen for the team and inspire others to exceed their personal best.

*Hargreaves and Harris, 2011*

Fifth, high-performing teams have clear objectives and clear plans for achieving them. They know exactly what they are aiming for and support their work with careful and rigorous evaluation that involves gathering data from a range of sources, analysing that data objectively, and reviewing their daily actions towards success. They constantly ask the question ‘Are we doing the right thing, in the right way at the right time?’ They are not afraid to change course or to row against the tide if it will achieve better outcomes.

Finally, all of the above is done within a learning culture, that is, one where every opportunity to learn something new that could improve pupil outcomes is explored, investigated and exploited. This collaborative and communal approach to learning may be encapsulated in the term *professional learning community* which is often applied to:

> an inclusive and mutually supportive group of people with a collaborative, reflective and growth-oriented approach towards investigating and learning more about their practice in order to improve pupils’ learning.

*Stoll et al, 2011:103*

The task of building such teams and such a culture within your school or academy is critical to its success and can only be achieved through the application of outstanding leadership, leadership which is distributed to others across the school.

**Performance management to improve teaching**

To address professional development in a strategic way, headteachers need to link it clearly to the school’s improvement priorities and also need to have a systematic approach to performance management that is known and understood by all. To support this work the DfE (2012) has produced a model policy for schools on teacher appraisal and capability, which provides an outline for such a system to be put in place. It promotes a positive, constructive and supportive though rigorous approach to performance review.

Having a systematic approach, however, is not enough. If performance management is going to be instrumental in developing and improving teacher performance rather than simply inspecting it, then the processes involved need to be underpinned by the establishment of the right relationships. Kaser and Halbert suggest that:

> Strong levels of trust and respectful relationships are preconditions for successful school improvement initiatives. When adult relationships in schools are characterised by trust, the stories about change shift from indifference or negativity to possibility and hope.

*Kaser & Halbert, 2009:45*

Where leaders have not taken the time to build trust and respect with teachers, then the process of performance management, no matter how systematic, runs the risk of feeling like a top-down inspection that is designed to catch teachers doing something wrong rather than doing something right.

How does performance management work in your current school? Do teachers see it as entitlement or a bureaucratic chore? Do they regard classroom observations as opportunities to share practice and learn from others, or as a practice inspection?
Formative classroom observations:

- focus on a particular aspect of practice
- involve the gathering of objective information about what is seen and heard in the classroom
- provide specific and objective feedback in the form of this information which
- prompts highly focused reflection about teachers’ actions in the classroom, which leads to trying out new practices
- allow good and outstanding practice to be shared and celebrated

The DfE’s model policy for schools in *Teacher appraisal and capability* (2012;6) recommends all classroom observations are carried out in a supportive fashion and prompts schools to be specific about how observations will be conducted.

Establishing a positive culture for performance management and review means ensuring teachers take responsibility and ownership of the process in as much as they are prepared through self-audit against the Teachers’ Standards, knowledgeable about, and involved in, their own ongoing professional development and appropriately aware of the criteria for review.

What can you learn from your experience as a senior leader that you would want to take into your first headship to help you establish an effective performance management system?

Summary

The overall link between teacher improvement and pupil attainment is perhaps an obvious one though many of the more detailed links between the two are not necessarily fully forged. Why is this? Is it, perhaps, that the professional development of teachers has, for too long, been managed rather than led; in other words, it is seen as an obligatory activity that ought to take place rather than a critical element in the cycle of school improvement?

Successful leaders will take this element of school improvement seriously and work with staff to ensure that this link is established and forged strongly within the normal, everyday practice of the school. By seeking out and developing leadership in others, by collaborating and sharing good practice between individuals and groups, and by building strength in individuals and in teams, leaders will establish a collective responsibility for school improvement. More than that, leaders must help everyone to see and work together for the bigger vision, for if everyone can understand what is at stake and what can be gained, this is what they will strive for and be prepared to change for.

*If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people together to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.*

Antoine de Saint-Exupery
Resources

DfE, 2012, Teacher appraisal and capability: a model policy for schools, London, Department for Education. This model policy provides an example of the sort of policy that schools might want to adopt when managing teacher performance. Available at: www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/deployingstaff/a00201884/new-arrangements-for-teacher-appraisal-and-capability-to-be-introduced-from-september-2012


Hargreaves, A & Harris, A, 2011, Performance Beyond Expectations, Nottingham, National College for School Leadership. Around the world there is a preoccupation with improved performance and ever increasing standards. But how do we secure exceptional performance and what type of leadership is needed in top performing organisations? The answers to such questions are addressed in a major new study about performance beyond expectations, led by Professor Andy Hargreaves and Professor Alma Harris. This study takes a unique look at how organisations perform beyond expectations in three sectors: business, education and sport. Available at: www.nationalcollege.org.uk/performance-beyond-expectations


Munby, S, 2011, keynote speech at the 2011 Annual Seizing Success Conference. Steve focused on the idea of ‘resonant leadership’ and how this is needed if we are to succeed in the challenging times ahead. Available at: www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/events/conference2011/conference2011-videos/conference2011-videos-munby.htm

National College, Identify and grow your own leaders (2010), Nottingham, National College for School Leadership. This publication offers practical guidance for people working in schools who have a role in developing new leaders. Drawing on good practice from schools in a range of contexts and phases, and from a local authority, it aims to encourage leaders to reflect on their schools’ existing practices and help them to devise new approaches to improve leadership development in their schools. Available at: www.nationalcollege.org.uk/docinfo?id=21826&filename=identify-and-grow-your-own-leaders.pdf

National College, Information for headteachers, principals and governors is available online. It is essential that all those involved in developing, attracting and appointing school leaders draw upon the widest and most diverse pool of talent available. This is to ensure schools continue to benefit from world-class leaders, and create a strong and robust leadership team that builds and maintains equality. More than ever, we need to grow a new generation of great school leaders, and everyone – whether a current or aspiring head, school governor, diocese or local authority – has a crucial role to play. Available at: www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/leadershiplibrary/leadingschools/diversity-in-schools/diversity-equality-information-headteachers-principals-governors.htm

National College, Developing leadership in your school, available online. Excellent leadership plays a critical role in the success of a school and its students. As a senior leader, it is important that you develop not only your own skills, but the leadership skills of your entire team. Options for doing so include coaching and mentoring, reviewing the leadership structure of your school or looking at performance management. If you want to make positive change in your leadership team, the information in this section is designed for you. Available at: www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/leadershiplibrary/leadingschools/developing-leadership-in-your-school
National College, *Top Tips for Maximising Team Performance* available online. Making the most out of the resources at your disposal is vital for any manager. This is especially true when it comes to the members of your team. Ensuring that employees are focused, challenged and engaged in work can benefit both the employee and the organisation. Follow these top tips to help your team operate at maximum productivity. Available at: http://member.goodpractice.net/nclscs-leadership/resources/developing-others/team-management/team-performance/top-tips-for-maximising-team-performance.gp

National College, *Prepared to lead: how schools, federations and chains grow education leaders* (2011), Nottingham, National College for School Leadership. The pattern of education in England is shifting. Schools that once were islands are becoming connected through federations and chains. These changes have not only placed a greater premium on school leadership but have also opened up new opportunities for developing leaders. This research explores the development of leaders in and for schools at the leading edge of change. Available at: www.nationalcollege.org.uk/docinfo?id=153521&filename=prepared-to-lead-how-schools-grow-education-leaders.pdf


Wilshaw, Sir M, 2012, first major speech since becoming HMCI. Delivering his first major speech since becoming Chief Inspector, Sir Michael Wilshaw HMCI launched detailed proposals for changes to Ofsted inspection in the drive to deliver a good education for all. Available at: www.ofsted.gov.uk/news/high-expectation-no-excuses-sir-michael-wilshaw-hmci-outlines-changes-ofsted-inspection-drive-delive
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