No more heroes?

Does collaboration spell the death of the heroic leader?

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## Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................... 3

Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 3

Reviewing the relevant literature .................................................................................... 5
  Leadership styles and collaboration ................................................................. 5
  The heroic headteacher .................................................................................... 6
  Starting collaborations .................................................................................... 7

Methodology .................................................................................................................... 9

Main findings ................................................................................................................. 10
  Competition versus collaboration ................................................................. 11
  Are heads natural collaborators? ................................................................. 13
  Starting collaborations .................................................................................... 15
  Decisive leadership ......................................................................................... 18

Conclusions ................................................................................................................... 21

Recommendations ........................................................................................................ 22

References ................................................................................................................... 23

Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................... 25
Whatever happened to all the heroes?
All the Shakespearoes?
They watched their Rome burn.
Whatever happened to the heroes?
Whatever happened to the heroes?

No more heroes any more.

The Stranglers – No more heroes

Abstract

This research associate report found that in starting collaborations, a heroic style of leadership was unlikely to be conducive to collaborative success. The results of the cross-sectional survey agreed that it is an outdated style of leadership and that different leadership styles are necessary to set collaborative work off on a sound footing. The research also revealed that collaboration between schools is also a disincentive to some headteachers, especially those who have been ‘brought up’ in an atmosphere of individual accountability and competition and are therefore not instinctive collaborators.

Where the recognised advantages of collaboration prevail, school leaders now need to develop skills of collaborative entrepreneurship. This style of leadership is deemed to be highly conducive to establishing collaborations, with an ability to identify opportunities and bring school leaders together for wider benefits and tangible rewards for all stakeholders. The report suggests that heroic leaders might profitably adapt their style of leadership to an equally decisive but more transformational style to achieve these ends.

Introduction

For school leaders who lead collaborations of headteachers, their role must feel akin to that of the England football manager with the headteachers acting as club managers. All club managers may voice their support for the national side, yet the managers of the leading clubs such as the Manchester United’s or Chelsea’s of this world constantly undermine the national coach by withdrawing players, as they see success in their own matches as more important than that of the national side’s.

In schools it is comparable: headteachers may be committed to collaboration and partnership ideals but still remain constantly anxious that their success is judged not by partnership outcomes but by the results and reputation of their home school. The collaborative decisions that headteachers must make cannot compromise this individual school success and yet in their hearts, headteachers may feel that partnership work seems to offer wider opportunities and solutions to parochial issues faced by individual schools.

Whether as football manager or educational leader, one wants to be remembered for leading team success. In the past, some headteachers (often branded as heroic leaders) did this through charisma and force of personality. In a collaboration where the leadership hierarchy is less defined, this seems less likely to succeed. Working in partnership with other local schools can be a major challenge for new school leaders.
They may hold clear views on how to work with colleagues within their own school’s management structure and a vision of the leadership styles that they wish to adopt when performing the role of headteacher. These views may have been formed from study of published works on leadership and from the experience of working with a variety of headteachers in the past. However, it is hard to prepare for the ambiguity or even vacuum of leadership that can result from a group of school leaders working in collaboration without a clearly defined hierarchy, just as it must be for a new football manager in their first dealings with national coaches.

The development of the leadership skills required for successful school collaborations holds a national relevance, as in the current political climate, one would only expect an increase in the number of partnerships between schools and colleges. These partnerships may take the form of soft federations, formed to deliver the complex curriculum necessitated by Diplomas and the 14-19 agenda, or groups of schools forming educational trusts to facilitate work with businesses and local stakeholders or even hard federations built to address the national shortage of headteachers.

One of the major current works on adding value through partnership has been written by Hill (2008, 256) who writes, “I… believe there is a significant difference in the kind of leadership needed to make federations work.” Previously one successful style of headship has been that described as the ‘heroic leader’ where the headteacher leads by charismatic example. However in a collaboration, leaders need ‘to value and develop a capacity to contribute to collective endeavour rather than the ability to inspire followers’ (Hill 2008, 255), hence the style of heroic leadership could be seen as counter-productive. Therefore does the increasing advent of collaboration signify the final demise of the heroic headteacher?

This present research study draws on the experiences of headteachers in successful schools working in a range of collaborations and discusses the issues of leadership as collaborations are formed. It considers the research questions:

- Is a heroic style of leadership detrimental to collaboration?
- What are the most effective leadership styles when starting collaborations?
- What are the implications of this for leaders establishing future collaborations?

The research explores the tension between competition and collaboration and whether heroic headteachers are natural collaborators. It examines how partnerships are formed, and how headteachers begin working in a collaboration. It offers the reader the opportunity to reflect upon the partnership they are working within, understand the motivations and fears of leaders as they form a collaboration and recognise how leadership within a collaboration can be made more effective from the beginning.

It needs to be stressed that this research focuses on the process of starting a collaboration rather than the leadership skills required to sustain one. It is recognised that substantial research is required on the sustaining of collaborations. A further report under the NCSL Research Associate programme is planned which will address this issue.
Reviewing the relevant literature

Leadership styles and collaboration

There are a myriad of definitions of leadership, in fact in the past 60 years more than 65 different classifications of leadership have been developed, (Fleishman et al., 1991). However in this present research study a certain type of leadership is being considered and that is when a group of headteachers are placed together in a partnership, or elect to develop a collaborative project. In this scenario, one of the most helpful definitions of leadership is that espoused by Northouse (2007, 3) who describes leadership as ‘a process, whereby an individual (one of the headteachers) ‘influences a group of individuals’ (the other headteachers) ‘to achieve a common (collaborative) goal’ as opposed to the view where leadership is seen as a trait or characteristic residing in one person.

If this study is to examine whether the leadership style of the heroic leader is no longer the most conducive to school success and that the onus on headteachers is now to work more in collaboration then it is necessary to re-examine established consensus on what constitutes successful leadership styles. ‘Recognised styles have a set of assumptions and goals that, when properly applied in the right environment, can result in success’ (Conner 1998, 184). This study examines whether this is still true when leading in collaboration or whether a new set of successful leadership styles emerge.

Conner (1998, 187) holds the view that many institutions are ‘finding it difficult to remain viable…because they are burdened with leaders who have not developed their style beyond the Rational or Panacea style’. The rational leader tends to see collaboration as ‘right or wrong’ (Conner 1998, 153) and lacks the flexibility to see collaborative advantage except when the outcome is predictable and assured. The panacea leader holds similar views yet believes the pressure has increased significantly and change is unavoidable. They reconcile themselves to change even when the outcome is uncertain.

Hill’s influential work for the ASCL on adding value through partnership (2008) suggests that leadership within federations is much more lateral than hierarchical. Potential gains and losses for a headteacher’s ‘home’ school are balanced against adding value for the whole partnership. This kind of leadership does not come naturally to some heads who still feel perpetual pressure to compete with other schools at the same time as collaborating with them and many would argue that whilst the government actively encourages collaboration, the dominance of league tables and individual statistical measures of success provides significant obstacles rather than incentives to the initiation of collaborative ventures.

In 1994, Chrislip and Larson examined different styles of leadership used by civic leaders including looking at tactical or positional leaders. Tactical leadership is a style best adopted when the goal is very clear – defeat the enemy, win the match or meet monthly sales targets. Smith (2008, 1) argues ‘that this is the most aggressive form of leadership and not one many leaders today would feel comfortable with’. Positional leadership as its name suggests relies on a hierarchical position to legitimise decisions and qualify them to set the goals in the first place. In their study of how civic leaders can make a difference, Chrislip and Larson (1994) identified that tactical or positional leaders are not successful in collaborations. Smith (2008) agrees that neither of these forms of
leadership stand a chance of being truly successful in collaborations. However, both tactical and positional leadership does 'facilitate the constructive interaction of the network, not do the work for it' (Chrislip and Larson1994, 144). From a series of US civic case studies it can be deduced that collaborative leaders 'convince others that something can be done by working together. They inspire collaborative actions that lead to a shared vision' (Chrislip and Larson 1994, 145).

Another charismatic style of leadership is transformational leadership, which Northouse (2007, 175) describes as 'a process that changes and transforms people. It is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards and long-term goals and includes assessing followers motives, satisfying their needs and treating them as full human beings'. Bass and Avolio (1990a, cited in Northouse 2007) break this leadership down into the four I’s: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration. Ainsworth (2009) explains how this style of leadership can be used to transcend hierarchical leadership structures within a school, raising the premise that this is even more pertinent to collaborative success.

The heroic headteacher

Many leaders across a variety of spheres of influence hold the view that heroic leadership is outdated. This view is encapsulated by Goffee, the Professor of Organisational Behaviour at London Business School, who in ‘Why should anyone be led by you’ (2006), suggests that our ideas about leadership are shaped by the times we live in. He cites corporate disasters such as the demise of Enron as a major factor in our shift of what he calls 'mood' regarding leadership, away from the attractiveness of the heroic, charismatic, larger than life type of leader over that last 10 years or so.

This is a viewed shared by educationalists over a similar time. Whereas in the past we read findings about leadership traits and were encouraged to examine and analyse our own individual leadership behaviours, the emphasis now is less focused on individual leadership characteristics. Indeed hero heads have become more the subject of caricature and satire. In his TES article ‘Hero Heads need Courage to let others have a go’ (June 20 2008, 20) Haigh refers to a school who had a hero head for a while and describes him as 'roaring in, soliciting approval like a colonel' but notes that 'later cracks appeared' and that no lasting improvement was made when middle leaders lost confidence in their own ideas and initiatives.'

Other writers are harsher, referring to the male dominated and ultimately self-indulgent style of the heroic leader who relies on personal charisma to lead a school and whose style is unsustainable in the world of collaborative working. Sinclair (1998, cited in Underhill 2005), an Australian leadership researcher, argues that ‘…our conceptions of leadership are locked in a time-warp, constrained by lingering archetypes of heroic warriors and wise but distant fathers…’. She goes on to suggest that:

‘…further characteristics include a tendency or preference for hierarchical and coercive ways of working , a reluctance to share or develop relationships as a working tool or to use dialogue and open discussion, or to leave people space and to trust them to tolerate ambiguity or uncertainty, or to use genuine listening and understanding as ways of working.’
Haigh (2008) further suggests that the hero head, that is, one who rules by the authority of hierarchical status, ‘can no longer be part of the educational leadership world’. In the world of expected collaboration this report examines whether this style of leadership can only lead to power struggles and dissention amongst headteachers working in partnership. Fullan (2001,1) agrees, claiming that ‘charismatic leaders often do more harm than good because at best they provide episodic improvement followed by frustrated or despondent dependency’. ‘Deep and sustained reform as required by collaboration depends on many’, Fullan asserts, rather than the ‘very few who are destined to be extraordinary’ (2001, 2). The NCSL paper ‘What we are learning about: Leadership of Every Child Matters’ (2008, 13) describes ‘old style leaders’ who are ‘competitive, inward looking and aggressive in pushing forward their own agenda’ and deems this style ineffective. Stakeholders stated that school leaders can find inter-school collaboration a challenge because of the tension between a collaborative approach and the competitive environment. Indeed Hannon writing in The Collaborative State (Parker and Gallagher, 2007) moves further to suggest that the situation where headteachers place their own school first is a view that can no longer be articulated in polite company.

**Starting collaborations**

A key focus of this report is to explore the leadership style(s) required to begin a collaboration. At the start there is likely to be an individual leader acting as a catalyst for the collaboration to form. The authority may or may not reside with this individual.

This behaviour is in agreement with the model of entrepreneurial leadership described by Steinhouse and West (2008). Entrepreneurial leadership consists of four components; self-motivation or the ability to be a self-starter, innovation to imagine the idea, strategic ability to turn the idea into a practical suggestion and finally the confidence to act decisively.

Educational collaborations are usually formed on a geographical foundation and it is likely that the headteachers are already in a loose partnership even if this is one of acquaintance rather than action. How does the individual or individuals, use leadership to move these groupings towards a collaboration? Goss (2005, 5) writing about partnerships explains:

‘A key leadership role is often that of constructing both the authority and power to act; and of connecting partnership decisions to the delivery capabilities of partner agencies. A partnership remains inert – unable to command or deploy resources, unless these linkages are made.’

Central to the process of beginning collaborations is the understanding by the leaders involved that the act of collaboration is worthwhile, or as Jackson (2007) poses the question: ‘How can networks prove they are making a difference greater than the sum of their parts?’ (Parker and Gallagher, 2007, 93). This question highlights one of the difficulties in beginning a collaboration, in that leaders must be prepared to trust that collaboration will bring benefits. The key for collaborative leaders as for all leaders in developing trust is one of understanding the relationships involved in their partnership. As Fullan (2001, 5) writes ‘if relationships improve, things get better. If they remain the same or get worse, ground is lost.’ However, as Hill (2008, 59) points out ‘nearly 60 % of partnerships have existed for less that 3 years’ and that ‘the demand on school
leaders is intense as they struggle to manage the tension between competitive and collaborative pressures and the additional practical demands of partnership commitments’. Thus there is much for school leaders to learn about how to participate most successfully in partnership work. This present research study seeks to contribute to that learning.

This review of the relevant literature has informed the first two key research questions, namely: is a heroic style of leadership detrimental to collaboration? And what are the most effective leadership styles when starting collaborations? The third research question: what are the implications of this for leaders establishing future collaborations? is addressed through the interview findings of this current research study. The following section explains the methodology that was used in order to address all three research questions.
Methodology

The study followed a qualitative research methodology, using a semi-structured interview approach. The interview style allowed for further probing and a more detailed level of response, supported by a set of open-ended questions that allowed comparisons to be made between interviewees’ responses. The respondents were sought from a range of contexts and were largely self-nominated. Requests for respondents were placed in national educational publications including Secondary Headship, Sec Ed magazine and the Times Educational Supplement. As a result, those that replied were not previously known to the interviewer. It is fair to conclude that they were headteachers who had strong views on the art of collaboration or felt strongly enough about their experiences to be motivated enough to make contact with the researcher themselves.

A cross sectional survey was developed focusing on these five serving senior leaders who were working within a variety of collaborations and partnerships in a range of state secondary schools, encompassing comprehensive, selective, co-educational and single sex schools. The one common aspect was that they had all been described by Ofsted as ‘improving’ or ‘successful’ or ‘outstanding’. Leadership experience varied from:

- School A: a selective state grammar school headteacher in West Yorkshire leading a group of schools to share and develop leadership practices as part of a second school specialism.

- School B: a collaboration led by a secondary school senior leader in the East Midlands to oversee a collaborative ICT project with eight primary feeder schools.

- School C: a Leicestershire 11-14 comprehensive school headteacher working with three other 11-14 high schools and 1 14-19 upper school.

- School D: a headteacher of a large primary school in the West Midlands who is seconded to both support an excellence cluster and to work with schools in difficulty.

- School E: a Nottinghamshire 11-19 comprehensive school headteacher for nine years, working in two headship posts and within three collaborative projects.

In addition, Gerald Haigh, the Times Educational Supplement columnist was interviewed, to set the case studies into the current national context. From these collected views, findings were shaped under headings that provided an overview of common experience, personal reflection and opinion.

The interviews were conducted between October 2008 and January 2009. It should be recognised that these detail the interviewees’ experiences as they told them. They are reported anonymously. No external verification or triangulation of their responses was sought, as the research focuses on individuals’ perceptions of collaborative leadership and how their personal leadership style has developed as a result of the projects they have been engaged in.
Main findings

The key questions within this study arose from asking whether collaboration does indeed mean the demise of the heroic leader. If this is the case, then how do headteachers most effectively lead in collaboration and what are the implications of this knowledge for educational leadership in a wider perspective?

Whilst the literature paints a fairly uncomplimentary picture of leaders whose styles have effected real whole school change, the survey tallies with a view of what makes collaborative leaders more successful amongst the heads working on collaborations interviewed. The headteacher of School A explained that even though her school was the initiator of the collaboration as a result of its second specialism it would not be appropriate for her to portray herself as the lead headteacher. In her own school she admitted to be perceived as 'the expert' by her staff but this role did not continue when working collaboratively with other headteachers, albeit ones with different levels of experience or in different school contexts.

The headteacher of School C agreed. Whilst in his home school his role was one of 'ultimate' leader (in the context of ultimate responsibility) he described his collaborative role as much more consultative. The dichotomy between being 'in charge' in one's home school and being a facilitator of change in a collaboration was clear across this research. Indeed, school leaders who attempted collaboration with a 'heroic' stance were often those least welcomed by their peers. As Headteacher C put it:

"Some heads dominate and people’s eyes roll and they get fed up…whereas there are other who speak [less frequently] but when they say something it’s spot on, it’s insightful and everyone listens. I think headteachers sometimes need to learn when to shut up."

In his interview, Gerald Haigh defines heroic leadership as:

"A matter of being very decisive in a way which sometimes doesn’t take other peoples views into consideration but because it sometimes has a beneficial short term effect people like it."

Whether in agreement or not, sometimes staff feel comfortable because they know where they are with such a leader. However, in his work on partnership, Robert Hill summarises the need for different leadership skills, and the tension that exists between the need for ‘strong’ leadership and effective collaborative working. He raises issues of legitimacy and authority, which changes when moving between leading an institution and a partnership. The automatic authority that comes with leading a school makes it clear where ultimate accountability lies. In a partnership he says it is rarely quite so simple:

‘Leaders of collaborations have to earn their authority – they have to persuade others to buy into or implement an agenda. By force of vision they have to create a space or carve out the territory where they want to act or add value.’
(Hill 2008, 8)
If, as the literature review suggests, the heroic style of leadership is felt to be at worst outdated, perhaps old fashioned and probably not conducive to collaborative ventures, then what style of leadership do successful collaborators adopt at the beginning of a collaboration? In addressing this question a number of themes arose from the interviews:

- Competition or collaboration? the perceived barriers.
- Which leadership styles facilitate collaboration?
- Leadership actions: start-up leadership and decisive leadership.

The first theme considers how collaboration occurs amongst schools and what the major barriers to headteachers working together are. All the interviewees discussed the difficulties faced by schools in reconciling the current competitive climate fostered by the use of league tables.

The second theme considers that if league tables are not present, would headteachers in fact behave as natural collaborators? If this is the case, rather than headteachers needing to develop a new leadership style, would it be possible and appropriate to reclaim leadership styles that headteachers used in the past.

The study then moves thirdly into considering the actions of headteachers when they are forming collaborations: how headteachers need to lead for these to happen most effectively and if at this time there is a need for a particular style of decisive leadership to occur.

**Competition versus collaboration**

One of the issues already highlighted in the literature review is the potential clash of priorities headteachers face between school collaboration and school competition – whether that is competition for pupil numbers or in league tables. One thing Robert Hill makes clear is that for headteachers to develop successful and long lasting collaborations they must move beyond competition. Hill discusses this in the context of a group of shipwrecked leaders trying to find the highest point on an island. The most individualistic and competitive method is for each leader to go off, do their own thing and try and find the highest point themselves. They then may communicate this point to the rest of the group or may not. The most collegiate or centralised approach would be for all the leaders to remain together, debate as to whether they can see a higher point and only move if the whole group is in agreement. This lack of movement can be highlighted by leaders who do not wish to join collaborations. The third approach is the collaborative one where the leaders subdivide into groups, try and find higher patches of ground and then encourage others to join them. He concludes by quoting John Kay, (cited Hill, 2008, 13):

‘This mechanism has a good chance of achieving better results than either of the others because it strikes balance between decentralisation and co-ordination.’

Gerald Haigh also commented that, ‘they [headteachers] have to reconcile the conflict between local competition and the need for collaboration.’ It would appear that the heroic headteacher who led by example in his or her own school, felt the pressure of ‘the days when the buck stopped there’ [with the headteacher] but Haigh suggests that now ‘the
buck stops everywhere’. This is an indication of how in recent years, headteachers have distributed leadership through their organisation with the associated trust and confidence in staff that it requires. Collaboration provides an opportunity for leadership to be distributed beyond the headteacher’s own school, with the additional trust that requires amongst other school leaders looking to their own home school success.

These views are supported by headteachers interviewed. For example, Headteacher E suggested that the competitive environment amongst schools is a product of the education system of the last two decades and that current headteachers have been formed or ‘brought up in’ this culture of competition. The increasing expectation of collaboration perhaps necessitates a timely opportunity to throw off the shackles of the league tables, as Headteacher E explains:

“I’ve got this notion – wouldn’t it be a really good idea if, in the whole district, the only GCSE results that are published, are district based and not school based. Then you are going to get some genuine collaboration as people don’t see they’ve got much to lose.

“… if we are really running away from this idea that a single heroic head can transform a school… is to say we are all responsible for the results of these young people in this patch; we’ve got to work together, we can then offer different things without feeling as though we are sacrificing too much. A lot of school leaders are reluctant to do that as they are already seen as winners and the winners don’t want to give it up do they.”

John Dunford, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, writing on the ASCL website (30/09/08) agreed with this sentiment:

“Every school should be part of its local family of schools. All schools should have an obligation to work in partnership with other local schools, especially on admissions and placing excluded and hard to teach pupils.”

Hill goes further. In his work for the ASCL he asserts that currently ‘the full potential of collaboration is not being realised’. He highlights seven broad areas that government, local authorities, school and college leaders and agencies that support schools should address. The first he says is for the government to:

“…end the strategic tug of war between emphasising the autonomy of individual institutions one moment, while calling for schools to work in partnership the next. Both are necessary. The accountability of schools can and should fit within a broader partnership context. Competitive pressures – in terms of schools knowing that they have to attract parents and pupils – can co-exist with an environment where schools also support each other. It does not have to be either/or. We need that message to be accepted and understood by policy makers and government ministers and then broadcast loudly, clearly and consistently. A set of principles that addresses the tension between competition and collaboration…could be a very useful first step.” (2008, 266)

Haigh suggests that for headteachers to move beyond the obstacle of the league table, ‘they have to get over that somehow and probably the only way to get over it is to get into the open and talk about it… though this requires a different mindset on the part of
the school leaders really’. This exchange of views which permits school leaders to move towards collaboration must still be based on personal integrity as Headteacher C explained:

“...but you have to be true to you and you have to be true to you as a leader. If you said what you thought each group you went to wanted to hear from you, you would tie yourself up into a web of deceit and lies that you could never undo.”

Competition amongst schools by its very nature can bring about isolation for school leaders and a natural consequence of this can be for headteachers to develop extreme self-reliance, which is a characteristic of the hero head. Headteachers are recognising that this isolation can be bad both for the school and their own well-being, a further catalyst for headteachers to work in collaboration.

Headteacher D described his feeling at the start of his career when competition amongst schools was beginning:

“I think what has driven me to move towards more collaborative ways of thinking is no-one should be as isolated as I was in the worst primary school in the country in the mid 80s in the middle of a no go area. I still work very closely with people who are in special measures that is the nearest comparison to the personal feelings I had.”

He explained further that:

“We need to move from the culture of schools being isolated and in competition with each other to a more collaborative ethic.”

The values that Headteacher D describes are examples of Transformational Leadership, which is ‘concerned with emotions, values and standards deeply rooted in treating fellow school leaders as full human beings, rather than just opponents’ (Northouse 2007, 175).

“You’ve got to be true to you and your principles which must come from the children in your school.”

The views above suggest that a number of headteachers find the current league table culture counter productive to the encouragement of collaboration. However, the benefits and the government incentives to form collaborations, allied with the values held by some headteachers means these obstacles are considered worth overcoming.

Are heads natural collaborators?

The advent of 14-19 reform could have a profound effect on the league tables that in many secondary schools are seen as a current hindrance to collaboration. If a situation where students are moving across institutions to study diploma lines is reached, as is currently expected, this could fracture the first principles on which league tables are based, as students may be studying for a diploma at one institution, not the school at which they are formally on roll, yet their results will be assigned to their ‘home’ school. This could, in the long-term, result in league tables having to be reported on a district or partnership level, as advocated by Headteacher E. However, Headteacher E did not
think the move to a partnership GCSE results would remove that element of competition without a wider change in educational thinking:

“…but they [headteachers] are always conscious of the fact that they are accountable for that site, I’m responsible for this site and anything that I give is reducing my impact upon this site potentially, now when OFSTED come in they are going to give us a hammering for taking our eye off the ball.”

Even though it is very difficult to envisage a world without competition, it is still worth considering that if the ubiquitous league tables were removed would headteachers have a strong urge to work together harmoniously. In essence the question is “are headteachers natural collaborators?” Dunford (2008) believes in the affirmative:

‘The vast majority of school and college leaders strongly support collaboration but some current policies like league tables, encourage schools to compete rather than collaborate.’

However, headteachers interviewed did not fully agree. Headteacher E felt that the views of the current generation of headteachers, i.e. those who had been in post for the last ten years had been formed as a result of the competitive environment and it would take a considerable change to move them to an ethos of natural collaboration:

“If the suggestion is that there is a new generation coming through who are a bit more inclined to do that [collaborate naturally], then I think a lot of work has to be done…. I’m not really seeing that from people in their late 30s or early 40s who are coming into the job.”

Headteacher D was also concerned that an element of competition was not just due to examination results but also a drive for resources and whether this could be made worse by a looming recession:

“Headteachers are quite avaricious because that’s the way it’s been for most of their careers. There is too much emphasis on budget stuff and efficiency. We’re back into that culture and it will get worse. With recession we’ll be back to what some of us have seen before and they’ll invent a new word for efficiency savings and what they really mean is cuts in the public sector.”

However there is the possibility for an economic crisis to promote the case for collaboration as Headteacher D suggested:

“One of the ways we can deal with this more effectively than we did 15 years ago, is if we work in a collaborative and we can do things cheaper.”

If headteachers do have a natural instinct to collaborate with other headteachers they have to reconcile this with the drive that has allowed them to reach their present position of authority in the first place. This was colourfully illustrated by Headteacher D, who commented:

“We are very strong net workers who occasionally a bit like crocodiles out of the Nile, come out of the water and snap and then disappear back into the water and we’ve really got to do is to move to a strong collaborative.”
The current generation of senior leaders who are yet to become headteachers, but have only been teaching for the last 15 years may well have established their careers in a culture of school competition. They may also have developed their craft as teachers only having known the national curriculum and the national strategies. There has been emphasis on teachers working in their own school sharing good practice within subject groups and across schools. It could be expected that this generation will take this ethos with them into headship as they recognise that one of the best ways of developing their own practice and the leadership of their colleagues is to collaborate and that the benefits this can bring provide a catalyst for collaboration. Headteacher A explained that:

“The best professional development for any teacher is to be able to go into another school and to be welcomed into that school and to share experience of leadership.”

Haigh in his interview did however feel that headteachers had natural collaborative instincts and this was best seen when they worked in groups outside their immediate geography:

“There is a strong fellow feeling amongst secondary heads. I almost call them robber barons… They are like a gang of robber barons they are all out for themselves yet they are well aware of the fact that they are all against the King. If you got to an ASCL conference, you are well aware that they are all sort of competing with one another but they know essentially that they are all in the same game, all playing the same game. They are willing to share stories and expertise and ideas… they are very ready to share ideas with one another but you know back at home that they are very much for their own school and their kids and so on.”

Haigh also commented that a group of headteachers collaborating together form a very strong force, ‘when headteachers get together they can solve most problems’.

**Starting collaborations**

Whether it is school improvement or curriculum entitlement that drives collaborations the majority of case studies explored in this study have been voluntary collaborations rather than those that have been directed by local or central government. The head of School A asserted:

“There is no point starting to do anything where you want positive outcomes if you don’t believe it can work…..we selected our partner schools very carefully.”

This highlights the premise that for a collaboration to occur, a headteacher or senior leader needs to identify an opportunity which can provide benefits for their own school and a tangible reward for partner schools. This is defined as entrepreneurial leadership by Steinhouse and West (2008). This could be more properly described as the behaviour of a collaborative entrepreneur as described by Takahashi and Smutney (2002, page 168)
A collaborative entrepreneur recognises the collaborative window and has the capacity to bring together relevant, important and appropriate stakeholders and participants.’

Senior leader B gave an example of this:

“The targeted capital fund was identified as a source of money which we could bid for. I recognised that my school had the capacity to develop the bid but we had a limited time before the fund was wound up. Whilst the idea was there we needed to act swiftly to make the idea collaborative reality.”

In addition to being an example of entrepreneurial leadership, the benefits of this bid can be described as a contingent reward, one of the first two transactional leadership factors; Northouse (2007, 185) suggests this is ‘an exchange process between leaders and followers in which effort by followers is exchanged for specified rewards. With this kind of leadership, the leader tries to obtain agreement from followers on what must be done and what the pay offs will be for the people doing it’.

The senior leader in school B further commented:

“The partnership was important to my school as we had a vision of providing ICT on demand…but did not have the funding to facilitate this. Our partner schools had limited budgets to fund IT development and so a soft federation provided a mechanism to seek funds from the DCSF.”

The motivation for starting collaboration here is clear and several headteachers spoke of financial incentive being a key driver for collaboration. Despite this, any collaborative organisation or short-term project requires an individual to identify both the project and the potential rewards it offers to all concerned. The rewards whilst in some circumstances may appear financial, are just a means to an end to bring about school improvement. Headteacher D described how his federation had raised the standards of boys’ writing:

“…there are a couple of schools that are doing particularly well [to develop some aspects of pupils’ learning]…and what we need to do is to release some capacity in those schools so that they can share with other schools.”

The headteacher of School E further suggests that schools most likely to form successful and long lasting collaborations were those, maybe surprisingly, which had most to lose by doing so. Whilst schools in Special Measures or National Challenge schools for example may be very open to the notion of collaboration as a way and means of finding additional leadership capacity or direction or funding for their improvement; schools that are already deemed to be successful have less motivation for involving other schools or developing projects that may take leadership time away from ‘home’ school initiatives.

A headteacher may identify an opportunity which initially appears to bring about school improvement. However, further work can reveal that energies required to implement the collaboration outweighs the possible benefits. Ainsworth (2007) highlighted this by writing:
‘School managers have received grants for reasonably large amounts and then realised that the funds are so tightly directed that there is no additional revenue to pursue any additional objectives. In the worst case the implementation of the project can actually detract from the school’s vision.’

Headteacher of School A concurred and warned against wasting time pursuing collaborative projects that had little chance of success simply because there is currently so much expectation that schools should work collaboratively:

"If you are going to go into collaboration with another school you have got to do your ground work and find out that you can work together harmoniously as there is no point otherwise, you are just banging your head against a brick wall. We have tried that in the past and time is too short to waste."
Decisive leadership

Once a viable opportunity has been identified and a collaborative group established, decisive leadership should ensure that a focused start is made. Hackman (2002, ix) says that ‘the leader’s main task is to get a team established on a good trajectory’. This remains just as true if a Headteacher is working alongside his/her fellow headteachers as when a headteacher is leading an initiative in their own school. Headteacher D explained:

‘You’ve got to be very clear about what’s important; in other words what those partnership priorities are going to look like at your school… there’s been a lot of research about vision and leadership and I’ve listened to what lots of people have had to say on that and if you are not careful it turns back into charisma.’

There is a danger that this may alienate some of the members of the group. Headteachers unused to having their meetings chaired or steered by another, until now competing, local head, may be reluctant to engage in the process as selflessly as necessary. And yet someone must have the focus, drive and charisma to establish a strong ethos and focus within the group. Perhaps from a simplistic point of view this is precisely the time that a heroic head is needed to set the wheels of the collaboration in motion. An individual with clear sight, self-belief and determination to start the process of collaboration, who is also decisive enough to not be discouraged by the infinite risks of partnership work is what is required. Headteacher A said:

“I think that you have got to have an idea of what you are trying to achieve but you have also got to be open minded.”

Again whilst this clear sightedness seems desirable it is actually leadership skill of a different, albeit decisive style, that is likely to lead to most initial success. As Bass and Avolio (1990a) suggests the need is actually for transformational leadership rather than heroic leadership. As Gerald Haigh suggested:

“I suppose the message from that is that if you want to adopt to a more collaborative and consultative style, you’ve got to not make it look like you are being indecisive.”

As previously indicated in the literature review, Bass and Avolio (1990a) break this leadership style down into the four I’s: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration. Using idealised influence means acting as a strong role model so that others wish to follow. In a new collaboration a headteacher might demonstrate commitment to partnership to such an extent that other colleagues recognise this and then want to become a part of the success that is being signalled. Headteacher D couched this in terms of approaching partnership meetings strategically in order to achieve a desired outcome, both contributing to the partnership cause but ensuring the right outcome for the ‘home’ school:

“If you are a strong leader you’ve usually worked out what you want from the meetings and actually when you are a strong leader you have to inwardly chuckle because you sow the seeds in the context.”
The second ‘I’, inspirational motivation, where a leader communicates their high expectations to others is also transferrable to partnership work. Expression of shared enthusiasm and a belief in the possible benefits of the collaboration are infectious and this mixed with intelligence and a clear commitment helps establish a shared vision. Headteacher D discussed the problems his collaboration had experienced with a colleague who sometimes hindered partnership progress in meetings:

“So what you try to do is to try and pull her in before she pushes, so you bring her to the table so she is part of the smaller group; in that group she is very strong…. and then if she reports back to the wider group she has a vested interest in not pulling away.”

Another issue is working with colleagues in a situation which requires significant levels of emotional intelligence. Tales of forceful headteacher personalities around a table may not be unfamiliar to those who have experienced the challenges especially of forced collaborations. One such situation is colourfully described in motoring terms by Headteacher D:

“He [a fellow headteacher] puts his foot in it; not on purpose but creates the wrong effect. I talk to him about wing mirrors; he hasn’t got any bloody wing mirrors. He doesn’t mean to upset people and he’s doing a very good job but sometimes he gets the micro politics wrong …in the heads group because he comes across as opinionated which he isn’t, he’s well thought of but some of what he’s saying is thinking aloud.”

The third ‘I’ of transformational leadership is intellectual stimulation, where the leader uses creative and innovative ideas to challenge the beliefs of others:

“If you are a strong leader you’ve usually worked out what you want from the meetings and you sow the seeds in that context. You have identified the priorities and you can leave the meeting and they’re thinking you’re a hero because you are doing a really good job but actually they’ve come up with better ideas than you could ever have thought of and actually implement them.” Headteacher D

It may be that a head’s greatest strength is their ability to research proposals and then develop a logical process of improvement. These skills brought to the collaborative table can give a project a sure start that leads to the confidence of other partners.

The final behaviour is individualised consideration. This describes the leader who provides a supportive climate and listens carefully to those they are trying to lead. Whilst some differences and disagreements may develop within the collaboration, the aim is one of reaching a critical mass of advocates which then creates a tipping point into partnership ethos and culture. Several of the interviewed heads talked of the need to listen well but combine that with a firm set of principles which should always be returned to. As Headteacher D explained:

“School leaders have got to be very clear about their own priorities. …that will focus them on what is important to them so if they are going to say something in those head’s meeting they need to be very clear about what is driving them to say it. They shouldn’t be saying something for effect; they should be saying something they need to.”
Being a decisive collaborative leader seemed key to the heads interviewed but this needs to be blended with high levels of emotional intelligence, strong principles, good listening skills and strategically voiced contributions to meetings.
Conclusions

• Is heroic leadership outdated in a collaborative environment?

All the headteachers interviewed acknowledged that heroic leadership by its common definition (that is, ruling by the authority of hierarchical status) was unlikely to be conducive to sustainable partnership work. Heroic leaders were deemed to be rather too self-sufficient as leaders and unaccustomed to work alongside other leaders to be comfortable working within a collaboration. At their most traditional, heroic heads seemed in some cases almost figures for educational satire.

This is not to suggest that strongly opinionated or charismatic leaders are unsuited to collaborative working or that heroic leaders who had been successful in their ‘home’ school couldn’t adopt a different leadership style that was more suited to partnership work. The headteachers interviewed recognised the difference between being expected by their staff to take on the role of ‘the expert’ or the ‘ultimate leader’ in their home school, whilst round the collaborative table it was deemed entirely inappropriate to be seen as the leader. Although in some partnerships heads had taken the role of chair and were clearly the initiator of the partnership, heads in collaborations as a whole saw themselves as ‘facilitators of change’ and their role as much more consultative than heroic.

• Are collaborative entrepreneurs required to begin collaborations?

There was a general understanding from the headteachers interviewed that at the beginning of a collaboration an individual is required to highlight opportunities and present these to the other headteachers in a palatable way. Whilst it would appear that headteachers can be natural collaborators, they are still very protective of their own school and reluctant to engage in projects which may not be entirely positive for their schools. There is no doubt that the current culture of league tables is seen as a deterrent to collaboration.

The style of leadership where a headteacher spots an opportunity which would not only improve his or her own school, but also support the development of other schools in a collaborative grouping, can be referred to as the collaborative entrepreneur leadership style. It is this style of leadership which is most likely to lead to the conception and formation of a voluntary partnership and one that is likely to engage early adopters through the energies and enthusiasm of the collaborative entrepreneur. Just as education has seen social enterprise allowing innovation not for profit but for community development, the collaborative social entrepreneur in collaborations sees clear opportunities for partnership work and has the vision and energy to set it in motion.

In common with all entrepreneurial activities there is a risk at the outset that the effort which is applied will not be guaranteed to provide a reward. This could be the time and energy required to write a bid or that needed to persuade other headteachers that this could be to their benefit. Collaborative social entrepreneurs are excited by the opportunities that are available to their own school and are willing to take that risk. They also have a strong sense of social responsibility to improve the education for all the children in the collaboration, rather than aiming for competitive advantage.
• Should heroic leaders grow into transformational leaders?

Whilst heroic leadership can be detrimental to the dynamics of a collaboration, the heroic leader can refine his or her style to that of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is built on a foundation of values and hence can be deployed to powerfully develop a collaboration. Transformational leaders constantly sell ‘the vision’ with the energy and belief this requires bringing on board those who see ‘the vision’ less clearly but think they might like to be a part of it. In order to create followers, the transformational leader relies on personal integrity as a key part of the vision.

The path to collaborative success may not always be obvious or carefully planned but a transformational leader will always know its direction. The journey can be difficult but the transformational leader will accept that there will be cul de sacs and blind alleys. Transformational leaders are always part of the process rather than simply being part of the recognition for its success, they are frequently people-focused and see the need for balance between action and the maintenance of group morale. Whilst the transformational leader works hard to transform the partnership, there is also an underlying understanding that those people involved will also be transformed in some way. Transformational leaders are often charismatic, but unlike heroic leaders succeed through a belief in others rather than a belief in themselves.

Recommendations

• School leaders should consider what is the most appropriate leadership style to use when they are starting a collaboration with other schools. This may involve acting in a different way when they are involved in a collaborative meeting than they would behave when leading their own school. School leaders would benefit from reflecting on how they work with other leaders and analysing the impact of different leadership behaviours.

• When schools are beginning to collaborate with other schools it could be helpful if one of the school leaders adopts the role of social entrepreneur and identifies the benefits for the other schools in joining the collaboration. This may take a significant investment in terms of time and effort and there is no guarantee of there being any reward. This is especially true of establishing voluntary collaborative projects rather than more formalised collaborations such as hard federations or compulsory geographical school collaborations.

• Once the social entrepreneur has identified an opportunity and detailed an implementation plan, decisive leadership is necessary in the collaboration so that the opportunity is not missed and that all schools involved are clear about their roles. It is the transformational leadership style which would appear to be the most effective at this juncture in building a collaboration.

• The current league table culture is considered a disincentive to beginning localised collaborations. A more equitable system would be for collaborations to report their attainment or examination results as a group rather than individual
schools. This approach could truly foster a genuine collaborative approach amongst local schools.

- Headteacher development programmes should give aspirant Headteachers the opportunity to develop their leadership style not only in their own school but also consider how they can promote collaboration.

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