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# What we know about school leadership



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## Introduction

Since the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) was established it has produced a substantial body of evidence about school leadership. The College has commissioned work from many researchers, conducted its own studies and scanned research findings within education and beyond (e.g. business schools, public sector), in the UK and internationally.

NCSL's research aims to capture actionable knowledge, that is, knowledge of what works. From the beginning it was clear there was a need to focus research on **how** leaders make a difference (Hallinger & Heck 1996). Consequently, NCSL looks at how school leaders make a positive difference to pupils' progress and achievements and concentrates on the **practice** of school leadership.

In 2006, after five years of active investigation and knowledge creation, the decision was made to collate the findings that had emerged, summarise them and communicate them in as straightforward a way as possible.

Drawing together commissioned research and evaluations NCSL had undertaken, the outcomes of practitioner enquiries, seminars and think tanks, as well as literature reviews and work outside England and education, this report presents an overview of what we now know about school leadership.

### What we know about school leadership?

School leaders in England have much to be proud of. Existing evidence shows that, when compared to other professions, people in the wider society think that headteachers provide particularly good examples of leadership.

Ofsted estimates that around four fifths of school leaders are doing a 'good', 'very good', or 'excellent' job at leading and managing their schools. The quality of school leadership has also been improving consistently since the mid-1990s when, according to Ofsted, only around half of all school leaders were ranked as 'good', 'very good' or 'excellent'. Government has also made considerable investment in developing school leadership through the creation of the NCSL and support for the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). As the PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) independent study of school leadership said: 'in general terms there is a very positive story to tell around the quality of school leadership in our schools' (PwC 2007, p. v).

Leithwood and his colleagues (2006) set out in a companion report to this one seven strong claims about successful school leadership:

1. School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning.
2. Almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices.
3. The ways in which leaders apply these basic leadership practices – not the practices themselves – demonstrates responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work.
4. School leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions.
5. School leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed.
6. Some patterns of distribution are more effective than others.
7. A small handful of personal traits explain a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness.

These claims are similar, but not identical to what NCSL has uncovered. Leithwood's overview is best seen as working in tandem with NCSL's findings and should be read alongside what follows here.

### NCSL's research can also be summarised under seven headings:

1. Context matters
2. The core tasks of school leaders are clear
3. Learning-centred leadership is critical
4. Distributing leadership matters
5. School leadership is hard work and rewarding
6. Leadership in schools is changing
7. Leadership development and succession planning have never been more important

## 1. Context matters

There can be little doubt that the environment in which a leader works strongly influences leadership. Leadership is contingent on context, which is why contingency theories are popular with both the academic community and practitioners. The former regularly make much of the need for leaders to be alert to the demands of their specific contexts. For example, Hallinger & Heck (1996) state that it is 'virtually meaningless to study principal leadership without reference to the school context' (p. 14), whilst Leithwood et al (1999) declare that outstanding leadership is 'exquisitely sensitive to the contexts in which it is exercised' (p. 4). Practitioners too subscribe to the importance of context; they repeatedly explain their actions as leaders in terms of the needs of the students, their home backgrounds and the social and economic circumstances of their communities.

Each school's context is constructed from a range of factors. Socio-economic, demographic, cultural and historical factors combine to determine the intake of every school and the communities they serve. Similarly, the type and phase of school, its size, levels of school performance, staffing arrangements and organisation, the governors, and the local authority influence the way leaders work in the school and their priorities for action. Whilst at a general level leaders of primary, special and secondary schools have much in common, there are significant differences at the operational level.

National policies from central government also shape schools, and more directly than ever before as a consequence of schools having more responsibilities devolved to them. Compared to some other school systems, governors and headteachers in England have significant responsibilities delegated to them, including responsibility for appointing all staff and managing the school's budget.

Successful leaders need to be 'contextually literate': they have to be able to 'read' their contexts like a text, including understanding the sub-texts, the meta-messages and the micro-politics whilst not becoming victims of them. Leaders are not passive players in their contexts – indeed, they are influential actors and should be pro-active in shaping their organisational settings, cultures and ways of working (Schein 1985). It should also be recognised that becoming contextually literate is a core skill and one that has important implications for leadership development. It implies that leaders should be able to analyse and understand their settings, determine priorities and enact their own and others' leadership in ways that are needs based. This means using a mix of school self-evaluation methods and student outcome data to recognise trends and the 'brute facts' of the school's levels of performance, progress and rates of improvement.

In emphasising the context-specific nature of leadership this is not to impute particularity. There are some core skills that leaders need to know about and adopt (see below). Almost all successful school leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices (Leithwood et al 2006). However, it is the enactment of these basic leadership practices – not the practices themselves – that is responsive to the context. In other words, how leaders read and then act, given their intimate knowledge of their contexts, is the distinguishing issue between leaders. Expressed more simply it is not only what you do as a leader, but *how* you do it that makes the difference in any given situation and environment. Therefore, there is no one way to lead a school. Leaders must act in ways that meet the needs of the schools they lead.

## 2. The core tasks of school leaders are clear

There is now growing agreement that there is a core set of leadership practices that form the ‘basics’ of successful leadership (Leithwood & Reihl 2003; Leithwood et al 2006a; PwC 2007):

1. *Building vision and setting directions*: identify and articulate a vision, create shared meaning and high performance expectations, foster acceptance of group goals, monitor organisational performance and communicate.

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2. *Understanding and developing people*: offer intellectual stimulation, provide individual support and an appropriate model – lead by example. Build on the knowledge and skills that teachers and other staff need to accomplish school goals, and develop, mentor, recognise and reward behaviours that integrate the functional and the personal.

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3. *Redesigning the organisation*: build collaborative cultures and processes; manage the environment and work conditions; create and sustain productive relations with parents and the community; connect the school to its wider environment.

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4. *Manage the teaching and learning programme*: create productive working conditions for staff and students alike; foster organisational stability; ensure effective learning-centred leadership; allocate teachers and support staff to deliver the curriculum; monitor school activity and performance.

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These four sets of practices also imply that leadership rests on certain qualities too. Leithwood (2006a, p. 14) argues that a small handful of personal traits explains a high proportion of the variation on leadership effectiveness, and:

*The most successful school leaders are open-minded and ready to learn from others. They are also flexible rather than dogmatic in their thinking within a system of core values, persistent (e.g. in their pursuit of high expectations of staff motivation, commitment, learning and achievement for all), resilient and optimistic.*

Across NCSL’s work the following qualities figure large: optimism and a positive disposition; a developmental orientation (e.g. that people and organisations can and do improve); and a strong moral compass – schools exist to serve children and students and to enable them to grow and improve as learners and social actors.

These qualities are vital because leadership is powerfully motivational and, by definition, de-motivational when it is less effective. Inspiring others and securing their ‘followership’ is part and parcel of leadership. Yet, whilst there has been considerable attention to moral purpose and to the importance of vision, little research has actually been conducted into what teachers find motivating. Two exceptions to this rule are: Blase and Blase’s (1998) exploration of followers’ perceptions of school leaders in the USA, and the PwC study that reports on support staff and teachers’ expectations of leaders (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Characteristics of effective leaders**

For support staff effective leaders ...	For teachers, effective leaders ...
Recognise and value the work of others	Are visible and approachable
Communicate fully and effectively with all staff	Are supportive
Define roles and responsibilities	Have in-depth knowledge of the school and wider community
Provide development opportunities	Are interested in wider issues rather than just results
Adopt an open, consultative approach	Understand classroom practice
Are visible	Are non-hierarchical and consultative
Have a constructive approach to performance management	Distribute leadership effectively
Act and feed back on concerns raised	Act and feed back on concerns raised

Source: PwC school leadership focus groups; PwC (2007, p. 52)

Values also play a part in leadership: indeed, values are inextricably tied up with leadership. There is a considerable body of work to support this claim (e.g. Fullan 2003), and work by NCSL's research associates shows that what sustains school leaders in difficult times are their core values and moral purpose (Flintham 2003). Values provide a moral compass and an anchor for the work of school leaders.

Whilst there is growing consensus on some of the technical competences there is also a broadening of enquiry in the leadership field to include studies on the passions and emotions of leadership (Day 2004; Sague 2005), and the moral and spiritual dimensions of leadership (West-Burnham 2002) However, there are few studies into leadership for social justice, i.e. research on those leaders who frame their leadership as a quest for equity (Jansen 2006, pp. 37-8).

### 3. Learning-centred leadership is critical

Leadership of learning lies at the very heart of school leadership. Schools are places where children and young people are expected to learn what a community or society decides should be passed on to them. This means that school leaders are responsible for the learning that takes place there and as such school leaders are leaders of learning.

It is important that leaders always make this explicit. It is too easy for the core business of organisations, including schools, to be taken for granted, then assumed and then, sometimes, submerged. Leaders need to keep on reminding their teams and staff what they are there to do.

Research at NCSL (2004) has shown that high performing and rapidly improving schools are characterised by learning-centred leaders. Such leadership is focused on influencing what happens inside classrooms and improving the quality of teaching and pupils' learning. And such a strong focus on students' learning is the basis for these leaders being role models for teacher and staff colleagues.

Elmore (2006) argues that in school systems where accountability policies are strong, then *leadership is the improvement of practice*. Learning-centred leadership is just such a practice.

Learning-centred leadership relentlessly focuses on learning, most of all on student learning processes and outcomes, but also staff learning and development, especially pedagogic development. They monitor what is going on inside classrooms and across the whole school by using data, observing teaching and learning, identifying strengths and the development needs of teachers and determine priorities for groups of students and units of the school.

Tracking pupils' progress is a key feature of all this monitoring, as is assessment for learning. Tracking and formative assessment are essential for personalising learning. Moreover, it is in these ways that improvements can be sustained because improvement rests on the development of diagnostic capacity (Elmore 2006).

Such leadership is shared, with middle leaders increasingly playing important roles. Headteachers and senior leaders create and sustain leadership at all levels because although distributing leadership matters, what matters most is *distributing and developing learning-centred leadership*. Therefore, the development of leadership is an important feature of school leadership today – it always has been – but as headship has intensified and become more complex, so too has the need to share leadership increased, bringing with it the responsibility to develop other leaders.

Part of such school-based leadership development rests on the school being an environment characterised by trust, professional dialogue, leading by example and management arrangements that enable feedback, coaching and teamwork. Furthermore, collaborative research with NCSL's leadership network shows that when these conditions and behaviours are present and effective within-school variations in pupil and departmental performances are reduced (NCSL 2006).

Having conducted a number of studies examining learning-centred leadership in action NCSL researchers concluded that learning-centred leaders:

- lead by example
- monitor – pupils' achievements and progress; classroom practices; the quality of teaching
- use data to analyse and evaluate performance
- generate and sustain discussion about teaching and learning
- actively sustain school improvement
- create school structures, systems and processes to support learning and each of the previous points.

(NCSL 2004, 2006d)



## 4. Distributing leadership matters

NCSL has always been committed to distributed leadership (NCSL 2001), which is why NCSL research has examined what it looks like in action (NCSL 2004a).

Some patterns of distributed leadership are more effective than others, as Leithwood and his associates (2006a) recognise. NCSL's enquiries reinforce this claim. More coordinated patterns of leadership are associated with more beneficial organisational outcomes (Leithwood et al 2006a, p. 13).

NCSL research shows that distributed leadership has a part to play in school improvement; it does make a difference to school and student performance (NCSL 2004, 2004a, 2006). Moreover, NCSL's work demonstrates that distributing leadership is vital if schools are to be places where pools of leadership talent are created and from which tomorrow's school leaders can be drawn. Heads and other senior staff do not just distribute leadership, that is, 'put more influence in the hands of people with expertise'; they also **develop** leadership (Elmore 2006, p. 25).

Distributed leadership also supports system leadership: they are two sides of the same coin – you cannot have headteachers and other leaders working beyond their schools unless and until other leaders are willing and able to 'step up' and take on new roles and responsibilities; each supports the other.

According to PwC well-executed distributed leadership is a key feature of effective models of leadership. There are many ways of sharing out leadership and, as Spillane (2005) says, it is about leadership *practice*, not just roles and positions. In other words, it is not only about giving others the chance to lead, but being clear what they will take a lead on. NCSL research suggests that when leadership is distributed it is learning-centred leadership that most needs to be shared. The PwC study also makes plain that distributing leadership and responsibilities must be linked to accountability (PwC 2007).

## 5. School leadership is hard work *and* rewarding

Over the past two decades research suggests that the work of leaders has intensified and become more complex, relentless and accountable. School leadership, like teaching, can be 'greedy work' (Gronn 2003). There is rarely a time when leaders feel their work is finished – there is always something more to do, something left unfinished. Consequently school leaders work long hours in term time. PwC's study reports that primary heads work on average 54 hours a week and secondary heads 65 hours (2007, p. 8).

Alongside the never-endingness of their tasks goes the fact that the work also involves emotional labour. The work is highly interpersonal, requiring empathy and sensitivity towards others. Headteachers report that staffing issues and dealing with individuals figure large. NCSL's (2007) study into the well-being of headteachers showed that dealing with negative members of staff came high on heads' list of least rewarding factors. Senior leaders' work is often concerned with caring for and protecting vulnerable children and young people.

It should therefore be no surprise that leaders become tired, if not exhausted, when working in some of the most challenging environments. Without doubt concerns about work–life balance and well-being are legitimate. School leaders need to look after their own well-being and spend time on the balcony, as well as on the dance floor (Heifetz & Linsky 2002).

Whilst their work may feel ever more urgent and demanding, leaders' learning, development and support needs have equally increased. Meeting these needs means, in part, remodelling not only the school's workforce, but also the support mechanisms on which heads and the leadership team can call – in particular secretarial and PA support, bursars and school business managers, as well as access to good quality human resources (HR) advice. Unless these are rethought and redesigned, headship may continue to look too intensive, demanding, and too accountable for some to aspire to.

It is also the case that in addition to improved support for leaders within their schools, more attention should be paid to their 'coping strategies' (Cooper & Kelly 1993; Southworth 1995) to deal with the strains and pressures of their work and workloads. For sure there are rewards, as reported on page 12, and some heads derive a sense of achievement from being able to deal with whatever comes their way, as well as the success of the school, staff and students. PwC state that for some heads the non-routine nature of their daily work was a motivating factor (2007, p. 7). But it is also the case that a more mature approach to sustaining leaders is needed today; indeed, sustainable leadership might be one of the next 'big' leadership issues (Hargreaves & Fink 2006).

Although the work is demanding two other features should not be overlooked: how effective leaders use time and the rewards of the job.

### How leaders use time

Researchers tend to focus on just one slice of leadership activity and sometimes fail to register the breadth of leaders' roles and responsibilities. Leaders themselves, of course, have to manage all their responsibilities at the same time: leaders, unlike researchers, have to do lots of things, often at once. It is for this reason that practitioners' metaphors for their work tend to be about juggling and plate spinning.

In a previous attempt to synthesise research findings and move beyond atomistic analyses, NCSL researchers noted two conclusions:

- one thing leads to another
  - leadership is both simple and complex.
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With regard to one thing leading to another a single input by a leader can create multiple outcomes. For example, one episode of coaching between a more experienced leader and a novice can also contribute to strengthening distributed and learning-centred leadership, growing tomorrow's leaders and creating a culture of learning for students and staff alike. Perhaps leaders need to recognise that their work is not always serialised, but also simultaneous.

As for leadership being both simple and complex this insight is based on evidence that showed that effective leaders do not have a repertoire of skills unknown to other leaders. Rather, what distinguishes the highly effective leaders is their ability to deploy seemingly ordinary strategies and tactics and execute them to an extra-ordinary degree. And they use tactics in combinations and with care and diligence, knowing that one thing leads to another, or several others. Therefore, they concentrate on applying their actions consistently so they mutually reinforce each other.

This suggests that rather than tackling each task in a serialised way, or in some checklist manner, what matters is the ability of leaders to make links between their tasks and tactics, develop their awareness of how one links to others and their capacity to create synergies between all they have to do. Such an approach may lie at the heart of what makes them effective and their work manageable. In turn, this idea suggests that leaders need to be able to see the whole – as well as the individual elements – and to be able to appreciate that the sum total of leadership can be greater than the individual parts (NCSL 2005, p. 43).

### Rewards of the work

As for the rewards of leadership these are now well documented (NCSL 2007; PwC 2007). NCSL's study into work–life balance revealed that there were three elements of headship that were rated highest in terms of reward and job satisfaction:

- developing others
- the nature of the job
- personal relationships.

In terms of *developing others* first and foremost this included seeing children progress and succeed. Many heads also spoke of supporting staff colleagues and seeing them develop too. As to the *nature of the job* this covered the relatively high levels of autonomy and control they experienced, leading the strategic direction of the school and improving the school. Others factors cited were: the variety of the work; the unpredictability of the job; and receiving positive feedback from parents and others. *Personal relationships* included positive dealings with staff and parents, with some heads emphasising the support and comradeship they received from their senior leadership teams, whilst others spoke of being valued by the local community as a source of satisfaction.

The PwC study produced very similar findings. It reported school leaders seeing their role as a 'privilege', whilst the greatest satisfaction was derived from seeing pupils achieve, followed by developing staff, setting the strategic vision, improving results and introducing new ideas. Highest among the factors that kept them in post were the personal challenge, their contribution to the community, contact with pupils and the success of the school (PwC 2007, p. 7).

The sense of altruism and vocation in these findings is very strong and plainly relate to previous comments about vision and moral purpose. More than anything, however, it is the sense of making a difference to children's and young persons' lives and learning that comes across.

## 6. Leadership in schools is changing

The leadership landscape is changing. In response to a number of factors, of which devolution of more and more responsibilities to schools is one, many heads have adopted, or are experimenting with, different ways of leading their schools. A number of co-headships, which are essentially job-shares, have sprung up; so too have federations of schools and executive leader roles. System leadership, where heads and other leaders work beyond their own schools as consultant leaders, school improvement partners and National Leaders of Education have also developed (see NCSL 2006c).

A major outcome of the PwC study was the emphasis it placed on new and emerging models of school leadership. In addition to the traditional model of a headteacher supported by a deputy and/or assistant head working together in a single school and modest levels of distributed leadership the study sets out four other models which, to varying degrees, are unfolding across the school system and sectors. They are:

*Managed model:* this model moves away from the traditional model towards a flatter management structure in which specific roles are allocated on the senior leadership team (SLT) for senior support staff, for example, directors of finance and/or HR. This model tends to be found more often in the secondary sector.

*Multi-agency managed model:* this model is a natural progression from the managed model and is, in a sense, borne out of the imperatives of the Every Child Matters (ECM) and 14–19 policy agendas. It involves a flatter, management structure, but is more outward looking and inter-agency focused. It can manifest itself in a variety of ways, but generally will involve teaching staff and professionals from other agencies working together as part of SLTs. This model remains the expectation rather than the rule but more schools are likely to move in this direction as a key way of responding to the ECM and 14–19 agendas.

*Federated model:* this model is characterised by varying degrees of collaboration between schools and sometimes between schools and other providers, for example, ‘whole town’ approaches to schooling; shared strategic governing bodies, with executive heads overseeing several schools; and federations between schools, further education and work-based learning providers.

*System leadership model:* this model embraces all the different roles that heads can assume beyond the boundaries of their own school, i.e. those that contribute to the wider educational system at a local, regional or national level. It includes, for example, National Leaders of Education assuming roles that include providing advice to government and ‘virtual heads’ responding to the needs of pupils facing specific challenging circumstances.

(see PwC 2007, pp. ix–x and ch. 4)

These models are broad and overlap in some cases. Nevertheless, PwC's classification has brought some coherence to a disparate and still unfolding set of practices. Which of these models prove to be enduring only time will tell; what is of more immediate importance is that there is now such diversity of practice occurring in schools. Even if we cannot be sure what school leadership might become, there is already enough evidence to suggest that it is no longer what it was. Nor should we exclude the possibility of other models, as yet unnoticed or untried, coming onto the scene.

Underscoring these emergent models is, as PwC note, a mix of policy agendas and ideas about schools as organisations. The extended and multi-agency schools, which strive to meet the ECM agenda, are one example of this. The 14–19 agenda may prove equally powerful. Another driver of change is school workforce remodelling, whilst falling roles in rural areas may also trigger federations, as might difficulties to recruit headteachers to these and some other schools. The idea that every school has to have its own headteacher is being tested by the federated model, which, in any case, is not unusual in other countries, such as the Netherlands (NCSL 2006c).

These new approaches also signal the prospect of different skills being required of school leaders. Enhanced stakeholder and relationship management skills, alongside political skills such as negotiating and networking skills, will increase along with change management, financial management, people management and project management. In turn, these imply two things. First, whilst leadership has been the dominant emphasis in running schools for the past decade, a new order of leadership *and* management may be on the horizon. Second, there is a growing need to bring in leaders and managers with different skill sets to those from a teaching background.

## 7. Leadership development and succession planning have never been more important

Across many developed nations a demographic ‘time-bomb’ is ticking away. Urgent attention is needed to defuse this challenge and NCSL has been examining what the challenge is and how it might be addressed in England (NCSL 2006a). Essentially the challenge is demographic – larger than average numbers of school leaders are going to retire between 2009–12 and there are lower than average numbers of teachers and leaders following them – too few to replace those who will be retiring. Moreover, in England, the time it takes to become a head is now too long for the next ‘bulge’ in the teacher population to be ready to take up the vacancies anticipated in the coming years.

All of this means two things in England – and in other countries too:

1. We are going to need many more school leaders than in recent times.
2. We need more leaders than current approaches to promoting staff are presently able to produce.

Furthermore, the demographic challenge is compounded by negative perceptions of the work and role of school leaders – especially regarding accountabilities and workload. Many of those most likely to step up to headship do not like the look of leadership. However, such perceptions tend to be held by those with little or no experience of running a school for a sustained period. Those who have had a spell of running a school report that the experience does two things: it shows them there are significant rewards that are under-reported by some serving school heads; and that having ‘had a go’ at leadership the great majority have learned they can do it and this markedly improves their self-confidence and increases the likelihood of applying for leadership positions.

Therefore, NCSL advised ministers that to address the demographic challenge there needs to be more fast-tracking of those with leadership potential. This means early identification of talent, and mentoring and coaching these individuals; and providing them with many more opportunities to lead – in their own and in other schools – to broaden their knowledge of school contexts and types and to increase the number of headteacher role models they can draw on.

NCSL’s advice to ministers recommended that this national challenge be dealt with by local solutions developed by groups of schools taking responsibility for developing their talent pools. Also, nationally, there needs to be a campaign to ‘talk up’ headship, since the overwhelming majority of headteachers are very positive about their work. By providing more opportunities for members of leadership teams to experience periods when they are acting heads NCSL believes perceptions of the role will be more positive and self-confidence to do the job will increase.

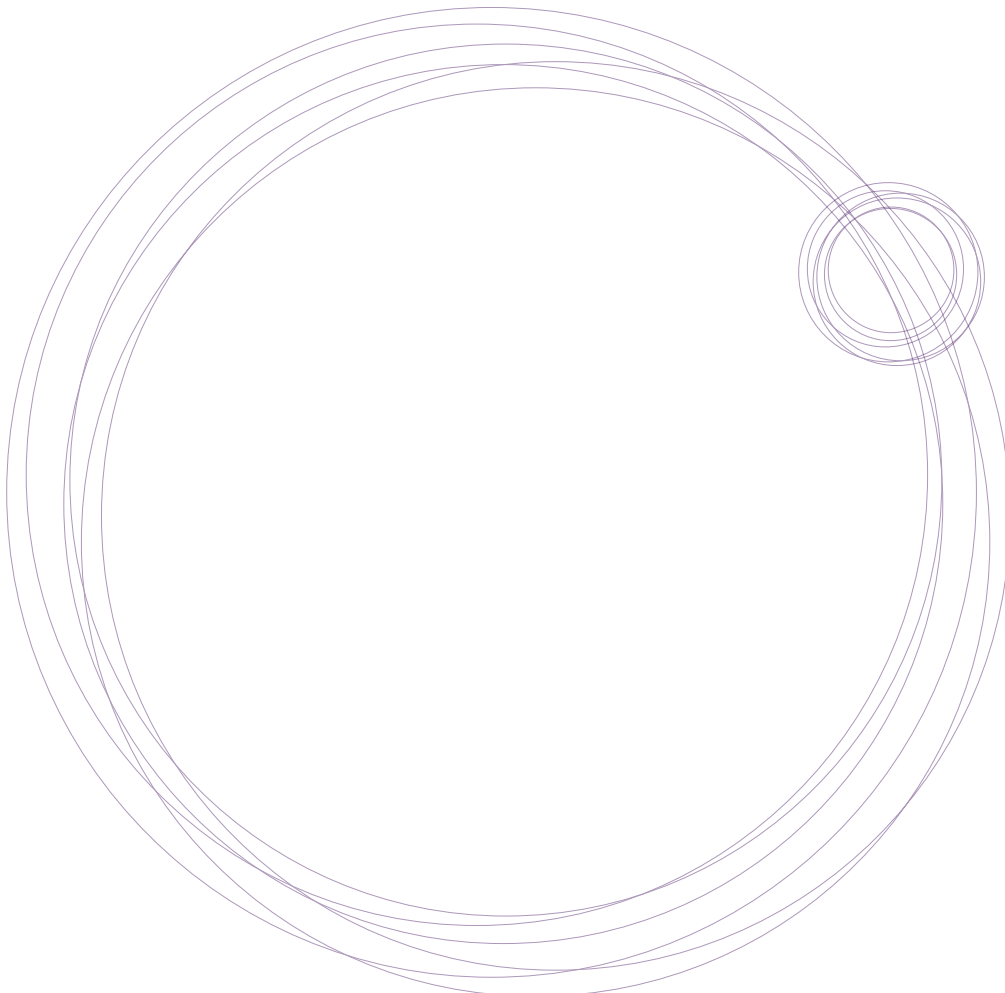
As Kotter and Cohen (2002, p. 11) say, people rarely change through a rational process of analyse–think–change. They are more likely to change in a see–feel–change sequence. The role of the headteacher is to create a process that enables people to see new possibilities, experience different situations, develop new skills, practice existing skills in new contexts and build their confidence based on real-life performance and success (see Fullan 2003, p. 2).

However, succession planning is not simply a quantitative issue. It is vital to ensure there is a supply and flow of *high quality* candidates for headship and leadership teams. Attending to quality also means tracking over time that we have the right mix of leaders (e.g. gender, ethnic minorities) and that the recruitment and appointment of headteachers improves (NCSL 2006b).

Whilst there is an urgent need to renew leadership capacity, to address potential leadership shortages in the next few years, at the same time, this work has to embrace wider issues as well. These wider issues include not only replacing leaders at a time of high turnover, but also ensuring:

- the next generation are prepared and equipped to face the changes already underway in schooling and society;
- succession planning simultaneously plays a part in improving talent management in schools by making it more systematic and explicit, as against ad hoc, implicit and informal;
- leadership development becomes a major responsibility of heads and governors. As Fullan (2003, p. 25) says, a headteacher should be judged on how many effective leaders they leave behind.

Developing leaders, at all levels, is now both imperative and integral to school and system success.





## Conclusions

School leadership today is:

- more data and evidence based than ever before
- less lonely and more collaborative
- intense, varied, accountable and rewarding
- increasingly about building leadership capacity
- changing.

Much of what has been reported implies that the development of leaders and leadership is becoming increasingly pivotal to the performance and vitality of schools and the communities they serve. Sustainable school leadership renews itself – both by taking time out to think and to learn and also by preparing the next generation of school leaders (Hill 2006).

As such school leadership should be thought of as a '**human investment enterprise**' (Elmore 2006, p. 33). Improving the quality of teaching and learning, distributing leadership and growing tomorrow's leaders all require investment in skill and knowledge – in people. Developing the workforce, and particularly leadership capacity, means that school leaders must be able to develop others, and be very good at developing themselves too; the two go hand-in-hand. Yet, there is nothing about being a school leader that necessarily means you are good at developing other adults – it is a skill that has to be learned.

If leadership matters as much as the work cited here suggests then leaving the development of leaders and leadership to chance is no good. Leadership development and the management of talent now have to take on greater prominence than ever before.

### **Developing leadership development**

Leadership must grow by design rather than by default. Most leadership learning takes place in schools – it always has – but that does not mean it is always of a high quality, or positive. There can sometimes be quite a bit of negative learning. This means that leadership development itself must be redesigned.

It can be seen from the discussion about succession that we need to:

- increase the opportunities for individuals to lead;
- broaden their experiences and knowledge of different contexts; and
- strengthen their skill sets.

These should also build self-confidence and an appetite to take on senior roles and responsibilities.

A large amount of such leadership learning should take place in school, as against on courses. Leadership learning that is work-based relies on mentoring, coaching, performance management and the careful sequencing of tasks and experiences to increase an individual's skills, experiences and meet their identified needs.

We know that for teachers and headteachers alike developing their 'craft' knowledge is a priority. Craft knowledge is essentially concerned with knowing what works. Know-how matters and is highly valued – indeed it is *premium learning* for school leaders. On-the-job learning respects these preferences. Moreover, the status of such learning should be raised: it is not a poor second to theory or academic knowledge; it is actionable knowledge on which the very success of our schools rests.

Making the workplace the workshop for leadership learning could bring two other benefits. First, it should move many schools closer to becoming learning organisations for pupils and adults alike. Second, whilst off-site learning can be powerful, it relies on in-school processes and conditions to maximise its impact and increase its value. Changing the conditions in school to make leadership learning more situated and ‘practical’ will also increase the dividend from off-site professional learning.

### **On-site *and* off-site learning matter**

So saying, it is important to stress that we need *both* in-school and off-site learning opportunities. Work-based learning is powerful, but can also be narrowing and conservative, sometimes lacking a focus on change and alternative ways of working because it only sustains existing role orthodoxies. Off-site learning can overcome these limitations. For example, learning away from the workplace should provide:

- opportunities to learn with and from others performing the same roles
- opportunities for social learning in cohorts and learning sets
- opportunities to network with peers
- time for reflection
- new or wider ways of thinking about leadership
- different ways of examining one’s practice
- a challenge to existing customs and practices.

Therefore, we not only need a stronger emphasis on situated learning, but also a new alliance between learning on-the-job and off-site development. Only by both working alongside each other will we be able to develop leaders for today and tomorrow.

Breakthroughs in one’s development do not come from doing, per se, but by *thinking* about the doing (Fullan 2007). Leadership has to be learned not just by doing it, but by being able to gain insight while doing it (Mintzberg 2004, p. 200): learning is ‘as much about doing in order to think as thinking in order to do’ (ibid p. 10).

### **Implications for NCSL**

Work-based learning does not mean that it should be confined to a single school. Job swaps with peers in other schools, placements and internships all have a part to play – to increase knowledge of other school types and contexts, as well as of other organisations. Such thinking lies at the heart of NCSL’s work on leadership succession, as well as trainee heads, and Future Leaders schemes.

E-learning also has a role to play. Much on-the-job learning is ‘just-in-time’ learning and as the demand to keep up with initiatives continues, then on-line learning and networking will play an ever-more important role.

NCSL has a role to play here – to promote these findings, to foster a debate about new ways of learning inside one’s own school, between schools and beyond school sites and to develop materials that make all of this possible.

**Finally**

In concluding this report two other points need to be made. The findings here show that leadership is more nuanced and subtle than previously portrayed. Certainly we need confident and strong leaders who have the resilience and determination to drive their schools forward, but we also need more emotionally intelligent ones too. The ability to recognise emotions in others, manage emotions and know one's own emotions is seen by many as fundamental to effective leadership (Day et al 2000). As relationship management within and beyond the school increases so too will reliance on emotional intelligence. Indeed, the picture outlined here is of leaders who are intelligent in many ways – professionally knowledgeable, skilful, political, shrewd in their perceptions and analyses and emotionally astute and insightful.

Second, if we are to implement these changes then leadership must be strategic. Looking ahead and scanning what is on the horizon is a legitimate part of the work. It is strategic thinkers and leaders who will be able to meet the adaptive challenges we face now and in the coming years. Adaptive challenges concern problems whose solutions are not yet known (Fullan 2005, p. 45). Schools are good at generating such challenges but we can also see in the emerging models of leadership that some leaders are good at solving them too because the emerging models have been developed by leaders themselves, in their schools.

As we face these adaptive challenges it looks from this report that not only are changes underway such that leadership development will have to change, but so too will leadership practice. There are many signs of such changes, they are implicit in the new and emerging models and they seem to have one thing in common – working together. Collaborations – groups and networks of schools that increase awareness, widen frames of knowledge, provide powerful learning environments for leaders and the workforce, and allow effective practices to spread – will be vital to meeting these challenges.

We know a lot about leadership today. This knowledge will be powerful in helping us all adapt to tomorrow's challenges.

## What we know about school leadership: *key points*

### 1. Context matters

- Effective leaders know and analyse their contexts: they are contextually literate
- Leaders should act in ways that meet the needs of their schools
- It is *how* leaders operate that demonstrates responsiveness to their contexts

### 2. The core tasks of school leaders are clear

- Build vision and set directions
- Understand and develop people
- Redesign the organisation
- Manage teaching and learning
- Leaders should be optimistic, positive and improvement-oriented

### 3. Learning-centred leadership is critical

- Lead by example
- Monitor pupils' achievements, progress and quality of teaching
- Use data to analyse and evaluate performance
- Generate and sustain discussion about teaching and learning
- Sustain school improvement
- Create school structures, systems and processes to enable all of this

### 4. Distributing leadership matters

- Distributed leadership makes a difference to school and student performance
- Coordinated patterns of distribution are more effective than others
- Distributing learning-centred leadership matters most
- Heads and senior staff must develop leadership in others

**5. School leadership is hard work and rewarding**

- Leadership is complex, accountable and relentless
- Leadership needs specialist support (e.g. administrative, bursars, HR)
- Leadership actions can produce multiple outcomes
- Rewards include seeing children achieve, developing others, improving results

**6. Leadership in schools is changing**

- New models of leadership are emerging
- Many leaders are working beyond their schools, supporting others
- Multi-agency and federated schools, plus system leadership are evident
- New models highlight different skills required now and in near future

**7. Leadership development and succession planning have never been more important**

- Succession planning is essential, as part of improved talent management
- Identify talent early, fast-track those with potential, mentor and coach individuals
- Opportunities to lead schools should be increased to build self-confidence, increase first-hand awareness of different contexts and knowledge of schools
- Ensure leadership is seen as positive and rewarding
- Prepare next generation of leaders for today and tomorrow's schools

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