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How successful headteachers build and develop effective leadership teams.

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SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

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Abstract

This research considers the characteristics of effective leadership teams in secondary schools. From a survey of relevant literature and based on an exploration of practice within six outstanding leadership teams, it seeks to identify the conditions required for an effective leadership team. These conditions include the composition and structure of such teams, their purpose, the selection of members, rules of operation, impact of team leadership, and the need for self-evaluation.

The study found that effective teams are small and made up of members with complementary skills and behaviours. They have a 'clear and compelling purpose' and undertake tasks which are relevant to that purpose. They possess strong team-working skills and high levels of integrity and the head exhibits strong leadership within a team framework. The teams are self-evaluative, reviewing past achievements, and constantly looking to improve both themselves and their schools.

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Introduction

“Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress.
Working together is success.”

(attrib. Henry Ford)

Senior leadership teams seem to have slipped off the agenda in recent years. Despite widespread agreement that the workload of heads has become excessive (e.g. PwC, 2007; NCSL, 2007a), little has been written about the role which leadership teams can play to address this issue. Recent research has focused on distributing leadership as widely as possible within schools, on how heads can deal with the extension of leadership (for example, in federations), and on delivery of various new initiatives (e.g. Every Child Matters and extended schools).

However, a key responsibility of heads is to ensure that the operational and strategic leadership of their school is secure. This can be achieved in many ways, but the establishment of a strong and effective leadership team (whether as part of a distributed approach, or as a preparation for it) remains one of the most important elements in this process.

For the head who either needs to or wishes to evaluate and possibly re-structure the leadership team, there is a distinct scarcity of recent research into *how* heads build and develop effective leadership teams. What makes an effective leadership team? What conditions are required to create such teams? How should they be structured? How should you select the members of the team? And how can you make your leadership team better? This research was designed to offer evidence from practice that would contribute towards the answering of these questions.

This paper should be of interest to:

- New heads who have inherited leadership teams to help them judge whether their team is effective and, if not, how they might improve it.
- Existing heads who are considering restructuring their team or reviewing its practices.
- Others in the leadership team who wish to reflect on their role and contribution to the team’s success and school improvement.

The research for this paper was undertaken entirely in secondary schools. However, I would suggest that many of its findings may also be relevant to other schools that operate a leadership team structure e.g. large primary schools. Those interested in this aspect may also wish to consult an earlier Research Associate report by Alison Kelly, *Team Talk: Shared leadership in primary schools* (2002, NCSL).

Methodology

This research was undertaken during the autumn of 2008. An early decision was made to include both state and independent schools in the research, in order to investigate a range of leadership practices, as well as to find out whether there was any discernable difference in approach between the sectors.

Following a review of the existing literature, six schools were selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- Secondary schools within England.
- A substantial Sixth Form.
- Identified by inspectors (Ofsted or ISI as appropriate) as a good or outstanding school within the last two years.
- Identified by inspectors as having outstanding leadership and management, with a particular emphasis on a strong leadership team.
- No change of headteacher in the last two years.

Some twenty schools were identified as fulfilling the criteria, from which a sample of six were selected; the six heads were contacted and agreed to take part in the research. A summary of the characteristics of the six schools can be found in Table 1.

Table 1 – Characteristics of schools researched

School	A	B	C	D	E	F
Type	Independent	Comprehensive	Independent	Comprehensive	Independent	Grammar
Number on roll	881	1742	621	1410	1081	934
Gender of pupils	Mixed	Mixed	Boys with girls in Sixth Form	Mixed	Mixed	Boys with girls in Sixth Form
Gender of head and number of years in post	Male, 2+ years	Female, 7+ years	Male, 8+ years	Female, 13+ years	Male, 6+ years (2nd headship)	Male, 14+ years (3rd headship)
Location	Medium-sized Midlands city	London suburb	Outer London borough	Rural town	Central London	London suburb

The basis for the research was a combination of semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Each headteacher was visited and interviewed for approximately 90 minutes. The interview included a set of statements about the operation of their leadership teams, to which they were asked to agree or disagree. The heads then identified two or three members of their leadership teams who were willing to take part, each of whom completed an online questionnaire which included a parallel set of statements to those used with the heads. The results alongside interview data from the heads formed the evidence base for this research.

It was originally planned to follow up the interviews and questionnaires with a second visit to each school to observe a leadership team meeting. However, time prevented this approach, and this has limited the scope of the research.

Literature review

“None of us is as smart as all of us. The Lone Ranger is dead.”
(Warren Bennis, quoted in NCSL, 2008)

Overview

Given the prevalence of leadership teams across our schools, it seems remarkable that so little has been written about them. There is a substantial body of research on distributed leadership in general (e.g. Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2008), highlighting the advantages of a broad distribution of leadership involving staff across the whole school. However, such writers have a limited amount to say on the role that leadership teams have to play in this distribution.

Books on school leadership tend to focus on the role of the head or principal, rather than on leadership teams, although Earley and Weindling (2004) devote a chapter to a summary of three earlier research projects into senior management and leadership teams, and draw some very useful conclusions from them.

Official governmental policy papers are also relatively silent on the topic: no relevant guidance is available on www.teachernet.gov.uk, the DCSF's website for schools; even the National Standards for Headteachers (DfES, 2004) mentions leadership teams only in passing, with no explicit requirement to have a leadership team, or suggestions as to its role. The 2007 PricewaterhouseCoopers study for DfES, *Independent Study into School Leadership* (PwC, 2007), discusses the roles of heads, deputy heads and assistant heads in some detail, but without considering the function or purposes of the team as a whole.

However, several relevant research papers are available from NCSL; although none deals specifically with the composition, working practices or role of the leadership team in secondary schools, recognition of its importance is often implicit; Ofsted has published a useful summary of current leadership practice (*Leadership & management: what inspection tells us*, Ofsted, 2003); and a small number of journal articles (e.g. Ehrich & Cranston, 2004; Gold et al, 2003) proved relevant to this research.

However, to find a book of relevant empirical research which is devoted solely to school leadership teams, it is necessary to go back some fifteen years to Mike Wallace and Valerie Hall's *Inside the SMT: Teamwork in secondary school management*, published in 1994. This extensive study of the workings of senior management teams¹ started by looking at the composition, structure and function of leadership teams in six secondary schools, followed by a more detailed analysis of the inner workings of two of the teams, based on a year-long study. Although the authors suggest that it is difficult to draw wider implications for the functioning of leadership teams from their work, my research for this paper largely supports their conclusions.

Outside education there exists a vast library of works devoted to leadership, teamwork, and management teams – too vast to be dealt with comprehensively here. However, it seemed important to include at least some ideas from beyond the school gates, and consider their relevance for schools. For the purposes of this research, I have restricted

¹ The term 'Leadership Group' was introduced in 2000 (*The Leadership Group*, DfEE 0127/2000) to refer to all those on the leadership pay spine. The term 'senior leadership team' (SLT) began to replace 'senior management team' (SMT) in general usage in state schools at around the same time, although SMT remains the common nomenclature in independent schools. For the purposes of this paper, the term 'leadership team' (LT) is used throughout.

myself to two books: one of the most influential books on this topic of the last three decades, Belbin's *Management Teams: Why they succeed or fail*, originally published in 1981; and a recent book from the Harvard Business School, *Senior leadership teams: what it takes to make them great* (Wageman et al, 2008), which analysed enquiries into 120 organisations around the world.

Why do we need leadership teams?

Before considering how to build effective leadership teams, it is worth reflecting on why we need them at all.

There is substantial agreement amongst authors both within and outside education that the day of the 'heroic leader' with what amounts to sole responsibility for leadership and management is past (Ofsted, 2003, Spillane, 2006). The extensive literature about leadership from outside the education world, combined with recent research about distributed leadership in education, makes a strong case for the advantages of a team-based approach.

'The work of well-designed senior teams can surpass anything that can be achieved in a traditional organization where leaders' separate contributions are coordinated and controlled by a chief executive.'

(Wageman et al, 2008: 207)

It is clear therefore that headteachers can no longer be expected to lead and manage schools on their own. The leadership of an organisation as complex as a secondary school needs to be distributed more widely, not least amongst a strong and effective leadership team:

'Delegated team management is essential for a successful school.'

(Earley & Weindling, 2004: 20)

A strong leadership team creates a synergy in which members can achieve more than they could do individually (Hall & Wallace, 1996). This is particularly important when schools are under constant change, and required to manage a seemingly relentless stream of initiatives:

'A team approach to management offers one way of achieving a coherent strategy for implementing multiple innovations.'

(Wallace & Hall, 1994: 184)

Moreover, the extent to which heads are leading within different models of school leadership such as federations, extended schools, and their generally more 'outward-focussed' position, has created opportunities for other senior staff to expand their roles. Deputy heads are taking on more strategic roles, while assistant heads are now involved in higher level managerial tasks which were previously the preserve of deputy heads (Chapman et al, 2008).

However, the value of effective leadership teams goes further. They can provide a source of invaluable support for the headteacher, both in the opportunities they present to delegate tasks and responsibilities more widely, and in offering the head a confidential group with whom he or she can share concerns. Strong leadership teams

can also contribute substantially to job satisfaction, both for the head and for other members.

‘The leadership support provided by other members of the senior team is crucial in supporting headteachers in their roles.’

(PwC, 2007: 16)

‘For a number of participants, the senior leadership team, to whom leadership responsibility and accountability had been effectively distributed, provided them with comradeship and support and offered a high degree of job satisfaction and reward.’

(NCSL, 2007a: 77)

Characteristics of effective leadership teams

Before we can consider the conditions which are required for an effective leadership team, we need to define how we can recognise such a team.

The literature reviewed provides several models for what makes a good leadership team. The most extensive is Wallace and Hall, who put forward 42 hypotheses about effective leadership teams, including both individual and team qualities and actions, as well as a series of expected outcomes (Wallace & Hall, 1994: 192-3). Earley and Weindling (2004: 105-6) provide a rather more concise, if slightly restricted, list of the desirable attributes and actions of an effective leadership team, tending to focus on their impact on teaching staff rather than on student achievement or other stakeholders. However, this provides a good basis from which to start, and, by combining these with observations from other sources, it is possible to compile a summary of generally agreed characteristics of an effective leadership team:

An effective head and leadership team:

- Work well together as a team; display a range of strengths in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes; have roles and responsibilities which are clear to staff; and are competent in fulfilling their individual management responsibilities.
- Communicate a clear vision for the school, supported by strong principles and values.
- Take the key policy decisions but consult widely before doing so; face up to differences of opinion and work for a negotiated solution and a sense of joint ownership of school development.
- Is proactive and keen to stay in the forefront of change. They are adept at anticipating future developments and the implications these might have for the school, thus avoiding crisis management.
- Set out a broad strategy for change and thereafter encourage and facilitate teacher autonomy; specify priorities, phase in developments, and allow time for consolidation.
- Maintain a relentless focus on issues of teaching and learning; are aware of the most recent research and ideas in pedagogy; consider all potential initiatives in terms of their impact on student achievement, but are interested in wider issues rather than just results.
- Are highly visible and approachable; model desired behaviours and attributes, e.g. hard work, commitment, mutual support and teamwork; behave with openness, honesty and integrity.
- Develop positive relations with the school community; are adept at managing people, including identifying and mobilising individual talents and energies and distributing leadership in order to develop and empower staff;
- Recognise and value the work of others; provide good and consistent support to staff; act and feedback on concerns raised; and communicate fully and effectively with all stakeholders.
- Have high expectations of staff and demand a lot from them; but are sensitive to staff mood, morale and workload.
- Acknowledge that they are accountable to others by providing clear evidence of the outcomes of their actions; are ready to admit mistakes and to consider alternatives.
- Have an in-depth knowledge of the school and of the wider community; build effective relationships with other local schools and relevant organisations.
- Undertake training in how to function as a team, and spend time reflecting on achievements and developing both individual and team skills.

(compiled from Chrispeels J, Castillo S, & Brown J, 2000; Earley & Weindling, 2004; PwC, 2007; Wallace & Hall, 1994; Wageman et al, 2008)

Conditions for creating effective leadership teams

The existing literature, both within and outside education, suggests six conditions that are required to create effective leadership teams. These are drawn primarily from Wageman et al (2008: 14-18), but are supported by other authors. The six conditions are:

1. An appropriate team structure.
2. A clear and compelling purpose.
3. Able and competent members.
4. Clear operating rules.
5. Strong team leadership.
6. Regular self-evaluation.

1. An appropriate team structure

Effective teams are not merely a group of people who meet together. The group has to be structured properly to enable its members to work together to achieve its purpose. The better the structure, the more effective and productive the team.

Existing research suggests that leadership teams need to be sufficiently large to cover all the areas required but not so large as to be unwieldy. Several studies outside education suggests that teams of between five and eight members are the most effective (Hay Group, 2005: 4; Wageman et al, 2008: 19; Belbin, 2004: 105-115) and this coincides with the findings of research within schools (PwC, 2007: 17). It is worth noting that this is irrespective of the size of the school.

Each member of the team needs a clearly defined set of responsibilities which is well known and understood both within and outside the team. (Earley & Weindling, 2004: 100). The delegation of substantial areas of responsibility (for example, for curriculum development, pastoral oversight, or staff development) gives other members of the team increased job satisfaction, as well as making a meaningful impact on the head's workload. Deputy and assistant heads are now expected to play a major role in formulating the aims and objectives of the school and establishing policies to achieve them (NCSL, 2003: 10).

2. A clear and compelling purpose

The role of the team leader (in this case, the head) is to articulate the direction and vision which are the reason for the team's existence, alongside the values by which they should operate:

'Leaders need to keep on reminding their teams and staff what they are there to do.'

(NCSL, 2007b: 8)

'Chief Executives must articulate to their teams a purpose that is consequential, challenging and clear.'

(Wageman et al, 2008: 59)

'Many of the principals interviewed thought that values were at the heart of their leadership. ... Values permeate everything you do as senior managers.'

(Busher, 1997: 89)

An effective team also needs clearly defined tasks which contribute to achieving the strategic goals of the organization as a whole. Such tasks need to be substantial, important pieces of work which are complex, intellectually demanding, and require collaborative working involving every member of the team.

‘The executive team’s mission must be consequential, requiring the deep experience and skills of the top team members.’

(Hay Group, 2005: 9)

A good example in education would be the completion of a whole-school self-evaluation form, or the preparation of a school development plan, or a new structure for the school day.

3. Able and competent members

The tradition in schools is that leadership teams are comprised of the senior staff, each of whom is usually appointed to fill a particular role (curriculum deputy, head of sixth form, and so on) rather than for their team-working skills. However, although it goes very much against the tradition of education, some writers advise against accepting an existing leadership team unless it can fulfil the required role:

‘Team membership is not about status, hierarchy or inclusiveness. Nor should it be an entitlement based on role or tenure. Instead, you should select the best, most appropriate members for the team purpose you have in mind.’

(Wageman et al, 2008: 49)

Wallace and Hall suggest that the principles which govern the composition of leadership teams in schools should include: the need to ensure coverage of school-wide issues; a conception of what constitutes a ‘balanced team’ in terms of personalities, qualities, skills and expertise; and the need to include those with ‘an ear to the ground’ (Wallace & Hall, 1994: 47).

The notion of the ‘balanced team’ appears elsewhere in the existing literature:

‘Heads believed strongly that to be effective, the team members needed to complement each other.’

(Earley & Weindling, 2004: 102)

Wallace and Hall also found evidence that ‘some heads had been influenced by the work of Belbin on complementary team roles, and sought to achieve heterogeneity in team-working styles within the SMT’ (Wallace & Hall, 1994: 67). Dr. Meredith Belbin’s work on management teams is well known and his findings have been validated by a variety of organisations over more than twenty-five years. His analysis of executives involved in training exercises at the Henley Management Centre and elsewhere led him to suggest that nine specific team-working roles are required to enable any management team to function effectively. Although the majority of Belbin’s work has been outside the field of education, he suggests that his team role theory is equally applicable to education, and it has been used effectively in this field.²

² For a summary of Belbin’s team-working roles, visit www.belbin.com/content/page/49/Belbin_Team_Role_Descriptions.pdf

Other research, both within and outside education, also suggests that team-working skills are more important than knowledge or experience:

‘The ability to trust and support each other and present a common view to staff was seen as very important. Also necessary was the opportunity for members to be able to speak their mind and to express contrary views but still work well as a team. Sharing a common purpose, clear roles, collective decision-making, joint responsibility and presenting a united front were all factors mentioned with regard to successful teams.’

(Earley & Weindling, 2004: 102)

4. Clear operating rules

Having created a team which is well-structured, and contains people with good team-working skills, the next stage is to ensure that they can operate effectively.

An effective team works together on shared projects, rather than merely reporting back on individual responsibilities. Each team member regards the success of the team as more important than their own success:

‘The commitment to collaboration in all cases included a rejection of competitive individualism and personal achievement in favour of community goals.’

(Hall & Wallace, 1996: 300)

‘Team success depends to a great extent on having members who set team goals above those of personal self-interest.’

(Belbin, 2004: 121-2)

Effective teams also require a set of rules or norms that ‘govern their behaviour both within and outside team meetings’ (Wageman et al, 2008: 19). This should cover such matters as how contributions are made, the importance of confidentiality, means of collaboration, and how to deal with conflict, with the aim of ensuring that the team can achieve its goals. All members of the team must exhibit trust and integrity, supporting each other both privately and publicly, and presenting a united front to those outside.

‘The onus is on every team member to accept equal responsibility for making the SMT work.’

(Hall & Wallace, 1996: 308)

‘Members of senior teams must conceive of their role as leading in ways that maximise the effectiveness of the organization as a whole.’

(Wageman et al, 2008: 85)

‘Integrity looms large as a necessary quality of successful management teams in schools.’

(Hall & Wallace, 1996: 307)

5. Strong team leadership

Any strong team needs strong team leadership. The reviewed literature recognises that even the most team-orientated chief executive or head will continue to exercise authority as team leader. In particular, they have responsibility for creating and promoting a culture of team work which includes identifying and allocating the tasks and responsibilities of the other members, setting the agenda for joint work, laying the

ground rules for meetings, and (usually) chairing the meetings (Ehrich & Cranston, 2004: 23). Any emphasis on teamwork does not diminish his or her standing.

‘Although the headteacher worked creatively with his senior team to come up with good ideas, he ultimately took, and was seen as taking, the final responsibility.’

(Earley & Weindling, 2004: 59)

One of the reasons why weak leaders are disinclined towards a genuine team approach is their fear that their own authority might be challenged. Building a team can strengthen it so that it becomes a threat to an insecure leader's power (Wageman et al, 2008: 60). However, a commitment to a genuine team approach implies that the head should sometimes be willing to accept a majority decision with which he or she does not agree:

‘Heads also backed down on occasions, in the same way as other team members were expected to do. They thereby demonstrated that they practised what they preached within the culture of teamwork.’

(Hall & Wallace, 1996: 305)

6. Regular self-evaluation

Regular self-evaluation of the team and its operation is considered by authors outside education as an essential part of team-working. The best teams learn from the leader, from each other, and from their experiences. They discuss how best to approach various kinds of problems and always review their actions and decision to find ways to improve how they operate as a team. (Wageman et al, 2008: 20)

This view receives qualified support from researchers within education:

‘Development for individual team members as teamworkers and the team as a whole plays an ... important part in establishing and sustaining a team culture. Much of the development is unstructured, the outcome of working together.’

(Hall & Wallace, 1996: 302-3)

New team members need to receive some sort of formal induction which allows them to understand the team's ethos and norms (Hall & Wallace, 1996: 302). This should include an explanation of each member of the team's responsibilities and area of operation, which will help the new member to build successful relationships within the team (Ehrich & Cranston, 2004: 25).

Allied to team coaching, the fostering of a team spirit through social events can be seen to contribute to the team's effectiveness:

‘Also contributing to the development of the team as a whole, sometimes consciously, sometimes subliminally, were the various social activities outside school in which some teams engaged.’

(Hall & Wallace, 1996: 303)

Findings

“If I could solve all the problems myself, I would.”

(attrib. Thomas Edison, when asked why he had a team of twenty-one assistants)

Conditions for creating effective leadership teams

Evaluating the six case study schools against the six conditions for effective leadership teams established above, each demonstrably fulfilled the majority of the conditions, with two fulfilling all six. All quotes are from headteachers interviewed although these are not identified for anonymity purposes.

1. An appropriate team structure

All the heads inherited leadership teams on arrival at their schools. In five out of six cases, they were able to make at least one appointment to the team within two years. In one school, retirement and promotion enabled the head to appoint an entirely new team within five years, while, at the other end of the scale, one team included all bar one of the original team members after more than eight years.

More significantly, however, all six heads re-structured their teams, at least in part, allowing them to introduce a new post, or revised responsibilities. In each case, this was a conscious decision in order to achieve a structure which they felt comfortable with, or in order to address what the head perceived as the needs of the school:

‘During my first year it became clear that the team had gaps, and wasn’t really fit for purpose. We also needed to address strategic issues which we knew had to change. I knew pretty well what structure I wanted, but I had to take it one stage at a time, which took about five years. Now I have exactly the team I want.’

All six case study schools shared some basic characteristics in terms of size and structure of their leadership teams:

- Four of the six teams comprised between five and eight members, including the head (see Appendix A). This agrees with the findings of the PricewaterhouseCoopers survey (PwC, 2007: 17) and with the composition of effective leadership teams outside education (Hay Group, 2005: 4; Wageman *et al*, 2008: 19). Two of the teams (Schools B and E) had nine and ten members respectively. However, there was no evidence, based on the data collected, that these teams were any less effective.
- In addition to the head, teams included either two or three deputy heads, plus three or four assistant heads or others with similar responsibilities. This accords with Wallace & Hall’s findings (1994: 48).
- Four out of the six teams included at least one member of the support staff, usually a bursar or business manager. This is in line with the proportion reported by PricewaterhouseCoopers, who found that 56% of secondary school leadership teams include at least one member of support staff (PwC, 2007: 19).
- In addition to the above, the leadership teams in the three independent schools each included either a head of marketing (responsible for public relations and admissions) or a development director (responsible for fundraising and alumni relations), or both.

These posts reflect the different demands of the sector, but their inclusion on the whole-school leadership team suggests that the team is focussed on strategic leadership as well as day-to-day management.

- On all the teams, each member had one or more specific responsibilities, in addition to their responsibilities as members of the team. However, substantial variation was observed in the division of such responsibilities, as well as the job titles attached to them, as can be seen in Appendix A. The reasons given for such variety included the historical (i.e. inherited teams), the particular needs of the school, the preferences of the head, and the expertise of individual team members.
- Four of the schools have what might be termed a traditional structure in which pastoral and academic responsibilities are split, either between two deputy heads, or between assistant heads. However, school B splits these responsibilities amongst all the deputy and assistant heads, with each taking charge of a year group and one or more curriculum areas. School D similarly shares academic responsibilities around, but is more traditional in its allocation of pastoral responsibilities. The fact that B and D are the two largest schools in the survey may suggest that such a system has particular advantages in large schools.
- All six schools have a head of sixth form (or equivalent) on their leadership team, responsible for years 12-13 and their associated issues. Four schools (B, D, E and F) have created parallel posts for Y7-11.

2. A clear and compelling purpose

All the leadership teams fulfilled two different purposes, the **operational** and the **strategic**. The former, the operational management of the school, ensured that the school ran as efficiently as possible; the latter provided strategic leadership and drove school improvement.

“Our job is firstly to provide strategic leadership and engineer a collective vision; and secondly to make sure the school runs as efficiently as a school can.”

This coincided with the views of members of the leadership teams:

“Our main role is to have shared vision and ethos, lead whole school improvement, and drive standards forward for all members of the school community.”

“To provide a vision and direction for the school and to ensure systems and personnel are in place that can carry through that vision.”

Some teams made a clear distinction between the two functions, e.g. holding separate meetings to address each function. In most cases, the operational objectives were achieved by individual team members carrying out their individual responsibilities (as curriculum or pastoral managers, for example); meetings were used to raise issues which might require a more considered response, or which involved policy decisions. Accountability was achieved largely through individuals reporting to the head via separate one-to-one meetings. This ensured greater efficiency for all team members, but involved the head in a large number of regular meetings.

All of the heads tried to ensure that full leadership team meetings were focused on strategic leadership and school development (although some were more successful in this than others). Some teams had established a regular cycle of self-evaluation, development planning and action to achieve strategic objectives which ensured that the team engaged in joint planning tasks and espoused a shared vision, even if individual tasks within the school development plan were then allocated to individual members.

Three of the six heads achieved this division between operational and strategic purposes by effectively having two teams. In one school, the leadership team focussed on operational issues, while responsibility for development rested with the School Development Group, a larger group which included middle managers alongside the leadership team. In two other schools, the head met with just the deputies to deal with essential day-to-day management, keeping full leadership team meetings for strategic issues.³

It was clear from the interviews that all the heads saw the success and happiness of both staff and pupils as their primary function, and this was a view shared by their teams:

“The leadership team is there to make sure that every child gets the best opportunities they can and achieves the best results they can, and to support staff in achieving that.”

“They [the members of the leadership team] genuinely want to see success, not just in the students, but in the staff they manage – it’s this whole idea of How can I help you to get this done?”

Another thread which emerged was that of continuous improvement. When asked what made their teams successful, one head responded:

“I think it’s ... the individuals on it in terms of their ability to say “We can do this differently”, and their desire to see things the best they can be. ... So it’s a ‘can do’ attitude – there’s always something proactive we can do to make things better.”

However, despite the existence of a clear and compelling purpose in all the leadership teams, heads rarely felt the need to remind their teams of that purpose. Only one team had a system of annual leadership team review which provided an opportunity for the head to renew and reaffirm the purpose of the team.

In response to the questionnaires, a very strong feeling of collective responsibility was evident – all six heads and 11 of the 12 team members agreed that ‘we’re all in this together’. Shared vision and values were a strong feature of all six teams, along with team loyalty: all six heads and 10 out of the 12 team members said that they normally agreed on most things; while all the team members and five of the heads agreed with the statement, “We trust each other, and know that we can disagree without falling out.”

³ This runs contrary to the recommendation of Wallace & Hall, who suggest that an effective LT will have ‘a single-tier structure of ... meetings’ (Wallace & Hall, 1994: 192). However, the two-tier structure seems to provide an effective method for ensuring that strategic focus is maintained, provided all those involved understand the reasons for it.

However, there was some discrepancy regarding the purpose of leadership team meetings. Half of the team members thought that the main function of team meetings was for them to report back on their responsibilities. However, the other six team members and five of the heads disagreed. This finding indicates that in some cases heads still need to be clearer about the function of the team and the meetings.

Providing team tasks which were suitable and appropriate did not present a problem for four of the six heads, as they regarded the strategic direction of the school as the leadership team's main function. Typical tasks therefore included undertaking self-evaluation, writing school improvement plans, designing community partnerships, planning the timetable or curriculum, or raising funds for new projects. However, two heads admitted struggling to focus on strategic issues, and needing to 'step back a bit' to avoid the team becoming too tied up with day-to-day operational matters.

In all teams, individual team members were often given strategic projects to work on. The discussion of problems within individual areas of responsibility was a regular feature of team meetings.

3. Able and competent members

All of the heads were very conscious of the need to assemble a team whose members could cover all the management tasks required of them. In response to a question asking which was more important, knowledge or behaviour, all the heads recognised the need for both:

"I would be looking for a mixture of both. For example, if I need a Director of Studies, then they need to be able to tick the boxes – curriculum and so on – but they also need to be able to get on with the rest of the team."

The traditional structure of leadership teams in secondary schools, where people are appointed to specific roles which require particular knowledge and experience, tends to lead heads naturally towards ensuring that the team consists of the people with the appropriate skills and experience for their individual role. There was also some evidence that heads tried to ensure complementary skills within the team (as in Belbin's team roles), but were not always conscious of doing so. As one deputy head put it:

"I believe we are a very effective team. I believe we would be a well balanced team, in Belbin terms, and our strengths support each other."

Posts were therefore generally advertised as requiring certain skills, expertise and experience, but in interview, all six heads thought behaviours were more important:

"Behaviours are more important than roles, because there's a degree to which you can write the job description to suit the successful candidate, and I think at the moment we've got people who complement each other. I wouldn't want clones of myself, I want people who can challenge my views, opinions and ideas."

"If they've got the right attitude, skill set and understanding of how to effect change and improvement, if you've got all of that, then the fact that they don't actually know something can be filled in. If they're the type of person I want in my

leadership team, they ought to be able to get up that learning curve fairly quickly.”

Team members’ personal qualities and competencies identified by headteachers as important included: good interpersonal skills, capabilities in problem-solving, being analytical, efficient and able to persuade and challenge others appropriately, as well as being willing to challenge the status quo. These were underpinned by a commitment to student improvement.

One head had a very clear view of the qualities needed:

“I need people who are drivers for change, people who really have a concept of development, because I feel as a school we always want to drive on to change further. ... I want to be sure they share my vision for the school, which is that excellence is expected in all things, but in a very supportive, warm and friendly environment.”

“Within that sharing of the vision, I also want to see that they have the ability to see things through, as well as the intellectual capacity to formulate policy, take lots of information and turn it into something we could take to staff. And the other thing is the work ethic, a willingness to work creatively above and beyond the normal school day.”

The need for one member of the team to have come up ‘through the ranks’ and have ‘an ear to the ground’ (Wallace & Hall, 1994: 47) was also supported by several heads:

“If you lose the experienced voice of reason who’s seen it all before, then you lose a lot from your SMT.”

4. Clear operating rules

All the heads made their expectations of team members clear at appointment, during induction processes, in annual reviews and in individual meetings. The norms for team behaviours themselves were not always explicit, but those which emerged included the importance of loyalty to the team, hard work, supporting school activities, and supporting each other.

“The head is a role model and sets the tone in being the consummate professional in all that she does. ... Individual line management meetings and leadership team meetings are very business-like and that all sets the tone for the team.”

Although not raised by heads as an essential quality, the need for team members to be loyal to the team and to each other was mentioned frequently by both heads and by their teams when asked what made their team successful:

“There is a sense of cabinet responsibility and loyalty: we may disagree in private, but we are shoulder to shoulder in public.”

“We’re very much a collective unit. We don’t snipe at each other to other staff (or ourselves). We do accept collective decisions but there is always an opportunity

to revisit if one or more feel strongly about something. Staff see us as united and there is a lot of trust given to us by them.”

“[We’re successful because of] mutual respect for our different strengths/expertise, a head who is open in his thinking/approach and encourages personal responsibility, [and] a strong sense of collective endeavour and responsibility.”

All of the team members were happy with the notion of collective decision-making, in which they accepted that majority decisions would be the norm. Most also agreed that, in the event of disagreements, the aim was to work for a negotiated solution and a sense of joint ownership of school development.

5. Strong team leadership

There was no question in any of the teams that the head exercised ultimate authority and even those heads who were strongly committed to the team ethos reserved the right on occasions to make a decision which went against the consensus.

“They [the Leadership Team] are not afraid to stand their ground if they think I'm proposing something in the wrong direction, which is very helpful, because I don't think it's a good idea to have people who are just going to nod all the time. But ultimately, they and I know that the buck stops with me.”

Evidence of strong team leadership was present in the responses to the questionnaires, both from heads and from the team members. All recognised that the head's job was to set the direction, and then for the team to take forward his or her vision together. Half of the heads agreed that they would, on occasions, go along with a majority decision from the team if they disagreed with it, as compared with all of the team members. This suggests that some heads, although committed to team leadership, still expect to be able to invoke their authority when required.

All twelve team members agreed that the head focused meetings very well, and drove the business of the meeting through at speed. However, only half of the heads perceived that to be the case. This suggests that the heads in question may be rather better at chairing meetings than they thought.

All the heads also made a conscious effort to build team spirit, ensuring that team members got on with each other. This normally involved an occasional meal out, often at the head's house, but heads also felt that positive day-to-day interactions helped team spirit:

“We keep meetings fairly light-hearted – we share achievements, recognise progress, and have a laugh at the same time.”

“I believe in giving positive feedback – I write lots of cards to thank people.”

6. Regular self-evaluation

When it came to reviewing the performance of the team as a whole (as distinct from the performance of individuals within it), this was the one area in which the majority of the leadership teams in the sample did not have specific strategies in place.

Two schools had a system for regular review or for providing coaching for the team. In other schools, a question to team members about reviewing the performance of the team generally elicited responses about individual reviews, suggesting that the team members did not always see themselves as part of a team with collective goals, or possibly that they did not identify the concept of team review. However, some could see that this might be useful:

“We are a reflective bunch ... and we occasionally do a bit of navel gazing, but no formal process - although the strategic review does involve that question about fitness for purpose...”

“Perhaps a greater focus on how the team operates would be beneficial.”

“The fact that we're prepared to be very self-evaluative and self-reflective. ... We're never complacent, we are prepared to reflect, we consult where we ought to, but are decisive where we need to be. ... When things work and the school goes well, that reinforces that feeling of solidarity that we're doing a good job.”

These goals were reinforced by successful outcomes:

“Success breeds success, so that when you feel as a team that you've done something well, all of you can share in that.”

The most evident team self-evaluation came from one school in the form of an annual team review, carried out each summer term by an external consultant (the school's improvement partner) and a governor. The team spent two days reviewing its performance over the year against targets from the previous year's development plan, and then writing targets for the new plan. This was then carried forward into individual targets for each member, which were shared with the rest of the team, in order to 'remind ourselves of our purpose and reinforce the shared ethic and what we're after.'

However, all the heads spoke about the importance of developing individual members of their teams, and helping them in their career development, where appropriate.

I see that as very much part of my job. I look out for courses for them, I ensure that everyone is involved in every decision, so that there is no area they haven't touched.

This was confirmed by members of their teams:

“The head provides excellent support and guidance. She has been careful to set Performance Management targets that really address those areas in my cv that need further development in preparation for headship.”

“The head makes this a regular part of reviews and is very supportive in encouraging career development.”

Conclusions

“If things seem under control, you are just not going fast enough.”
(attrib. Mario Andretti)

This research suggests that effective leadership teams in secondary schools, despite their different contexts, share certain characteristics which largely echo those found in effective leadership teams outside education. The key characteristics are:

1. An appropriate team structure.

A team, usually of between five and eight members (including the head), structured to suit the needs of the school, with clear delegation of responsibilities and tasks.

2. A clear and compelling purpose.

An understanding by all members of the team both of the team's function and of their function within it, with a clear distinction between operational and strategic matters; this 'compelling purpose' is underpinned by strong moral values and periodically reiterated by the head as team leader.

3. Able and competent members.

A team in which the individual members complement each other in terms of their skills and experience, but also in the behaviours they bring to the team.

4. Clear operating rules.

A strong ethos of collaboration, loyalty and integrity, in which team members support each other and place the success of the team (and therefore the school) above their own individual interests; a strong team spirit, enhanced by positive feedback, a sense of achievement, and occasional social events.

5. Strong team leadership.

A team leader who understands and can play to the strengths of the team members, who can establish norms of behaviour to ensure successful outcomes, but who knows when to exercise authority.

6. Regular self-evaluation.

A system of team coaching, allowing the team to review its performance and operation, including how it reaches decisions and how well it has achieved its targets, allied with coaching for individual team members to help them to build on their strengths, achieve their individual targets and develop their careers.

The findings from this study suggest that a team which includes all of these characteristics is likely to be effective and (providing it is stable) should continue to develop and grow as a team, leading the school effectively and improving the learning experience for all pupils.

The condition which appeared to be least evident across the schools, apart from in two instances, was any formalised programme of self-evaluation focused on how well the team worked together to achieve its goals. This may or may not reflect other schools' practices nationwide, but it should be a consideration when assessing the effectiveness of a team.

Recommendations

‘The leaders who work most effectively, it seems to me, never say ‘I.’ And that’s not because they have trained themselves not to say ‘I.’ They don’t think ‘I.’ They think ‘we’; they think ‘team.’ They understand their job to be to make the team function. They accept responsibility and don’t sidestep it, but ‘we’ gets the credit.... This is what creates trust, what enables you to get the task done.’
(Peter Drucker, *Managing the Non-profit Organization*, 1990)

The identification and recruitment of future heads is one of the issues which the National College for School Leadership was set up to address. As Alma Harris says:

‘The main challenge facing schools and school systems is how to locate, develop and sustain committed and talented leadership.’
(Harris, 2008: 3)

This is not going to be achieved with one solution; but the establishment of strong and effective leadership teams can go some way to making a difficult job more manageable.

For those reflecting upon or reviewing their leadership team arrangements, I hope that this research has provided some suggestions for ways forward. In the introduction, I have suggested what an effective leadership team should look like. I have then offered some conditions which need to be established to create such a leadership team. They are not in any particular order, but I would proffer, on the basis of this research, that they all need to be in place for a team to reach its maximum effectiveness. To assist with such self-evaluation, heads may wish to ask themselves these questions:

- What is the purpose of my leadership team?
- Who do I need on the team to carry out that purpose?
- Do I have the best people available to me on my team?
- If not, how can I restructure the team to include them?
- How can I ensure a balance of team-working skills within my team?
- Have I agreed with the team a clear set of operating principles to ensure effective team working?
- What do I need to do to lead them effectively?
- How do I know how well we are doing? What processes do we use for team self-evaluation?

Teams may also like to use the checklist on page 9 to establish:

- Whether they are a high performing team, using the list as a set of criteria for self-evaluation.
- A set of operating principles including behaviours to establish expectations of team members’ contributions.

Whilst undertaking this research, it became evident that the majority of the heads I interviewed were largely unaware of the theoretical basis for their approach – they simply took the steps which they felt were necessary to make their team ‘fit for purpose’.

I would therefore recommend that:

- The building and development of leadership teams becomes a core part of appropriate NCSL programmes including NPQH.
- Inspection frameworks focus more on team leadership and less on the individual head or principal.
- The National Standards for School Leadership include an emphasis on the development of strong and effective leadership teams.

Appendix

Summary of leadership team responsibilities in the six case study schools, excluding the head

School	Job title	Main Responsibilities
A	Deputy Head 1 Deputy Head 2 Director of Studies Head of Sixth Form Director of Marketing and Admissions	Pastoral care (shared), timetable, reporting, assessment, staff induction Pastoral care (shared), CPD co-ordinator, discipline, daily routine Teaching & learning, line manager for HoDs, timetable, cover, options Pastoral and academic matters in Sixth Form, university applications Publications, website, admissions, community links
B	Deputy Head 1 Deputy Head 2 Deputy Head 3 Assistant Head 1 Assistant Head 2 Assistant Head 3 Assistant Head 4 Bursar	Note: academic and pastoral responsibilities are shared, so that each DH/AH is responsible for a curriculum area and a year group Science, Y9, KS3/4 tracking, reports, self-evaluation, school trips Humanities, Y10, teaching & learning, staff development MFL, Technology, Y11, calendar, timetable, cover, ICT strategy Learning support, Y6, pastoral system, child protection, admissions Maths, Art, Y7, assessment for learning, ITT English, Music, Drama, Y8, literacy, school council, NQTs Business, Psychology, Y12-13 (all issues) Finance, catering, premises, H&S
C	Deputy Head Senior Master Director of Studies Head of Sixth Form Bursar Head of Marketing Development Director	Day-to-day management, pastoral care, calendar, staff duties, induction Academic appraisal, INSET, ITT, liaison with Junior School, Oxbridge Curriculum management, line manager for HoDs, academic data, reports All Sixth Form issues, HE applications, 16+ admissions Finance, premises Marketing strategy, public events, 11+ admissions, community links Fundraising, alumni relations
D	Deputy Head 1 Deputy Head 2 Assistant Head 1 Assistant Head 2 Assistant Head 3 Assistant Head 4 Assistant Head 5	Note: academic responsibilities are shared, so that each DH/AH acts as the LT link to a faculty Curriculum planning, timetable, ICT, premises, finance, creative arts Teaching & learning, calendar, cover, staff duties, INSET, NQTs, science Head of Sixth Form, HE applications, 14-19, English Head of Upper School (KS4), trips, activities, residentials, technology Head of Lower School (KS3), primary liaison, child protection, languages Specialist status, SEF, data analysis, target setting, reports, humanities Achievement, mentoring, school council, intervention, SEN, PSHE
E	Deputy 1 Deputy 2 Deputy 3 Assistant Head 1 Assistant Head 2 Assistant Head 3 Assistant Head 4 Finance Director Development Director	Day-to-day management, cover, functions and events, child protection, management of capital projects Curriculum planning, academic policy, timetable, line manager for HoDs, assessment policy, ICT strategy Staff (teaching & support) welfare & development, cover, induction, performance management, INSET, co-ordinate strategic plan Pastoral & academic management Y12-13, 16+ admissions, Oxbridge Pastoral & academic management Y9-11, 13+ admissions Pastoral & academic management Y7-8, 11+ admissions Manage co-curricular programme, community links Finance Fundraising, alumni relations
F	Deputy Head 1 Deputy Head 2 Assistant Head 1 Assistant Head 2 Bursar	Day-to-day management, cover, timetable, calendar, staff duties Curriculum, academic management, self-evaluation, CPD, induction Pastoral management Y12-13, 16+ admissions, HE applications Pastoral management Y7-11, year group councils, child protection Finance, premises, fundraising, personnel

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