National College for School Leadership

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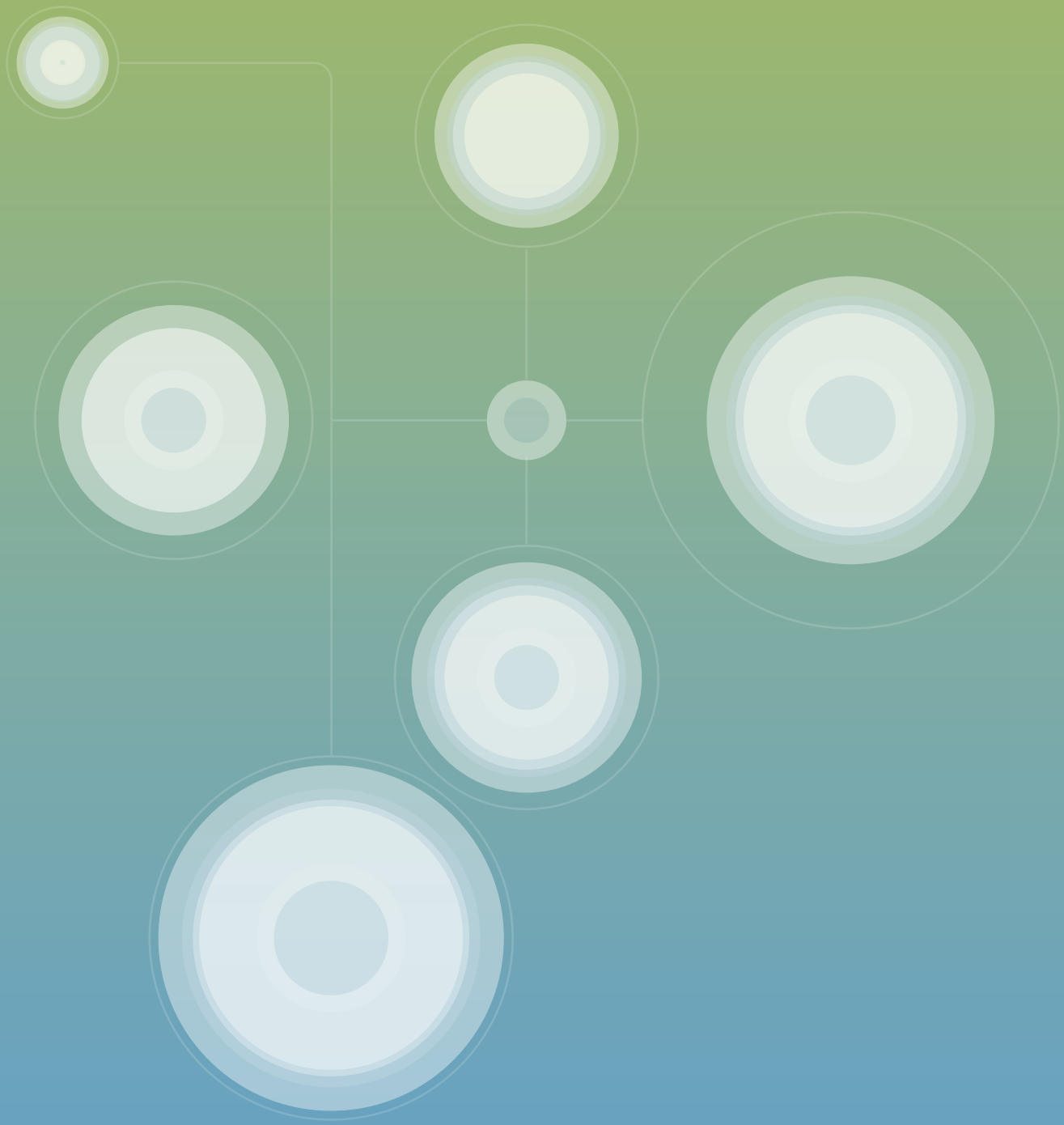
improving children's lives

System Leadership

Lessons from the literature



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March 2007
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1. Introduction

What defines a system leader?

This paper argues that system leadership has a consistent set of principles that can and should be applied within and between institutions.

System leaders recognise the importance of the connections between different issues, different individuals and different institutions. They understand that it is these connections that create *systems*, which are *more than the sum of their parts*.

This feature of systems creates interdependence within them, for example between the performance of schools and other public institutions, meaning that solutions to problems are often found in relationships rather than individual people or institutions.

Systems

A classic example of a system is a computer: it relies on the connections between its component parts to make it work.

Importantly, systems can exist within systems. For example, a computer can be part of a network; again, the connections between the computers are what make it a network, rather than just a collection of individual computers.

Human systems have their own particular characteristics, but the point stands that it is the connections that create a system.

System leaders therefore see schools as systems within their own right, operating within wider social systems.

These wider systems include:

- the education system: relationships between schools
- systems of public services: relationships between schools and other public services
- local communities: relationships between schools and others in the local area, including parents and carers

What do system leaders aim to achieve?

Like all leaders, system leaders aim to achieve the best possible outcomes for children.

However, system leaders achieve this not by focusing narrowly on the performance of any one individual, department or institution. Rather, system leaders see and act on the *system as a whole*.

System leaders recognise the interdependence between schools, between schools and other public institutions and between schools and communities. The relationships between them can have profound effects on the outcomes for young people.

In recognising the importance of and potential in these relationships, system leaders seek to build the capacity of whole systems to:

- sustain their own high performance and improve over time
- adapt to new challenges over time

How do system leaders achieve this?

System leaders build structures, processes and cultures that will achieve a number of goals.

1. **People will recognise that, in systems made up of individuals, there will be multiple perspectives on a problem or situation.** This means that change is most likely to be achieved by drawing on those perspectives and focusing relentlessly on outcomes to create a shared vision.

> ***Example:*** *A teacher and a social worker may interpret a child's case in different ways. Drawing on both of these different perspectives and remaining focused on an agreed set of outcomes for that child is crucial.*

2. **The autonomy of those in the system will be built by setting a few simple rules while maintaining high minimum standards.** This means understanding that the complexity of problems and the relationships that surround them require people to adapt and find particular solutions to particular problems. To marry flexibility with quality assurance, this needs to be done within a clear overall framework.

> ***Example:*** *No class in a school is the same. Having schemes of work and an understanding of best practice is important, but too much prescription may prevent a teacher from tailoring his or her lesson to a particular class.*

3. **Connecting individuals to one another will support individual autonomy.** Allowing people autonomy within systems does not mean leaving them in isolation. Building structures and processes that help create purposeful relationships between people can support people in finding solutions and sharing learning.

> ***Example:*** *For years, teachers have been isolated in their own classrooms, enclosing learning and innovation. Finding spaces for teachers to come together, both within and between schools, can help spread excellent practice.*

4. **Supporting learning and continuous improvement, by creating feedback loops, will help those within the system to improve its overall performance.** This means giving people access to information that can help them understand the factors affecting the performance of the system – and make changes as a result.

> ***Example:*** *Collecting and analysing data helps people assess the strengths and weaknesses of a system and to understand what contribution they could make to the process of improving it. Building in opportunities for pupil voice is another example of generating feedback loops to improve performance.*

5. **An open learning culture will be maintained.** This means recognising that organisational cultures are as important as structures and processes in pushing the boundaries of best practice and learning from experience. Learning cultures need leaders to recognise and model the importance of learning.

> ***Example:*** *Creating a learning culture may be as simple as starting meetings with an opportunity to share recent learning in a blame-free atmosphere. Another example might be lesson observations that are designed explicitly to support learning and professional development rather than enforce accountability.*

In the remainder of this paper, we seek to explore, explain and elaborate on these key principles. The aim is to combine a rigorous understanding of systems theory with a practical explanation of how this applies to school leadership and the advantages that this brings with it.

In the following section, we provide a case study of system leadership in action, drawing on the innovative work of Blue Mountain School in Canada. Section 3 identifies some core elements of system leadership, as an explanation of where the idea of system leadership comes from. Sections 4 and 5 look at government policy in recent years and Section 6 focuses on the elements of system leadership that have emerged during that period. Section 7 offers a more comprehensive view of system leadership on the whole.

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2. System leadership: a case study

One of the clearest examples of system leadership in practice is Blue Mountain School in Ontario, Canada (Hargreaves, A, 2003). Opened in 1994 with 600 pupils, Blue Mountain sought to model the principles of a learning community from the start. In the words of Andy Hargreaves, who spent many years working with the school, the goal of the first headteacher was that every teacher 'would be able to see the "big picture" of their organisation, understanding how parts and whole were interrelated … and how actions in one domain created consequences in another'.

Recognising multiple perspectives

The leaders at Blue Mountain recognised the creativity that can emerge from a clear sense of purpose and a simple set of shared rules or values. The school established seven defining goals that were used to orientate the work of staff and served as criteria against which the performance of the school could be judged. Underlying each of these goals was a straightforward statement: 'all that matters is the pupil'.

The school also worked hard to build partnerships with parents and others in the community. The principal of Blue Mountain was conscious that innovative schools can encounter opposition from parents. Monthly meetings with the community evolved into a significant school council. Parents were asked to work with the school to decide the 'skills and values they wanted their young people to have when they left the school'. Through this partnership, according to one teacher, the school generated 'the philosophical view that binds the place together'. In the process, they created a school where parents were treated as guides – invaluable sources of intelligence and wisdom without whom the school could not succeed.

Rather than dismissing the perspectives, or frames, of parents on the evolution of the school, the energy of this community was harnessed through explicitly recognising the importance of their role.

Building autonomy

To support the autonomy of staff and the organisation as a whole, the leadership team introduced a culture of self-assessment, recognising that this was likely to be the most effective way of ensuring that staff internalised the goals and held each other to account for them.

From this relatively simple and internally driven platform, the school earned a reputation for innovative approaches, driven by motivated and creative staff. New forms of assessment were introduced and assessment targets quickly became data that was shared with pupils as well as staff.

Supporting autonomy through purposeful relationships

Setting out to be part of an innovative and highly successful school, the leaders of Blue Mountain nevertheless paid great attention to the context in which they worked. They understood the kind of unpopularity that often comes with being a 'prophet in your own back yard' and slowly built strong alliances with other local schools. Success would be short-lived, they argued, if it came at the expense of other schools or their own popularity.

The leaders of Blue Mountain took care to nurture key sets of relationships *within* the school. Strong efforts were made to ensure that learning took place *across* subject departments, in an attempt to spread effective practice throughout the school, rather than simply within departments.

And, working beyond the level of a single institution, the schools in the area agreed to form a strong system of leadership rotation, investing in the stock of local leaders at short-term cost to the institution. In a district that regularly rotated its principals, the principal of Blue Mountain worked hard to create an organisational system that would survive his departure and 'perpetuate what we are doing'.

Learning and improvement through feedback loops

Strong feedback loops were also built between staff and pupils and between staff and school leaders, to support the flow of information and learning throughout the school's internal system. Pupils were involved in cross-departmental decision-making processes, ensuring that their perspective was brought to bear on important decisions.

The assessment and reporting system at the school was reformed, with data stored electronically, analysed and shared with parents. Parents were involved in meaningful discussions about how to improve the effectiveness of the school as a whole. Even the design of the school was effected by an approach based on maximising connections within the system: the main hallway was designed to encourage interaction between staff, pupils and visitors, with school office, pupil guidance and business studies areas all being accessed off a central hallway.

A learning culture

Another defining feature of the approach adopted by the leaders at Blue Mountain was that they deliberately adopted a learning approach, accepting the uncertainties that are implicit within this.

A policy was adopted of beginning all meetings with systems issues. This approach was designed to free people to identify problems they were having at the systems level and removing the stigma and fear that often surrounds reporting of those problems. This helped information flow more freely, supporting organisational learning.

The overall effect of this was to help the school to embed an approach and school culture that outlived any single leader.

The approach of the school helped to invest durability in the system of the school, rather than in any particular individual.

3. Core elements of systems theory

Systems theory is best understood as a lens through which to view problems and challenges in the real world. It is a practical tool for understanding and responding to dynamics within and across organisations. Underpinning systems theory are some core insights (Chapman, 2002).

1. The **connections** between elements of a complex system are crucial, because they produce a system that is more than the sum of its parts. For example, the performance of a team is determined not just by the individual performances of team members, but also by *how team members relate to one another.*

2. Interventions which attempt to break complex systems down into their component parts, without paying attention to these interconnections, are likely to have **unintended consequences** elsewhere in the system. For example, setting targets for delivering *numbers* of operations in hospitals may, in fact, damage *the quality of care* provided, leading to the need for more treatment in the future.

3. For this reason, there are **limits on the ability of leaders to prescribe and control** complex systems. Problems are often best addressed by those closest to the issue, where the interconnections are clearest and the trade-offs between different strategies can be best understood and negotiated.

4. Supposed empirical solutions to problems have their limits in any case, because participants in systems see issues through **frames**. Where an individual is in a system will have an important influence on which problems they identify and how they frame solutions. For example, there is often disagreement as to the nature of a problem in public policy: is the national strategy wrong or is it simply being implemented poorly?

5. Central to overcoming problems within a system is the process of disrupting these frames, or at least making people aware of the existence of multiple perspectives on a problem, and supporting **learning** over time in order to build the **capacity** of the system to achieve a goal or set of goals.

4. System objectives for children's services

Together, Every Child Matters (ECM) and the government's Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners codify the two related system challenges for schools and other institutions that operate under the umbrella of children's services – to raise educational standards and to support children's well-being – in the shape of the five outcomes for children and learners.

Although these goals have been pursued for a number of years by institutions and practitioners working within the system, the two strategies are explicit in stating them:

> The central purpose for every pupil over the next five years is to raise the quality of education, teaching and learning.
>
> We have also published in Every Child Matters ... It paves the way for the Government to help all children and young people stay safe, be healthy, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution to society and achieve economic well-being.
>
> **(Department for Education and Skills, 2004)**

The key means for achieving these goals is the development of a system of children's services that is capable of making a personalised offer to every young person. As the Five Year Strategy states, 'the central characteristic of such a new system will be personalisation – so that the system fits to the individual rather than the individual having to fit to the system' (Department for Education and Skills, 2004).

These two key objectives, achieved through personalisation, require excellent, innovative schools that perform at consistently high levels over time. This is in itself a systems challenge: leaders need to build organisational systems that help schools to sustain their performance over time.

But more than this, they require positive, purposeful relationships between schools, between schools and other public institutions and between schools and communities. The performance of each of these depends on the others, requiring collaboration built on a whole-systems approach.

5. The emergence of systems policies: a brief history of the last 10 years

Over the last decade, the importance of the interconnections between different issues and institutions has grown ever clearer. The evolution of government policy over that period towards what might be understood as systems policies reflects this.

The first term of the present government focused on raising levels of performance within the education system through direction from central government. Specifying best practice and using audit and inspection were the key means to ensure that standards were maintained.

The government's literacy and numeracy strategies embodied this approach most obviously, with a high degree of prescription involved in both. Such an approach raised levels of performance in the system, at least by measurements of examination performance. However, the strategies were regarded by many as limited in their ability to transform the education system from good to great. As Michael Fullan (2004) has argued:

> … even the most sophisticated centrally-driven reform – what has come to be called 'informed prescription' – can only take us part way toward the solution; on the other hand, even highly supported decentralized strategies which seek 'a thousand flowers to bloom' do not take us very far (not enough flowers bloom; good flowers do not get around or amount to critical mass breakthroughs).
>
> **(Fullan, 2004)**

In recognition of this dilemma, the government has pursued a number of what might be described as systems policies. These are policies that recognise the education system and surrounding institutions to be more than the sum of their parts and seek to build on this rather than ignore it. Ironically, these policies themselves have often either overlapped or contradicted each other, but each policy in isolation is best understood this way.

These policies fall into three categories.

1. **Building relationships between schools: making the education system more than the sum of its parts**

   A number of government-sponsored initiatives have been aimed at building collaborative relationships between schools. Such initiatives were designed on the basis that they would bring several advantages.

- *Economies of scale:* schools could make, for example, shared financial investments or support wider curriculum offers through sharing resources and expertise.
- *Transfer of practice:* schools would learn effective practices from one another.
- *Innovation and enquiry:* new relationships between schools would offer the opportunity not just to learn from existing good practice but also to forge successful new approaches through experimentation and research.

There are several initiatives that fall into this category. **Beacon schools** were designed to spread best practice across the education system, with designated schools sharing successful approaches with partner schools. **Leading Edge schools** operated on a similar principle: schools deemed to be at the leading edge of practice were paired with those that were not, with the aim that good practice would be transferred from one school to another.

Networked Learning Communities were founded on the belief that schools should learn 'with, from and on behalf of each other' through enquiry and collaboration. Under this programme, schools opted into collaborative networks, agreeing a shared purpose for the network and appointing co-leaders to help shape and facilitate collaboration between schools. **Specialist schools** were also founded on the principle of collaboration. Each school specialises so that it can invest in key facilities and professional capacity and works with other schools to offer specialised provision across the curriculum.

More recently, the government has promoted new governance arrangements for schools to support this kind of collaboration, including **federations** and **foundation trusts** in the recent Schools White Paper. Trusts will be able to govern more than one school, with the aim that they serve as a useful vehicle to encourage the kind of collaborative working described above.

2. **Making the wider system of children's services more than the sum of its parts**

   ECM reforms have been seen as central to what government describes as a 'holistic' approach to education and children's services. It represents the recognition that standards in education and children's wider well-being are intimately related. The policy places a duty on schools to take responsibility for the five outcomes for children and a corresponding duty on social services to contribute towards educational achievement.

   Whilst ECM reforms represent the culmination of efforts to achieve more joined-up services for children, it was preceded by other policies with the same goal. **Extended schools** is one example of this, which is envisaged as using institutional bases for the delivery of a wide range of services to young people. These might include co-location on school grounds of social workers, special needs staff, youth workers and police.

3. **Building more consistent links between schools and parents and the wider community**

   Extended schools also represent a third plank of the systems policies introduced by government in recent years. Alongside the provision of wider support for young people, they are also expected to build links with parents and carers. Parenting support and opening up the use of school facilities to the wider communities are examples of this.

Although no longer running, the government's **Education Action Zones** were established on this principle. According to government guidance, they were designed to 'enable local partnerships made up of groups of schools, businesses, the community and other statutory bodies to develop innovative and radical solutions for raising educational standards in some of the most deprived areas in England' (see **www.standards.dfes.gov.uk**).

The sheer number of these policies illustrates that they have often been overlapping or even inconsistent with one another. Yet the defining characteristic of each initiative has been to recognise the interconnections between issues and institutions and to try to build productive relationships between them.

As we discuss in the next section, they have given rise to elements of system leadership without creating a genuinely systematic approach, due to their own fragmentation.

6. The emergence of elements of system leadership

The raft of policies and initiatives introduced by central government since around 2001 has given rise to glimpses of system leadership, if not a detailed and coherent vision of what it entails.

Leadership models have emerged in which school leaders have sought not just to establish their own schools as effective organisational systems, but also to attempt to play a role in the wider social system in which schools operate, including relationships with:

- other schools
- other parts of children's services
- parents and the wider community

Executive headship, which allows headteachers to take leadership of more than one school, is one way in which heads have been able to take responsibility in the wider education system, often building productive relationships between schools. More than this, though, executive headship has also involved an implicit shift in the model of leadership exercised *within* individual institutions, with executive heads having to let go of many day-to-day issues.

Co-leadership of Networked Learning Communities has been another model of system leadership, with two or more leaders given responsibility for co-ordinating strategy and relationships within a network of schools.

Leaders of extended schools have begun to learn the discipline of building holistic packages of services around the needs of individuals, families and communities. Often this involves co-ordinating the offer made by one school with the activities of other schools in the area, as well as multi-agency services run by the local authority.

NCSL's **community leadership** strategy has sought to bring together academic research and professional experience to highlight the need for headteachers not just to become institutional leaders but also key players in local areas. New forms of non-institutional leadership, based on constructing relationships with communities around shared objectives, are beginning to emerge.

Each of these approaches has brought benefits through recognising some of the interconnections in social systems that shape outcomes for young people. However, each might be understood as representing *modules* of system leadership, rather than a comprehensive account.

We know that system leadership recognises interconnections and focuses on the whole system, rather than on individual people, departments or institutions. We also know that system leadership aims to support the kind of relationships that help make systems high performing, sustainable and adaptable.

But *how* do system leaders achieve this? The following section tackles that question.

7. Seeing the whole picture: system leadership

System leadership starts at home. Organisations are incredibly complex in their own right and the relationships within them matter. System leaders, therefore, treat individual organisations as systems. As a group of headteachers agreed in a recent workshop, 'system leadership begins with a framework for leadership inside the school and grows out beyond' (National College for School Leadership, 2006a).

However, the approaches adopted by system leaders should be consistent, whether they are working within or between organisations. This is because system leadership is built on a core set of systems insights that remain the same whatever the scale of the system in which leaders are working.

The core set of systems concepts was discussed in Section 3.

1. The **connections** between elements of a complex system are crucial, because they produce a system that is more than the sum of its parts.
2. Interventions that attempt to break complex systems down into their component parts, without paying attention to these interconnections, are likely to have **unintended consequences** elsewhere in the system.
3. For this reason, there are **limits on the ability of leaders to prescribe and control** complex systems. Problems are often best addressed by those closest to the issue.
4. Supposed empirical solutions to problems have their limits in any case, because participants in systems see issues through **frames**.
5. Central to overcoming problems within a system is the process of disrupting these frames and supporting **learning** over time in order to build the **capacity** of the system to achieve a goal or set of goals.

The first step in system leadership, whether within or beyond a single institution, is to orientate the efforts of all those working within the system towards a core set of goals. Importantly, however, this needs to extend beyond an agreed set of outcomes, although this is helpful in itself, and involve a workable strategy for achieving them.

Multiple perspectives

Without this, the existence of multiple frames, or perspectives, can disrupt collaborative processes aimed at achieving goals such as the five outcomes in ECM.

As has been written elsewhere, 'for years teachers have understood their role through concepts such as "learning", while social services have concerned themselves with "well-being", and the police have worked to encourage and enforce "respect for the law"' (Lownsbrough & O'Leary, 2005). These frames can lead to unproductive relationships if leaders are unable to help bring them together around shared goals and strategies.

Bringing professionals together in Bexley

In Bexley, a group of professionals from different institutions, supported by the local authority, have put together MAISI – the Multi-Agency Integrated Services Initiative. At the heart of the initiative was the principle that time should be taken for professionals to work together to identify priorities for the future and a shared set of working practices to achieve them.

Those involved in the process have set many of their own outcome goals as well as agreeing protocols. Whereas, previously, Normandy Primary School had as many as 12 pupils on the at-risk register, now it has none. Referrals between services now happen far more quickly than in the past, making early intervention a much more realistic proposition.

The same challenge is true of partnerships between schools and communities. The perspectives of those within the community need to be taken on board if productive relationships, rather than short-term alliances, are going to be built and sustained.

Parental involvement in Hartlepool, Chichester and Barnsley

In Hartlepool, schools are collaborating to build leadership skills among young people and adults in deprived communities in order to spearhead community-led regeneration. In Chichester, a nursery school and children's centre are forging a community alliance to deliver multi-agency services for local families. Barnsley is pioneering new governance models for full service and extended schools, which will actively engage the community in brokering local services.

For leaders, therefore, the challenge is not so much to find all the answers, but to demonstrate to others that, because of the existence of multiple frames or perspectives on a problem, *no one is likely to hold all the answers*. As Schön and Rein argue, 'evidence that one party regards as devastating to a second party's argument, the second may dismiss as innocuous or irrelevant' (Schön & Rein, 1994).

Building a shared vision, therefore, means bringing different frames or perceptions to the surface and putting together strategies that draw on them, rather than relying on attempting to prove objectively that one approach will be more effective than another.

Autonomy

Having established a set of overall objectives for the system in which they are operating, system leaders then seek where it is possible to build the autonomy of those working in the system.

This is an important part of system leadership because it recognises that those closest to the problem are most likely to understand the consequences of potential decisions and trade-offs.

A very simple example of this is that the teacher working with a child is probably more likely to understand what is best for that child than the headteacher of the school. This is because the teacher will probably have more direct knowledge of the issues that relate to the case, such as relationships with parents or carers, peers and other service providers such as social services or the police.

This approach can have some valued spin-off benefits. Distributing leadership or responsibility can help support the professional development of those working within the system, in the long run equipping the system with more leaders. As research from NCSL has argued, system leaders often aim to build capacity in others through 'internal coaching and mentoring approaches. This is combined with a clarity or simplicity of focus' (National College for School Leadership, 2006b).

A second important benefit of giving people autonomy is that it can help build the motivation of staff. As one teacher put it, 'this school gave me the opportunity to experiment. I was a traditional teacher, I think … so it was a wonderful catalyst for me to grow and learn'. Indeed, academic studies support the idea that leaders who build autonomy are rewarded with loyalty. Research tells us that people are healthier, for example they have lower death rates, if they have more control over their work (Bosma *et al,* 1997).

Autonomy at work also encourages people to take responsibility by freeing them from a sense of domination at the hands of those above them in the hierarchy: by removing the nagging fear that, however well their day is going, it could all be disrupted by an arbitrary intervention from a senior colleague (Petit, 1997).

Building autonomy at Humberside Training and Enterprise Council

Peter Fryer, the leader of Humberside Training and Enterprise Council (TEC), has made the creation of staff autonomy the driving force behind his organisational strategy. He argues that too many organisations treat their staff like children. Organisations say, 'if you don't behave like a responsible adult then you can't work for us', but do little to *acknowledge* that their staff are adults. To address this, Humberside TEC sought to remove stabilisers, seen metaphorically as those on a child's bike. For example, the organisation entirely did away with office hours: as long as the work gets done, staff get paid. And as the organisation develops, they continue to look for other stabilisers that can be removed. Fryer argues that this approach is powerful because saying and modelling 'I trust you' places a great deal of moral responsibility on individual members of staff. The onus is on individuals to take ownership of tasks and objectives and to work responsibly.

This case study is drawn from work done by the Innovation Unit's Next Practice project.

Importantly, however, building the autonomy of individuals, departments and organisations does not mean removing all quality assurance. The systems literature often romanticises the effects of autonomy, suggesting that to lead an organisation, one needs simply to set it free. In practice, system leaders find as ultimately inescapable the idea that with rights come responsibilities. The most successful system leaders retain mechanisms by which they can hold staff to account. Indeed, the leaders most reluctant to invoke formal accountability often rely on the harshest final sanctions.

Equally, for headteachers, the idea that they need simply to set their staff free will hardly be credible. In practice, system leaders find that in order to shape the environment in which staff exercise autonomy and to protect organisational rules and values, retaining tough sanctions can be extremely important. A leading businessman, Ken Iverson, argues that people are an 'under-challenged resource' (Iverson, 1997) – autonomy and tough minimum standards alike help to unlock their energy, creativity and moral responsibility.

In this way, shared vision and a strong sense of moral purpose help system leaders orientate schools and the wider systems in which they operate towards core goals, but accountability remains. Marrying innovation with tough minimum standards is a central task for system leaders.

Connecting people in purposeful relationships

Just as personal autonomy can rely on clear rules, so too can organisational autonomy rely on a degree of openness to external influence. As Marshall McLuhan put it, 'our new environment compels commitment and participation. We have become irrevocably involved with, and responsible for, each other' (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967).

In practice, therefore, system leaders exploit networks and build organisations in which staff can seek out diverse experiences, within and beyond the organisation. This process both improves the work of the organisation and develops the talents of its staff. It draws on the systems idea that organisations thrive on feedback loops and creativity.

Purposeful relationships can therefore bring a number of important advantages. The first of these is to widen the scope of what is achievable: harnessing the skills and resources of a number of people and institutions to meet the needs of young people, rather than relying on just one. Charles Leadbeater describes a school's role in this as that of a 'solution assembler'. He writes:

> It is only possible to assemble solutions personalised to individual need if services work in partnership. An institution – for example a secondary school – should be a gateway to a range of learning offers provided not just by the school but by other local schools, companies, colleges and distance learning programmes. Institutions should be gateways to networks of public provision.
>
> **(Leadbeater, 2005a)**

Federated governance in Knowsley

Over the past five years, schools in Knowsley have made considerable progress in improving outcomes for young people in the area: over that period, the percentage getting five GCSEs at grades A*–C has doubled. This has been achieved through an approach in which all the schools collectively take responsibility for the performance of the education system in the area.

The schools in Knowsley intend to completely overhaul the local system, closing all secondary schools and, using funding from the Building Schools for the Future programme, opening eight new learning centres. Knowsley's vision for the implementation of a federated governance includes collective ownership and accountability across the borough.

This case study is drawn from a contribution by Valerie Hannon to a forthcoming Demos publication on collaboration.

Elsewhere, Leadbeater continues that it should not just be other schools that are seen as potential collaborators in efforts to improve outcomes for children, but that parents and communities should be seen in the same light.

Research by Charles Desforges has suggested that, in the early years of schooling, parents are six times more significant in their children's learning than are schools (Sacker *et al,* 2002): they too are part of the social system of learning that children grow up in and system leaders recognise this. For this reason Leadbeater argues that 'the biggest gains in terms of learning productivity will come from mobilising as yet under-utilised resources available to the education system: children, parents, families, communities'. (Leadbeater, 2005b).

Building relationships with parents in Gloucestershire

Nine primary and secondary schools in Gloucestershire agreed to be involved in running a series of workshops that were organised by Parentline Plus and designed to foster children's education and learning by raising parents' awareness, skills and confidence in communicating with their children. The courses were developed in partnership with the schools and also adapted to reflect the interests of the audience. Topics included 'Helping your child learn', 'Tackling bullying', 'Working with the school to help your child' and 'Parenting teenagers'. The sessions encouraged parents to learn through pair work, group discussion and role play, supported by trained Parentline Plus facilitators. Feedback from parents has been extremely positive. According to one, 'the course has helped me to realise there are different ways of dealing with feelings. It has helped me to see my children in a new light and to cope with tensions at home when there are arguments'.

A second major advantage of connecting individuals and institutions to one another in purposeful relationships is that it can be a very effective method of sharing learning. The ability to learn over time is an important part of systems thinking, because it is essential to systems becoming both sustainable and capable of adapting to new challenges.

Such an approach was famously adopted by General Electric (GE) (McKelvey, 2000). As part of its innovation strategy, GE systematically move people around the company. Leaders deliberately place people in positions where they are at risk of failure, encouraging people to ask for help and to learn from and with their colleagues.

This strong approach to promoting connectivity has to be supported by a culture of collaboration. At GE, an anti-hoarding principle is strictly enforced. Anyone in GE who discovers a valuable idea or practice must spread it through the rest of the company as quickly as possible or face serious consequences, including the loss of their job: here, we see the ruthless side of system leadership.

This anti-hoarding principle breaks down boundaries in the organisation and encourages connectivity through information sharing, distributing intelligence effectively. Alongside this, there is a 'not-invented-here' rule, which stipulates that an idea can be rejected only if it fails after being tried in practice for at least six months. By embedding these practices in everything it does, GE is working toward its stated aim to become a 'boundaryless' organisation.

David Hargreaves has written extensively (Hargreaves, D H, 2003; 2004a) about the advantages of peer-to-peer networks, suggesting that they hold the potential to help schools overcome the age-old problem of continually having to reinvent the wheel. By spreading the risks of innovation and sharing the learning, he suggests, innovation networks can offer a system-wide approach to school improvement.

Feedback loops

Related to the ability of systems to learn from themselves is the systems concept of a feedback loop. This describes what many good school leaders have been doing for years: collecting information and making it available to people, to help them see where and how it is possible to improve overall performance.

An obvious example of this is the effective use of data, either examination results or parental satisfaction surveys. Key to this idea is that feedback loops should empower *everyone* in the system to improve its overall performance rather than simply ensuring that leaders themselves are more informed.

One obvious route for feedback in schools is to ask learners themselves for feedback and analysis on the overall performance of the system. Jake Chapman suggests that the best person to analyse the performance of a system is not an external agency but the end user of the service. This helps explain the power of pupil voice. David Hargreaves has suggested that student voice is 'the most powerful [gateway] of all for personalising learning' (Hargreaves, D H, 2004b). Finding avenues and opportunities for pupil voice can be vital not just in making young people feel valued and empowered, but also ensuring that valuable information flows throughout the system, enabling continual improvement.

Circle time as a principle for class school council meetings at Standens Barn Primary School

The learning mentor at Standens Barn Primary School used the principles of circle time as a tool to enable students to discuss issues that concerned them and to give them a voice in the school's decision-making process. The learning mentor modelled circle time at the school council and in each class in the school. She also watched and assisted the school council representatives to each class to provide help and support if and when required.

Each class in the school was introduced to circle time, which enabled the students to discuss their issues and then to elect a class representative. The school council meets weekly for half an hour, reaffirming the circle time principles as the vehicle for how to run their meetings. They now have a chairperson who leads their discussions.

After each meeting, the class representative chairs a circle time meeting to discuss issues raised and decisions made. This is a chance for the class to raise and discuss any issue they would like raised at school council. Each class representative who chairs the meeting and facilitates the discussion in the circle ensures that the ground rules of circle time are known and understood. They also ensure that everyone listens to everyone else and respects all views even when there are disagreements. All the members of the school council know that they can seek advice, support and guidance from the learning mentor.

This case study is draw from a DfES report on pupil voice, accessible at **www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/learningmentors/downloads/studentvoices.pdf.**

A learning culture

Finally, system leaders recognise that in *human systems,* structures and processes may not always be sufficient to ensure that the system is able to continually improve and reinvent itself in order to achieve its goals. Innovation, reflection on failure and transfer of learning can all be stifled by the wrong organisational *cultures.*

Judging the success of organisations in the public sector has parallels with the business world: businesses make decisions and plan activities *expecting* that they will yield a profit, but it is only looking back, with sales and costs figures available, that it can be established whether the ventures were profitable.

Similarly, leaders in the public sector, politicians and public sector managers may devise policies and strategies that they anticipate will help achieve certain goals, but it is only through reflection after the event that success can be judged and the learning can start.

Research by Demos and the University of Sussex has shown that 'building confidence in staff was seen as vital in mobilising that commitment and in creating a desire for and an openness to change at all levels in staff and pupils alike. It involved breaking down staff defensiveness where embracing change is seen purely as an indictment of current practice. This is particularly important in a policy context where examination of practice is often about inspection and judgement rather than admiration and sharing' (Fielding *et al,* 2005).

As one teacher commented during the research:

> *You have to change the culture in order to get people to a point where they will be motivated and work together, doing it professionally rather than being defensive. And that doesn't happen overnight. It's a long thing.*

8. Conclusion

The education system faces a number of discrete challenges. They include:

- making best use of the country's current crop of headteachers
- finding the next generation of headteachers
- breaking the link between family background and educational achievement
- finding ways to integrate agendas on standards and well-being

The list goes on and could be matched by any number of initiatives in recent years that have been designed to address each of those issues and more.

System leadership is no panacea for these issues. It is more of a lens through which to view problems than a blueprint for action. But what system leadership, as a philosophy and practical approach, does offer is a more strategic approach to improving the overall performance of the education system over time.

Paradoxically, it is by keeping an eye on the bigger picture that solutions to smaller problems can be found, because the connections between parts of a system become clearer and solutions become achievable.

This is at the core of understanding systems and their capacity to achieve their goals. When system leaders achieve this, it becomes clearer how to build the capacity of a system to achieve its own goals, rather than attempting to force individuals to behave in certain ways through the limited strategy of command and control.

In this regard, systems theory holds important lessons not just for policy-makers but also for headteachers who wish to see an education system that is genuinely more than the sum of its parts.

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