National College
for School Leadership

Succeeding in senior leadership

Thinkpiece

Resource

Succeeding in senior leadership

This thinkpiece is intended to be a synopsis of the theories and ideas that will be explored in more depth throughout the module. It will act as a reference point throughout your study.

Introduction

Taking on whole-school senior leadership responsibilities and accountabilities and joining the leadership team from middle leadership are analogous to standing on a high wire – thoughts of going backwards are out of the question and moving forwards is challenging; however, achieving the far side is immensely rewarding. Understanding yourself and developing strategies that help you adapt your leadership style and competencies to a particular context can be seen as a range of balancing options for school tasks that may range from purely operational to those that are highly strategic. There is the need to move away from professional responsibilities that have been constrained by the 'silos' of subject or phase and to move towards whole-school perspectives and themes. This requires effective influencing skills, a firm grasp of underpinning concepts and knowledge from contemporary writers in education, and high-level competencies that have been practised in a low-risk environment.

Members of senior leadership teams also have to show aptitude for being specialists and generalists: specialists in their subject fields and generalists in all other fields (possessors of multiple specialisms). In schools where leaders possess these capabilities, there is a better capacity for flexibility (as a result of potential overlaps) to meet the challenges of an uncertain and unpredictable world. Senior leaders are expected to contribute to strategic discussions on topics outside their own areas of responsibility and take collective responsibility for the implementation of all decisions across the school.

In order to achieve an understanding of these multiple specialisms and of how to develop them further, there needs to be a way of understanding leaders as learners. Boyatzis's (2006) model of self-directed learning is one theory that explores adult learning (Kolb (1984) is another). His major findings are simple but profound, and stress that:

– adults learn what they want to learn

– even when people are enthusiastic about learning, the learning they retain has to come from
  an intentional desire to learn

This motivation to learn emerges when adult learners identify gaps, and leads to a number of discovery steps that emerge from a learning cycle that comprises five stages. As a senior leader you will find yourself subject to close scrutiny of your actions from teachers, associate staff, parents, governing body and a myriad of other stakeholders. In this situation, when there is the desire to be the best senior leader you can be, the following questions and stages from Boyatzis (2006) may be relevant:

1. My ideal self – who do I want to be – in the role I am appointed to?

2. My real self – who am I?

3. My learning agenda – building on my strengths while reducing the gaps. My strengths are where my
   real self and my ideal self are similar. My gaps are where my real self and my ideal self are different.

4. New behaviour leads to thoughts and feelings through experimentation. Creating and building new neural
   pathways is achieved through practising to mastery.

5. Trusting relationships help, support and encourage each step in the process.

The practical implication of these five stages for senior leaders and of a more adaptive, complex leadership response will be explored later in this thinkpiece. The starting point for improvement must be knowing yourself.

Understanding yourself as a leader

External reference points and an understanding of school leadership concepts are crucial for informed senior leadership and are explored further in Section 3. The definitions of leadership and management are many, and various writers attempt to sever the link between these two elements. For us to make progress we need to be clear about these concepts. The purpose of 'total leadership' and management in schools is to enable high-quality teaching. The key phrase here, of course, is 'total leadership': by this we mean the capacity for leadership at all levels in the school. This is explored further in Section 4.

Leadership in this context is seen as a collective capacity or potential. In other words, leadership is expressed and manifested in many different ways and perhaps the most important is the quality of leadership in the classroom and this in turn is influenced by the quality of other leaders in the school. The difference is in the scale and scope of that leadership, which defines roles within the school. Figure 1 illustrates leadership as a collective capacity, shared and interacting at all levels.

Figure 1: Leadership as a collective capacity

System leadership

School leadership

Middle leadership

Classroom leadership
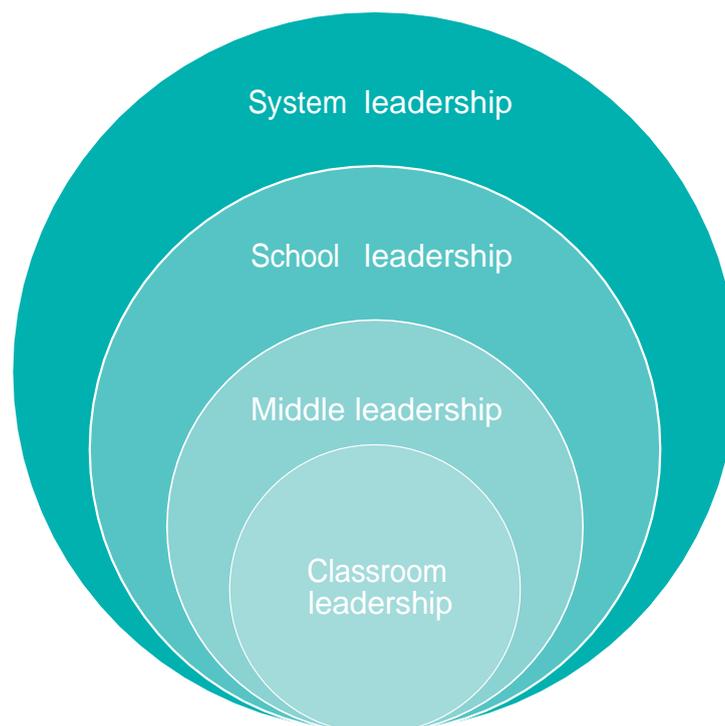
As a leader in the 21st century it is no longer possible to rely on linear models of leadership, which underpinned the command and control mentality of hierarchical and bureaucratic organisations in the past. These have to be replaced with networked, self-organising and self-managing institutions, which support the development of a rich leadership capacity at all levels within the school.

Morrison (2002:16) provides information that describes different contexts in schools, where a rich network arises from the connections that are created both internally in the school and externally to others in the local environment. A school that does not link to its local community or fails to meet local demand will perish. The school must flex and change like a living organism and constantly learn. At an organisational level McMaster (1996, cited in Morrison, 2002, p. 93) suggests that organisational learning includes the:

– ability (within the organisational structures) to receive, understand and interpret, in various ways, signals from the external environment

– ability to respond in various ways to those signals, including creating new internal structures and organisational features

– ability to influence the external environment both proactively and reactively

The diversity in our schools will continue to increase, as the national academy programme and other national initiatives, such as free schools, accelerate. There is clear evidence of McMasters's organisational learning in the development of chains and system leadership, involving clusters and networks of schools. At this level of system leadership there is the danger that leadership will feel remote at the level of classroom leader.

The key message here for senior leaders is that there may be the need to consider an 'abacus' style of leadership, that adapts to the context and the level of leadership required. This would apply from the classroom level to that of supra-chains of schools. This emphasises the requirement for school leadership teams to be proactive in creating new internal and external structures that place leadership close to those being led.

Table 1 outlines some of the features inherent in the complex organisation of schools, and which work towards this flexible collective capacity. It is important to recognise that senior leaders need to respond to their own individual contexts. There may be times when local capacity is best developed by tightly controlled and bureaucratic systems that give structure and form to teachers' efforts. The skill lies in the level of understanding of the context and the skilled selection of the appropriate response. At all times senior leaders will be working with the headteacher to respond to the national agendas that impact upon the school context in developing a flexible, responsive organisation with a deep collective capacity. Increasing autonomy for school leaders will require constant reflection on which is the most appropriate response.

Table 1: Generating collective capacity

Local capacity ← →	Collective capacity
Large	Small
Hierarchical	Flatter management
Bureaucratic	Teamwork and matrix structures
Departmentalised	Multi-team membership
Closed	Open
Specialised	Multiple abilities
Mechanistic	Organic/flexible
Technocratic/impersonal	Person–centred
Controlling	Self-organising/autonomy
Command and control management	Empowering/facilitatory management
Predictable	Unpredictable

Source: Morrison, 2002 (adapted)

In its Middle Leadership Development Programme, the National College (2009) stresses a very simple proposition that underpins educational leadership and that supports this view of the complex nature and organisation of schools. This is that leadership is concerned with:

– principle: the moral basis of the school

– purpose: the core business of the school

– people: social relationships in the school

Successful leaders are those who can balance these three Ps. Consider as a senior leader how your behaviour would change if you were clear about your purpose and principles but failed to consider the motivations and biographies of the people involved. Moreover, if you engaged with the people and purposes but had no sense of principle, would this be a case of the end justifying the means? This notion of 'walking the talk', of being congruent, so that observable actions are in line with what you say, has an important function in transmitting school culture and ethos.

Another way of understanding the complexity of school leadership is to examine the relationship between leadership and management and to define their relative contributions in the way an organisation functions. In this respect there is no hierarchy of influence between leadership, management and administration, but rather a conscious selection of the appropriate response to the appropriate context (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Potential responses to context

Leadership	Management	Opportunities
Doing the right things	Doing things right	Doing things
Path making	Path following	Path tidying
Engaging with complexity	Creating clarity	Securing consistency

Senior leaders will inhabit all nine boxes but it is in the appropriate balance of leadership activity that the art of leadership is fully expressed.

Understanding yourself as a learner

Senge et al (2004, p186) state: 'As models of leadership shift from organisational hierarchies with leaders at the top to more distributed shared networks many people will need to be deeply committed to cultivating their capacity to become a real human being.'

Possibly the best way to 'kill leadership' is to ensure leaders have little commitment or understanding of a set of values and principles that drive their behaviour. As Goffee and Jones (2006) suggest: 'Leadership must always be viewed as a relationship between the leader and the led.'

As we have mentioned earlier, leadership seems to be 'situational' and the ability to develop sensitive antennae that lock on to the particular elements that drive a context is an important skill. This openness and empathy to others in the school seem to be ranked highly in leadership attributes. Goffee and Jones (2006, p17) propose that 'authenticity' is the key and that as a leader, you need to be 'yourself – more – with skill'.

This is very comforting, but in practice it would mean that in order to become a more effective leader you must be yourself and in becoming yourself more effectively, you need to have self-knowledge and a learning model to support your personal growth. Some learning models that may help us in this respect are provided by Kolb and Boyatzis.

Kolb (1984) created his famous model out of four elements:

– concrete experience

– observation and reflection

– the formation of abstract concepts

– testing in new situations

He represented these in the famous experiential learning circle that involves (1) concrete experience, followed by (2) observation and reflection, followed by (3) forming abstract concepts, followed by (4) testing in new situations. It is a model that appears time and again and is adapted in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Kolb's learning cycle

concrete
experience

observation
and reflection

forming abstract
concepts model
building

testing in new
situations

experiential
learning

Source: Kolb, 1984 (adapted)

Each of the steps in this model are designed:

– allowing the learner to see and feel what it is like, through concrete experience

– being given an opportunity to think about their own and others' experiences

– coming up with a theory that makes sense of what they observe

– trying something out, by actively experimenting with a new approach

Kolb found that people learn most through one of the modes above, but learning often occurs and is best when two or more modes are engaged; sometimes an individual may use a single mode or a mode that does not engender effective learning. Perhaps as a leader you may have read educational theory but have not had the opportunity to experience this in practice. It is important therefore to have an idea of the gaps in your learning to inform your learning plan – Boyatzis (2006) can help us in this respect.
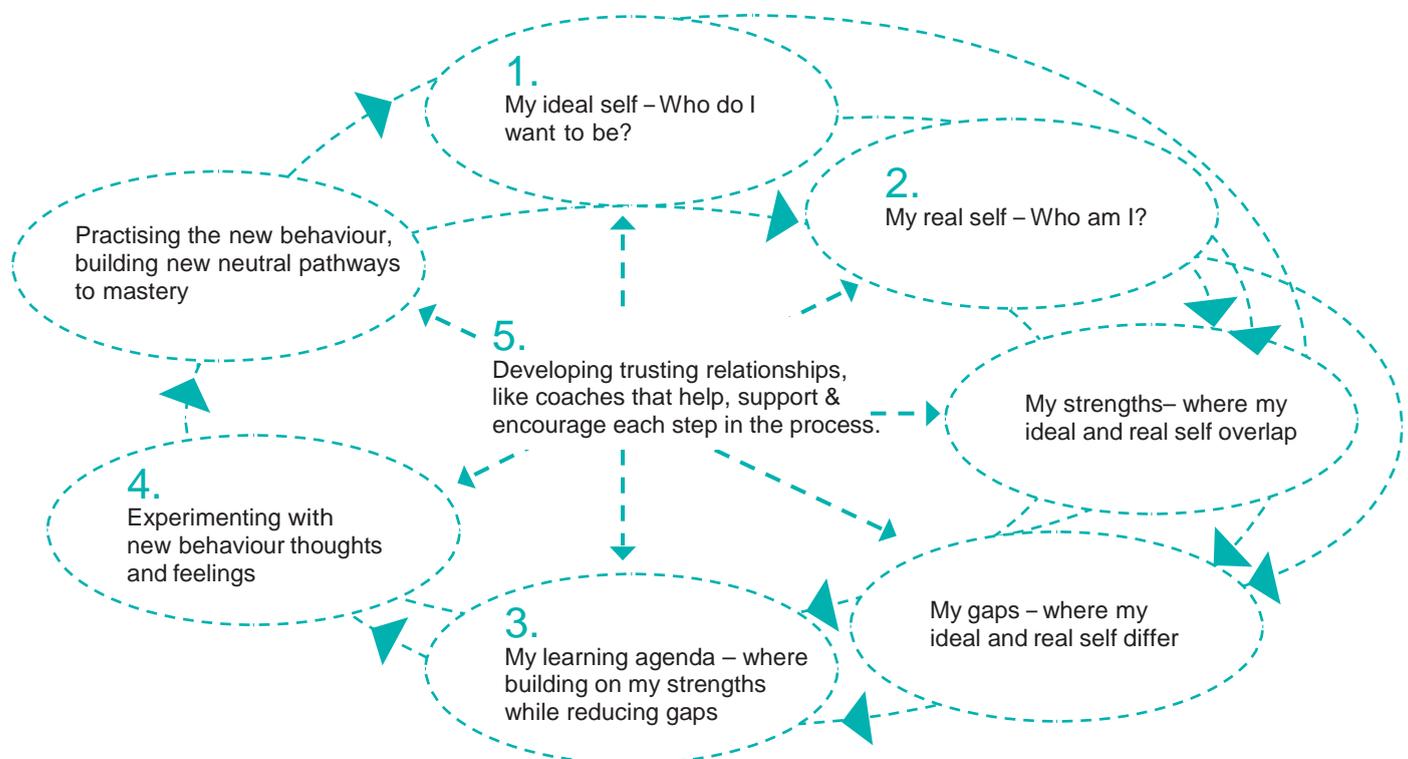
His model is based on the premise that learning is dependent on adults learning what they want to learn and their desire and intent to learn. For Boyatzis you cannot make a person want to learn – they have to want it for themselves, ie it has to be intrinsic.

He has developed a five-stage process to describe self-directed learning. Each step in his model starts from a point of 'discontinuity', which then prompts a 'discovery'. These discontinuities lead to a number of discovery stages, as follows:

1. engaging your passion and creating your dreams – discovering who you want to be – your ideal self, as a senior leader

2. knowing yourself – your real self – as a leader and identifying your strengths (those aspects of yourself you want to preserve) and your gaps or discrepancies (those aspects you want to adapt or change and how you can apply these in your context)

3. creating your own personal learning agenda and focusing on your desired future – a learning agenda helps you focus on what you want to become

4. experimenting and practising desired changes in a real-world setting

5. seeking relationships, networks and groups that enable us to learn

There are obvious similarities with Kolb, in particular the action frame that translates learning to action. Central to this model is the need for trusting relationships that help support and encourage at each step of the process. A focus on coaching is a way of creating this type of environment (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Boyatzis' Theory of Self-Directed Learning (Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 2002)

1. My ideal self – Who do I want to be?

2. My real self – Who am I?

Practising the new behaviour, building new neutral pathways to mastery

5. Developing trusting relationships, like coaches that help, support & encourage each step in the process.

My strengths– where my ideal and real self overlap

4. Experimenting with new behaviour thoughts and feelings

3. My learning agenda – where building on my strengths while reducing gaps

My gaps – where my ideal and real self differ

Developing leadership effectiveness

You grow as a leader by relating leadership development to personal development. John West-Burnham (2009) proposes three components to leadership effectiveness:

– personal growth

– professional growth

– effective learning

West-Burnham maintains that growth as a leader requires all three components to be developed and nurtured. Effective leaders are effective people. This means balancing personal development and fulfilment with professional growth. This suggest that leaders, like any balanced human beings, engage in a range of activities that enhance their personal fulfilment, wellbeing, physical and psychological health and happiness.

The implication of all this is that work–life balance is an integral part of leadership effectiveness. Measuring leadership quality is not about the volume of hours, nor is it the thickness of documents produced that is the answer to successful leadership. Rather it is the use of a range of experiences that contribute to the whole human being. The Confucian view of leadership formation rests on the idea that if you want to be a leader you have to be a real human being. Senge et al (2004, p180) develop this thought, and maintain that to be a great leader you must 'understand yourself first'.

The use of a diagnostic is very useful in this regard and allows you to receive a 360-degree perspective of yourself in your role. Usually the diagnostic has multiple competencies that would enable a leader to identify the gaps that need addressing and the strengths that can be built upon. This type of exercise is found to be useful in determining the views of your peers and others on your resilience, optimism, and personal and interpersonal effectiveness. These competencies are critical for effective leadership. It is important that you know how others, especially those you line manage, perceive you as a leader. The module offers you some further self-awareness tools you could use.

Csikszentmihalyi (2004) suggests that to be a real human being you need to operate at the optimum level – in a zone he refers to as 'flow'. Athletes will often talk about being 'in the zone'. Another example of being in the zone may be when you are teaching a really outstanding lesson, or a surgeon is performing intricate heart surgery.

The challenges to school leaders in the 21st century can be matched by our potential for growth and development, to a place where we can remain focused on the task, but happy in the process. Great school leaders are not heroic; as mentioned earlier, they are normal human beings who have developed and applied their innate abilities or qualities consistently and remorselessly, in the pursuit of their goal. Their balance on the 'high wire' is achieved through a commitment to self-learning and 'stretch' – truly in the zone.

Summary

Recent research (Jacobsen et al, 2005) suggests the most successful school leaders are those who remain open and flexible and are ready to learn from others. These leaders are persistent and ensure their responses are grounded in a set of core principles and values. These leaders espouse and live these core values and are authentic – what they say is what they do. It is critical that senior leaders develop a set of scanning skills that links them closely to an understanding of their context, and that allows them to sense the hopes, dreams and desires of those they work with and to use this information in setting and prioritising their goals.

Flintham (2002) maintains that leadership of this type requires:

> the individual leader to act as the external reservoir of hope for the institution, preserving its collective self-belief and directional focus against the pressures of events, but also to maintain and sustain an internal 'personal reservoir of hope' (the phrase is from John West-Burnham, 2002), the calm centre at the heart of the individual leader from which their values and vision flow and which continues to enable effective interpersonal engagement and sustainability of personal self-belief in the face of not only day-to-day pressures but critical incidents in the life of the school.
>
> Flintham, 2002: 2

This thinkpiece and the module content suggest that leaders need to develop a range of strategies to adapt to different contexts and find the multiple ways of remaining at the calm centre that supports leadership at the level of the leadership team. Arguably, the role of leaders cannot be considered separately from the needs of the school. In deciding what needs to be learned, to fill the gaps personally or professionally, we need to consider three forces that affect leaders and their learning in the school setting (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: The components of effective leadership (West-Burnham, 2009)
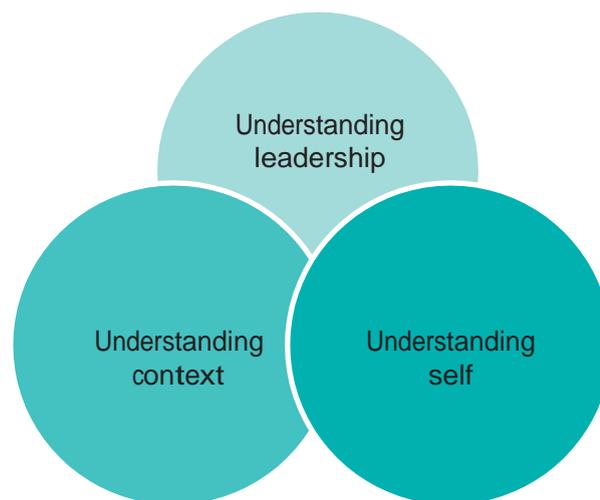
This process requires a thorough understanding of leadership theory of the gaps in our learning and practice and the consistent desire to grow and develop as a human being. The ultimate goal is to find the answers to professional questions in our personal growth.

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