Chapter 14
Leading Networks

Despite the growth of networks and collaboration both in education and in the public sector more generally, most of what we know about management derives from studies of single organisations. This is clearly problematic in the light of observed differences in the nature of networks. Leading networks requires an additional skills set, focussed on organising resources and partners, and, not least, their relationships, something which head teachers have not traditionally had to do to this extent.

14.1 The Role of the Head Teacher

The role of the head teacher or principal is a key one in networks. We have seen in many of our case studies that successful networks either originate from the initiative of one or more charismatic head teachers, or else are steered through the always difficult set-up phase by individual leaders. While, therefore, we have evidence that distributed leadership is fostered through collaboration and networking, it remains the case that strong head teacher leadership at the network level appears to be a facet of many successful networks. There is evidence both from education and from other field that leaders play a key role in the establishment of networks, McGuire and Agranoff (2007), for example, pointing to the fact that a leader or leaders usually lie at the basis on new public service networks. Within schools themselves, head teachers and other senior staff in schools who are willing and able to drive collaboration forward are key to making it work. As with other educational interventions, networking will only work if head teachers are committed and behind the idea. Head teacher support is necessary to encourage other school staff to see network activities as key, to put in train the cultural and structural changes needed for collaborative work with other schools or organisations, and, not least, to ensure that time is freed up for staff to take part in network activities (for example joint CPD with another school) and that staff are encouraged to disseminate the outcomes of any network activity in the school. Obviously, where a network proposes thoroughgoing forms of integration such as teachers teaching at multiple schools or joint appointments the role of the head in making this happen is crucial. Head teacher leadership is therefore clearly important to effective networking (Lindsay et al., 2005). At the

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individual school level, this means that the Senior Management Teams of all network schools need to support the network in order for it to be sustainable. Networks that are driven solely by staff lower down the school hierarchy, while potentially successful in the short term, are unlikely to show long-term sustainability. Networks of teachers, where there is little senior management involvement, are unlikely to result in systemic change across the school and are likely to peter out (Ainscow & West, 2005; Harris et al., 2005). In practice, according to Hadfield (2007), most successful networks are driven by a small group of activist leaders, given 'permission to lead' by colleagues. According to one report, firm directive leadership is required at the start, at least for schools facing challenging circumstances, which can later be relaxed. A more distributed approach can then be adopted once changes have been bedded in Chapman and Harris (2004). Changing leadership styles can be fraught with difficulty; however, as staff expectations may have become embedded to the extent that such changes may be met by mistrust and a reluctance to take on new leadership roles (Muijs & Harris, 2003).

14.2 Other Leadership Roles in a Network

As well as leadership by head teachers, we typically find a number of other important leadership roles in most successful networks.

A key role in the leadership of networks is played by so-called *boundary spanners*, staff members with a specific role in integrating the work of different organisations (Nylen, 2007). These boundary spanners may occupy a variety of positions in the organisational hierarchy of their 'home' organisation, and don't necessarily have to be senior. Their role tends to be particularly crucial at the start of collaboration and during problems, where their understanding of issues in the different collaborating schools can lead to them being ideal brokers. Boundary spanners therefore illustrate the importance of distributed leadership in networks, being typical of roles that are both typically distributed by heads to colleagues lower down the school hierarchy, while the role itself will develop the leader and is an important one to successful collaboration.

Another network leadership role is that of *network designer* or designers. This can be a head teacher or group of head teachers, an external broker, or a Local Authority officer, but needs to be someone with a strategic vision of how the network will function and what its goals are going to be. The key role of the network designer occurs at the start-up phase. The job of the network designer is, with goals and capacities clearly in mind, to identify appropriate network partners, make contact and bring all partners around the table to discuss forms and function of the network. The network designer needs to communicate expectations of how the network will function and what its goals are, and choose an appropriate network design. Again, this is clearly a task that will need to be undertaken in close collaboration with network partners and that will usually be more of a brokering role than a hierarchical management function (except in those cases where the network is clearly top-down) (Goldsmith & Eggert, 2004). Research has shown that most educational networks

have a de facto network designer, in that it tends to be an individual or a small group of individuals, usually at the senior management level, who take the initiative to start up a network and subsequently tend to be the key actors within the network (Muijs, 2008). However, formalising this role may in some cases be beneficial, especially where a network contains a large number of (potential) partners, as doing so will create clarity and clear structures of responsibility. In his review of leadership in Networked Learning Communities in England, Hadfield (2007) identified three key steps in the setting up of networks which were, in this case, led by head teachers. The first stage is courting, where the leading school(s) approach potential partners and develop proposals for network activity. During this phase heads contact other schools and sometimes make links with other networks. During the second 'aligning' phase, leadership buy-in is sought from schools contacted during the courting phase, through a sometimes extensive process of negotiation. Concrete network plans are drawn up. In the third, connecting and embedding phase, the network is formalised by creating links between schools and opportunities for teachers to work together.

Once the network is up and running the role of *network coordinator* becomes important. This is an aspect that is often missing in educational networks. In many cases, it is left to meetings of head teachers to do the coordination. This may work for a while, but leaves the network highly vulnerable to changes in staffing at the senior management level, to issues that may take the eye of particular school leaders off collaboration, such as being put into special measures (a category of failing school used by the English government). It can also happen that misunderstandings occur between head teachers, or that politicking and rivalry between schools and heads may weaken the work of the coordinating team. Therefore, it can be helpful to appoint a coordinator who is responsible for the network rather than individual schools. There are different models for this. In some federations, as we saw earlier, an *executive head* with responsibility for the federation as a whole rather than individual schools is appointed, which in effect puts an extra layer of overarching management above that of the schools. A joint governing body may do some of the coordination, but day-to-day coordination work cannot usually be done at this level and is not typically the role of a governing body. Many schools don't want to go as far as having a joint executive head. In that case other coordinating mechanisms are possible. In some cases a deputy head or other senior manager from one of the schools takes on this role, but the risk of a viewpoint that is too strongly associated with one particular school remains. In other cases an external coordinator takes on this role, usually the external broker of the network. This has the advantage of providing an impartial voice with regards to the individual schools, which can therefore promote greater trust. Arranging meetings requires long-term planning, and is more difficult the larger the cluster group. The network coordinator can also help to solve the problem of the time it may take for head teachers and senior leaders to travel to meetings, especially where the network serves a large geographical area, as is the case in many rural collaboratives, or where the network is not geographically based, as in some of the federations of academies. This problem can be reduced by holding fewer, longer meetings and/or by forming subgroups for specific projects, or the

network coordinator can coordinate meetings and events, and timetables between schools (Jones, 2009).

14.3 Characteristics of Successful Leadership in Networks

Leaders' interpersonal skills are another aspect of successful networking. Inevitably, networking entails the bringing together of different organisational cultures, so some measure of misalignment and misunderstanding is inevitable. In order to be able to overcome this problem, a good understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and the emotional impact of collaboration are necessary (Muijs, 2006b). Heads also need to be open and honest, in order to help develop the trust that is so important to effective networking arrangements.

However, as well as these softer elements of management, networks appear most successful where a clear management structure exists (Lindsay et al., 2005). Again, this is similar to findings from other studies on school effectiveness and school improvement, which have, for example, shown that even school improvement based on notions of distributed leadership benefits from strong and clear management structures (Muijs & Harris, 2007). In some of the federations, the creation of new management posts at the network level (such as Associate Heads and Assistant Heads for the whole federation) has been found to aid that process, though this would only be appropriate where the network is intended to show permanence rather than a more short-term focus on particular programmes or aspects of improvement. New roles, described by Fullan (2004) as 'system leadership' are emerging in networks, largely structured around key brokering roles. These include the building of group identity, trust, and the fostering of mutual knowledge.

More generally, there is evidence that networks not only require additional leadership roles and skills, but that they, by creating these, help to involve more school staff in leadership, thus promoting both distributed leadership and an increased leadership capacity in the system. Likewise, the creation of leadership roles specifically related to network leadership creates a cadre of people with experience of system leadership, and thus makes future networking easier (Hadfield, 2007; Fullan, 2004).

One of the key differences between managing networks and single organisations is the fact that networks are generally voluntary collaborations between equals, as opposed to hierarchical organisations. This is a very different situation than the norm for educational managers, used to being at the top of a hierarchical system, where, essentially, what they say goes. When managing a network, the role becomes very different, focussed on getting a community of equals (who are likely to jealously guard that sense of equality and strongly resist signs of hierarchy) to work together and coordinate activities for the common good. This is what is known by economists as the Joint Production Problem. This form of management is characterised by the lack of possible sanctions, and by often limited economic incentives (Milward & Provan, 2003). As Handy (1991) pointed out, the good thing for network managers is that they manage a programme with far greater resources in terms of staff, but the bad thing is that none of them think they work for you.

According to some theories, networks are in fact unmanageable, due to the fact that they emerge from multiple micro-interactions, and therefore are not controlled by any one actor (Ritter et al., 2003). This view of networking fits well with a 'new social movements' perspective, but does not fit well with those networks that have been more deliberately created, and where often a network leadership position has been formally created, in which cases some element of network management is present. What is clear is that in many cases some form of central administration and management is necessary for a network to be sustainable and effective over time (Milward & Provan, 2003).

Being perceived as an honest broker is key to effective network management, and to the building up of the necessary credibility as leader. This is closely linked to the importance of managing relationships. Management of relationships for individual organisations has been hypothesised as containing a number of key elements, such as cooperation, communication and involvement (Ling-Yee & Ogunmokun, 2001). Managing a range of relationships involves planning (developing a relationship strategy), organising (implementing the plan, staffing (who deals with what aspects of the relationship) and controlling (i.e. reviewing the results of the collaboration) (Ritter et al., 2003).

Consensus building has been identified as another key role within networks, and one that is part of the role of all head teachers in a network. In his study, Hadfield (2007) found that in the early stages of network development the aspect of consensus building that was central was the selection of an initial theme that could give cohesion to the work of the network as a whole. Later on consensus building emerged around the choice of specific network activities.

Continuous change and fluidity of networks is another issue managers have to be able to deal with, and this necessitates a flexible outlook and, again, strong communication skills. Communication in particular is important, as the more diffuse nature of a network can mean that not all teachers and other staff will be clear on network goals and purposes. Continuous and extensive communication to staff is therefore imperative. Likewise, parents may not be clear on the benefits of networking. In particular, where a highly effective school starts to collaborate with a school perceived as less effective there are often tensions with parents who fear that their head may lose focus on their school and pupils. Communication with parents is therefore important (Jones, 2009).

14.4 Distribution and Devolution of Leadership in Networks

An additional complication is that leaders of networks in education usually still have a dual role, that of leader of the network and that of leader of their school. This can cause problems, as effective network managers need to be aware of structures, actions, and developments in all the schools in the network, not just their own. They need to develop a management style in which it becomes equally normal for them to spend time in partner schools as in their own schools,

and develop a culture in which this is an expectation of leaders in those school as well as the network leaders' own school.

A related problem is the fact that in many cases leaders of networks are no longer able to play a strong instructional leadership role due to the additional responsibilities of leading the network. This is problematic in a number of ways. Firstly, leadership research clearly shows instructional leadership to be a strong correlate of school effectiveness (Hallinger, 2003). Secondly both effectiveness and improvement research show that what happens in the classroom is the central factor in improving pupil outcomes, and thus something that a successful network will have to attend to (Muijs & Reynolds, 2002). Finally, if the network head was, as head of her school, previously the key instructional leader within the school that role may be lost. There are two main solutions to this problem. Firstly, distributed leadership where the instructional leadership role is shared across schools and the network may alleviate the pressure on the individual leader to fulfil this role on her own. That this does happen is clear from a number of studies that have shown that the number of middle leaders increases substantially in networks, and that they are typically engaged in leading network-related activities (Hadfield, 2007). Secondly, it is often sensible to devolve some management and leadership tasks to other leaders in the organisation. One interesting development in this regard is the increasing use of School Business Managers in networks and federations of schools. School Business Managers are typically from an administrative background, but are given senior management responsibilities in areas such as finance, procurement, and buildings management. They take part in Senior Leadership Team meetings and are part of the senior management team. In England, specific qualifications and training exists aimed at developing administrative staff to take on these roles through a step approach that includes a certificate, diploma, and advanced diploma in School Business Management. Evaluations point to positive impacts of having School Business Managers trained and responsible in this way, and networks of schools benefit particularly in terms of the School Business Manager taking on roles for which school leaders may feel less well prepared (Muijs et al., 2010).

14.5 Conclusion

From the above it should be evident, firstly, that leadership is every bit as important to networks as it has been found to be for individual schools, and that many of the characteristics of effective leaders in schools carry over into effective network leadership. Factors such as distributing leadership, developing school climate, and shaping goals are all factors in effective leadership at any level. However, there are also a number of more specific skills and behaviours, or at least skills and behaviours that become more central, when leading in a network. Working in a horizontal rather vertical hierarchical context, brokering, and collaborative skills all become far more important to network leadership than they are to the leadership of individual schools. Networks also tend to lead to their own additional leadership roles, such as network coordinators.

What is clear in all this is that, while schools may be improved quite rapidly, developing networks takes time, and networks need to be given the time and stability to develop. Change should occur incrementally (Milward & Provan, 2003). This is linked to the need for leaders to build up legitimacy with partner organisations that does not necessarily exist to the same extent as in their own organisation, where it is in part a function of the position of power the manager has. Legitimacy can grow as partners get to know the manager and the network shows itself to be more than just an ephemeral phenomenon.