



A ROUNDTABLE REPORT

# DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

*ESTABLISHING DISTRIBUTED  
LEADERSHIP*

**BEN BROWN**



## **Forward**

The following material is a summary of a roundtable conversation discussing some of the challenges around the wellbeing and mental health of staff. It is not intended to be a final solution but to provide suggestions for possible actions and encourage wider debate.

Huge thanks as always to those who participated in the discussion. If you wish to participate in similar conversations, then get in touch.

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This conversation took place on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2020

## **Context**

The focus of the discussion was on establishing distributed leadership in schools.

The discussion was broad and covered many areas, most of which are covered in this document.

I have tried to organise the ideas and comments into a more coherent piece than the original transcript and hope that you enjoy reading it.

I apologise to any of those involved if I have misunderstood any of the comments, these mistakes are mine – do not hesitate to offer clarification.

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## Introduction

Being a headteacher is one of the hardest jobs now, and the ability of a single individual to lead a complex organisation such as a school as the hero of the piece has been questioned in recent years. One person cannot transform a school single-handedly.

All the heads present at the roundtable recognise this and are at different stages on their journey to put distributed leadership in place.

The heroic-individual can be a bottleneck of information and decision making and much of the discussion was around developing the staff in such a way, to remove this bottleneck.



## Definitions

Distributed leadership does, however, mean different things to different people and for some it may mean shared leadership, or democratic leadership. In this context I am defining it as the way in which “leadership is stretched over people and place.” (Spillane & Sherer, 2004). It is a web of leadership activity and relationships.

There are some arguments around the perception of distributed leadership being a gift from the headteacher, where the power is retained and distributive leadership is regarded as taking initiative as a right, rather than a gift. This is a cultural difference which stems from the head’s values and practices and depend on levels of trust.

While oversight is ultimately the responsibility of the head, the leadership roles performed by the deputies, teachers, TAs, governing bodies and students all count under the umbrella of distribution as leadership is not concentrated in the body of one heroic person.

The chart on the next page shows some of the terminologies related to distributed leadership, all of which include a common message that leadership is not the monopoly of any one person, which is at the heart of distributed leadership. The move away from the heroic leadership model, it is a way of thinking about leadership rather than a specific practice. It is not “done” by an individual “to” others and emerges from a range of sources depending upon the experience or creativity of individuals dealing with an issue.

Dispersed	Collaborative	Democratic	Shared
<p>“Dispersed” appears to suggest leadership as an activity that can be located at different points within an organisation and pre-exists delegation which is a conscious choice in the exercise of power. The idea of dispersed leadership is captured by David Green’s term „leaderful community“ which involves a community „in which people believe they have a contribution to make, can exercise their initiative and can, when relevant to the task in hand, have followers“ (Green, 2002)</p>	<p>Operates on the basis of 'alliance' or 'partnering' or 'networking.' Network learning communities are an expression of collaboration across the boundaries of individual institutions. Collaborative leadership may also apply to an 'interagency context', expressed in schools“ joint work with community agencies, parents, teacher groups, and other external stakeholders.</p>	<p>Leadership as „democratic“ is by definition antithetical to hierarchy and delegation. Elsbernd (n.d.) suggests four defining characteristics (i) a leader's interaction with, and encouragement of others to participate fully in all aspects of leadership tasks (ii) wide-spread sharing of information and power (iii) enhancing self-worth of others and (iv) energising others for tasks Democratic leadership can either take the form of consultative (where a leader makes a group decision after consulting members about their willingness) or participative decision-making (where a leader makes the decision in collaboration with the group members - often based on majority rule) (Vroom &amp; Yetton, 1973).</p>	<p>Shared leadership is best understood when leadership is explored as a social process – something that arises out of social relationships not simply what leaders do (Doyle &amp; Smith, 2001). It does not dwell in an individual’s qualities or competencies but lies „between people, within groups, in collective action, which defies attempts to single out „a leader“ (MacBeath, 2003). It is built around openness, trust, concern, respect and appreciation</p>
<p>Taken from ‘Distributed Leadership’ In Schools: What English Headteachers Say About The ‘Pull’ And ‘Push’ Factors. – George KT Oduro (2004)</p>			



## Trust

There was a lot of discussion around building trust and how important it is for developing distributed leadership. At the heart of its effectiveness are the relationships between staff, the leadership team and the head.

Trust takes time and those schools at the start of the journey are spending a lot of time working on developing this.

Schools which had progressed and were 6 or 7 years into their journey towards distributed leadership had developed high levels of trust between staff already. Initially, by leading from the front and formally distributing leadership as the relationships between the head and staff became more trusting.

New heads in place were facing issues with developing trust with staff and getting them into the

right place. They had inherited schools which had a culture of everything coming through the head, who was seen as “God”.

Frequently there was a lack of succession planning and early heads were doing a lot of things themselves because the staff weren’t empowered.

It was noticed that embedding distributed leadership requires all staff to be onboard with the vision and values of the school. This will require some persuasion and selling of the concepts being introduced. This may take time.

Staff who were still resistant and causing issues should be encouraged to find somewhere else to work where they would be happier, and where the values and vision of the school aligned with their personal values and vision.



## **Empowerment**

All of the heads around the table wanted to empower their staff, to allow them the freedom to develop themselves and other staff when taking on leadership roles, whether that was in phases, subjects or even their own classes.

There was a strong belief that they needed the opportunity to “play in the sandpit” and then inform the heads of the changes that needed to be made and to provide solutions to the issues.

Heads wanted to empower them to make appropriate changes without the heads becoming a bottleneck.

To do this, meetings should be used to coach as well as share information.

There was a desire to guide them to do their own research around their leadership responsibility and to encourage professional development, with time being given to them to do so.

There was wide recognition that expertise of the staff was key in empowering staff to lead and make decisions within those areas of expertise. Staff therefore needed to develop their expertise and take ownership of it.



## **Coaching**

Several heads identified the need to coach leaders into their roles and introducing a coaching culture in their schools was something that they had or were actively pursuing.

By coaching staff, heads are able to build leadership capacity within the organisation. There are challenges regarding experience and confidence, so coaching that is specific to leadership and also how to coach others is essential.

Leadership that is based on expertise rather than position has the potential to be transformative but can also be threatening to the existing hierarchy within schools.



## Leadership Structure

The leadership structure of several the schools had changed, with deputy heads

being replaced by assistant heads and phase leaders. In some cases, this was to increase the capacity of the school leadership team, although in others it was a response to budget constraints.

The impact appears to have been the same. Flattening the hierarchy of the school staffing structure allowed greater capacity of the distribution of leadership responsibility.

The diagram below taken from Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris and Hopkins (2006) shows the effects of leadership influence from all leaders within the organisation on student learning and achievement.

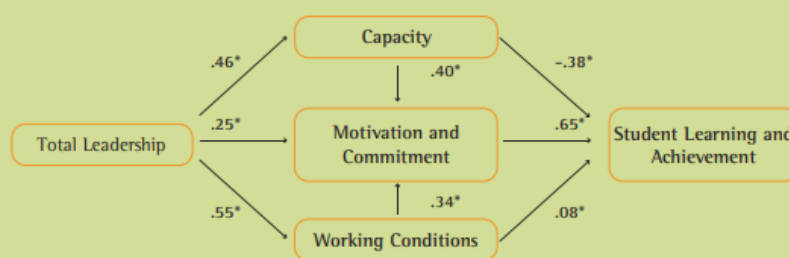


Figure 2: Total leadership effects on teachers and pupils

The following are indicated by the diagram.

There are significant relationships between total leadership and the

three dimensions of staff performance.



The strongest relationships are with teachers perceived working conditions.

The weakest relationships are with teacher motivation and commitment.

The relationship between total leadership and teachers' capacity is much stronger than the relationship between the headteacher's leadership alone and teachers' capacity (which was cited as having weak influence according to the papers that the authors had studied).

The most significant results of the study were the indirect results of total leadership on student learning and achievement, which accounted for 27 percent of the variation in student achievement across schools, which is two to three times higher than is typically reported in studies of individual headteacher effects.



## Values and Vision

The heads felt that distribution of leadership through the staff effectively depended on the staff sharing the same values as them and a clear understanding of the vision for the school. Staff couldn't just play lip-service to

this, it was essential that they buy-in.

They recognised that there was no loss of power and influence on their part when staff bought into the vision and became extensions of the power and influence of the head throughout the school.

One head commented that they were able to focus on enabling the leaders to do their job more effectively instead of micro-managing everything. They had time and the capacity to deliver on promises made, which only enhanced the team's commitment to the vision.

When values and vision were shared power and influence was not a zero-sum game, indeed it seemed to increase the more that it was shared.

There were different ways of establishing the values and vision of the school used by heads, although most of them involved discussion, either as individuals or as a group.

One head introduced non-negotiables for the children (this is distinctly different to non-negotiables for staff) – these are the things that the children must get from the school, it is what we offer them.

Constantly shouting about the offer and repeating it again and again so there is no doubt about what the values and vision are, and the responsibilities of all leaders are clear.



## **Giving Responsibility**

Giving responsibility to people for the things that they love is much more effective than just handing out responsibility because someone needs to be accountable for it.

One head noted that having subject specialist responsible for their subjects had greatly improved the quality of provision in the school. They just needed their confidence building and plenty of praise and reassurance at the start of their leadership journey.

Communication was key to allowing leaders to progress. Constant communication instead of termly performance managements is essential. Each area is reviewed every term, but the conversations were happening on a weekly, if not daily basis.



## **Barriers**

A few barriers to distributing leadership were discussed. One of these is change in leadership and the hierarchical nature of the school staffing structure.

Teachers at the upper end of the pay-scale, particularly those that have gone through the threshold are not always those best placed to be leaders, although their pay dictates that they should be. This may be because they haven't bought into the vision and values and are blocks to change rather than advocates for it.

Currently the capacity for staff to manage change and leadership roles is limited because of Covid, so some plans are on hold now.

Embedding change can also be a challenge. There is often a lot of enthusiasm at the beginning, but new leaders often don't realise how often they need to follow-up on new developments and change.

Planning when changes happen to prevent overload of staff is also important. All the changes can't happen at once.





## Final Thoughts

Leading a school should not be an act of individual heroism and building capacity for leadership in your school is essential for your survival.

Maintaining this through careful succession planning, which allows those who demonstrate effective leadership to progress as far as possible within the organisation with capacity for those coming in to replace them to be coached to lead in the same way.

Coaching and leadership have to become part of the culture of the school and this takes time.

The basis for this culture needs to be built on trust and shared values with a clearly communicated vision that everyone buys into.

The right people in the right places develops expertise and knowledge and uses it most effectively.

The National College for School Leadership shared a report on distributed leadership in action (2004) which posed a number of questions to consider, it is probably worth repeating them here as a guide to further consideration of the subject.

- 1) Where is the line drawn between "hands off",

"standing back" and laissez faire"?

- 2) In what circumstances is it appropriate?
- 3) Is there a need for clearly demarcated roles to avoid confusion or anxiety? Is fluidity of leadership too risky?
- 4) In a hierarchical role and pay structure, how valid is a teacher's claim that they are not paid to do something?
- 5) How does accountability work when leadership is distributed?
- 6) How can a school create and sustain trust?
- 7) How do heads manage the tension between honesty and integrity and external pressures such as Ofsted?
- 8) Is it possible to avoid manipulation, lack of disclosure, the noble lie?
- 9) How much does distributed leadership rely on the political skills of the head?

Some food for thought.

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## Bibliography

There are a lot of books on leadership and lots of research in distributed leadership. I have included reference to a few papers in this write-up which are listed below, plus a few more that I read but haven't referenced on this occasion.

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