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National College
for School Leadership

Schools and academies

Establishing and developing high performing leadership teams

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Resource

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Introduction

This is the final report of the University of Warwick's research on establishing and developing high performing leadership teams for the National College. This project relates to high performing leadership teams in English primary, secondary and special schools. The research addresses the factors associated with high performance in leadership teams. The research operated to a tight timetable: the literature review was completed in the Autumn term, 2009, while all the fieldwork was undertaken in the Spring term, 2010.

Heroic models of leadership based around the role of the principal have been supplemented by an emerging recognition of the value of 'distributed leadership' (Harris, 2010; Gronn, 2008). The work of effective senior leadership teams is an important manifestation of distributed leadership.

The research team's evaluations of College SLT programmes (Bush et al, 2005, 2006) show that the effectiveness of leadership teams may be compromised by differences in commitment to school objectives within teams, and that sustainability is affected adversely by changes in SLT membership.

Key issues for study

The research is underpinned by seven research questions:

- What factors are important in recruiting individuals for high performing leadership teams?
- What factors facilitate the establishment and development of high performing leadership teams?
- What factors are important in maintaining a high level of effectiveness in the performance of senior leadership teams?
- What are the characteristics, strategies, and approaches that are critical to the effective leadership of high performing teams?
- What are the potential pitfalls to be avoided?
- What are the implications of this for new headteachers?
- What are the implications of this for professional team development?

Responses to these research questions based on the findings and linked to the literature review are given in the conclusion to this report.

Literature review

The research was underpinned by a systematic review of the relevant literature on establishing and developing high performing teams. While the central focus is on sources related to English secondary schools, the review also considers research and literature from other national and organisational contexts. In this report, the literature is integrated thematically within the case study findings.

Case studies of effective senior leadership teams

The literature review provided a starting point for the design of case studies of effective senior leadership teams in nine English schools (four secondary, three primary and two special). All the sampled schools received 'outstanding' Ofsted grades overall, as well as for leadership and management, in inspections conducted in 2008-09. Insights from all the case studies are included within the report as part of a thematic approach.

The case study schools

Table 1 provides a summary of the nine case study schools:

School type	School code	Researcher	Field work
Special	School R	Robert Smith	January 2010
Special	School G	Robert Smith	January 2010
Primary	School L	Ian Abbott	February 2010
Primary	School M	Ian Abbott	February 2010
Primary	School N	Ian Abbott	February 2010
Secondary	School Y	Janet Goodall	March 2010
Secondary	School B	Janet Goodall	February 2010
Secondary	School P	Tony Bush	January 2010
Secondary	School S	Tony Bush	February 2010

Table 1: Case study schools

Brief descriptions of the nine case study schools are shown below:

School R

This is a school for pupils with complex needs and moderate learning difficulties located in north-west England. The school has both a senior leadership team (SLT) and a senior management team (SMT). The SMT has four members and focuses on operational issues. The SLT has six members and adopts a more strategic approach. There is a long service ethic, leading to continuity in staffing and in leadership. The high performance of the SMT/SLT is thought to be maintained primarily through clarity of purpose and roles. The most recent Ofsted inspection was conducted in June 2009, when the school had 136 pupils, aged 11 to 19.

School G

This is a federation of two schools in a south London borough. It has an executive head and two heads of school. The school is for pupils with severe learning difficulties, some of whom have additional disabilities. The majority of SLT members are long-serving and, although the school has been subject to significant change in recent years (becoming federated, moving to a new building), there has been consistent leadership. Headship is shared among the three heads but the executive head is highly regarded and seen as having the 'final word'. The most recent Ofsted inspection was in January 2009, when the school had 100 pupils.

School L

This is a successful primary school operating in central London. Its approach is based around giving every child the best possible chance to succeed and attempting to break the cycle of under-achievement. It forms a collaboration (sometimes referred to as a 'soft federation') with another primary school and the head of school L is also executive head of the federation. The school has a senior management team and a senior leadership team. The SMT comprises four senior staff and focuses on 'nuts and bolts' and the larger SLT addresses strategic issues. There is a strong emphasis on internal promotion. The head operates in a strategic way and provides the support to allow staff to develop within the school. The last Ofsted inspection was in January 2009, when the school had 236 pupils, aged 3 to 11.

School M

This is a small Church of England infant school, with 72 pupils. The school is high achieving and there is a strong belief in developing the whole child. Leadership responsibilities are shared among a small group of staff and the small SLT does not have regular meetings. Promotion from within is a key feature of the school, which has a long service ethic, leading to continuity in staffing and in leadership. The last Ofsted inspection was in January 2009.

School N

This is a large primary school in the north-east of England. It is a very successful school operating in an area of high social deprivation and its approach is based around giving every child the best possible chance to succeed in this context. There is a strong emphasis on internal promotion. All SLT members are internal appointments but the SLT does not meet on a regular basis. The head believes in promoting "people who have come through the school". The head recognises that "it's the management team together, that makes the school strong". The most recent Ofsted inspection was in January 2008, when the school had 389 pupils aged 4 to 11.

School P

This is a large Catholic school in the south of England. A sense of moral purpose infuses the work of the school and the SLT. It has a senior leadership team of seven – headteacher, two deputy heads, three assistant heads, and the school bursar. There is a strong emphasis on internal promotions – a 'grow your own' policy – and a long service ethic, leading to continuity in staffing and in leadership. The head came to the school as a deputy in 1990 and became headteacher in 1994. The SLT links to the faculty structure, with each of the five faculties being led by a deputy or assistant head who also oversees a year group. The SLT is perceived to have a strategic role and the school's success is maintained through clarity of purpose, long-term planning, and staff mentoring and coaching to inculcate the school's distinctive approach. The most recent Ofsted inspection was conducted in September 2008, when the school had 1678 pupils.

School S

This is a large comprehensive school in east London. It has a senior leadership team of nine – head, two deputies acting as associate heads, one acting deputy head, four assistant headteachers and the school business manager. The school has substantial continuity within its leadership team. There is a strong rhetorical emphasis on internal promotions – a 'grow your own' policy – but the three most senior SLT members, apart from the head, were all external candidates. This suggests a more pragmatic approach that balances internal and external appointments. The school's structure shows the central role of the SLT in that the three deputies oversee the three key stages, while assistant heads are responsible for oversight of a year group. The most recent Ofsted inspection was conducted in November 2008, when the school had 1000 pupils, plus 360 in the joint sixth-form with two other schools.

School B

This is a small secondary school in south-west England. It has a senior leadership team of six – headteacher, deputy head, three assistant heads and the bursar. Untypically for an ‘outstanding’ school, it was designated a National Challenge school in 2007. This is a full service school and is part of an excellence cluster; it works closely with the adjacent special school. The school was involved in the Building Schools for the Future programme and moved into a new building in 2012. It does not have a sixth-form and post-16 education is provided by local colleges. The most recent Ofsted inspection was in September 2008, when it had 672 pupils aged 11 to 16.

School Y

This is a large secondary school in north-west England. It has a large senior leadership team, comprising the head, the deputy head, four assistant heads, the business and finance manager, the head of specialism and the head of sixth-form. The school has many long-serving staff and leaders. The head has been there since she was a newly qualified teacher (NQT), as have other members of staff. However, more than half of the SLT members have been with the school for less than 10 years. The last Ofsted inspection was in October 2008, when it had 1,596 pupils aged 11 to 18.

Key findings from the literature review

1. The essence of a team is shared commitment. Without it, groups perform as individuals; with it, they become a powerful unit of collective performance (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993).
2. The increased responsibilities and accountability of school leadership are creating the need for distribution of leadership, both within schools and across schools (Pont et al, 2008).
3. New senior leadership team members need to share the school’s vision and embody it in their working practices (Day et al, 2007).
4. Effective teams are small and have a ‘clear and compelling purpose’ (Thomas, 2009).
5. High performing teams have a shared vision, mutual understanding, and co-operative working, but with a clear view of individual responsibilities.
6. Team effectiveness is adversely affected when people do not feel valued or when there are micro-political pressures, defensive behaviour or power struggles (Cranston and Ehrich, 2005).
7. Strong links between the senior leadership team and other staff are vital to promote cohesion and develop mutual respect (Wallace, 2002).
8. It is important for the SLT to present a united front to other staff (Earley and Weindling, 2004: 102).
9. High performance teams are extremely rare but teams can be strengthened by building a strong performance ethic (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993).
10. There are three essential conditions for effective leadership teams: creating a real team, providing the team with a clear and compelling purpose, and ensuring that the team consists of members who have requisite knowledge, skill, and experience (Wageman et al, 2008).
11. New heads need to begin a process of team evaluation, including reviewing the purpose, considering who the best people to achieve that purpose are, and assessing how to restructure the team to include these people.

The sections below present the main findings from the nine case studies and consider the extent to which this evidence supports the views expressed in the literature.

Overview of literature and case studies

Leadership team experience and continuity

A distinctive feature of the nine case study schools is the long service of most of their leadership team members. This phenomenon is barely mentioned in the literature, so this is a significant new finding. The implication is that effective team working takes time to develop and that 'quick fix' solutions to inadequate team work are inappropriate.

Continuity is a key aspect of leadership at all three primary schools. At school L, all the team have been appointed by the current headteacher who came to the school in 2001. The deputy head has been at the school since 2004 and the assistant head since 2002. This also applies to other staff and to the chair of governors who has held the post for 10 years.

All SLT members at schools M and N were internal appointments. The headteacher of school M has worked at the school for 11 years, while the two assistant heads joined the school 10 years and 5 years ago respectively. Other staff have also been in post for a long time, as has the chair of governors. School N's headteacher has worked at the school for 20 years, and the deputy head for 13 years. This continuity also applies to other staff and to the chair of governors.

Most members of the two special schools (G and R) are also long serving. The executive head of school G was appointed in 2005 but before that was head of the primary school. In addition to the executive head, there are two heads of school who have both been in post since 1991. The headteacher of school R was appointed in September 2001. The other senior leaders have been at the school for between 6 and 18 years. The chair of governors has been in post since the school's inception in 2001.

The main distinguishing feature of school P is that seven of the eight teacher members of the SLT were internal appointees, while the other was known to the school through her consultancy work. Their collective experience at the school is more than 100 years. The head came to this school 20 years ago as deputy head and was appointed to the headship 16 years ago. Continuity also applies to other staff and to the chair of governors who has been in post for eight years.

The first head of school S founded the school in 1992 and retired at the end of 2010, after 18 years in post. The chair of governors has held their post for 16 years, so this key relationship is very well established. The SLT members have substantial collective experience of the school, contributing to a sense of stability and continuity.

At school B, there is a mix of established leadership team members and newer appointments. Two assistant headteachers are recent additions but the other members of the SLT, except for the head, are long-standing members of staff. The business manager and the deputy head have both been in the school over 20 years.

The leadership team at school Y is also stable. The headteacher came to the school over 30 years ago as an NQT and has spent her entire career at the school. One of the assistant heads came to the school 28 years ago as a teacher and has, in her words, "held every post except head of year".

These nine case studies collectively provide powerful evidence of the value of stability and continuity within SLTs, enabling the development, articulation and implementation of a clear vision that is focused on student learning. Effective team work requires mutual trust and confidence, and takes time to develop and to take root.

Leadership team structure

Senior leadership team structures are influenced by three considerations:

- distributing leadership responsibilities
- determining the size of the team
- allocating responsibilities and activities to team members
- distributed leadership

Team structures are increasingly linked to notions of distributed leadership:

'The most successful headteachers are sharing or distributing leadership responsibilities across their leadership teams. There are more roles within these teams. These include an increasing number of non-teaching leaders, (National College for School Leadership, 2009: 31).

The nine case studies support the notion that effective teams distribute leadership among SLT members in ways which give them a strong collective overview of teaching and learning and of pastoral issues.

Leadership team size

Distributed leadership is linked to the size of leadership teams in that larger teams can handle more responsibilities. There is a trend towards larger and more diverse leadership teams, reflected in the experience of the case study schools, but the size of their teams contradicts the evidence from Thomas (2009: 2) who claims that 'effective teams are small'.

Secondary school S has nine people in its leadership team; the head, two deputies acting as associate heads, one acting deputy, four assistant heads and the bursar.

School P's leadership team has seven members while there are nine substantive members of school Y's team: the head, deputy, four assistant heads, the business and finance manager, the head of the specialism, the head of sixth-form, as well as associate members, drawn from middle leaders, who are appointed for one year. School B is smaller than the other secondary schools, with 678 pupils, and this is reflected in their senior leadership team, which comprises only six members: the head, a deputy, three assistant heads, and the business manager.

The primary and special schools are smaller and this is also reflected in their leadership teams. Primary schools M and N do not have regular meetings of their SLTs because, given the small size of the schools, whole staff meetings provide the opportunity to discuss key issues. At school N there is a daily briefing for all staff, while there is a weekly staff meeting at school M. School G's leadership team comprises six members: the executive head, two heads of school, the deputy head and two assistant heads.

Allocating responsibilities to team managers

The size of senior leadership teams provides a starting point for the allocation of responsibilities. Thomas (2009) shows how effective team structures are fostered by clearly and widely understood responsibilities.

The four secondary schools have all developed structures to integrate academic and pastoral dimensions of their work. At school P, the core of the structure is the faculty system, linked to the five year groups. The five faculty heads are all assistant or deputy heads who oversee year groups as well as groups of departments. There is also a post-16 leader and a support staff 'faculty'. Similarly, at school S, one deputy is responsible for Key Stage 3, one for Key Stage 4, and the acting deputy for Key Stage 5. The assistant heads are each responsible for oversight of a year group. All members of the SLT at school B have charge of at least one year group, which includes line management of the head of year. The position is similar at school Y, where all full members of the SLT relate to curriculum areas and also oversee a year group.

The smaller size of the primary schools is a major factor in the structure of their senior leadership teams. At school M, the two assistant heads job share and they also teach a Year 1 class. The head also has a small teaching load. Each member of the SLT at school N has a range of responsibilities which are clearly set out in school documents. However, there is also some flexibility and, according to the deputy head, “if you need to do something, you do it”.

Dual SLT/SMT arrangements

While the great majority of schools have a single leadership team, dual structures, comprising separate leadership and management teams, are preferred in some settings. Such arrangements are discussed by Day et al (2007: 37):

‘In the fourth primary school, the head had created two teams — a senior management team and a senior leadership team, each with different responsibilities. The benefit of this approach was considered to be on the way that the SMT could focus on leading on matters that were more to do with the general running of the school, freeing the SLT to focus their attention upon those matters which were more directly associated with improving teaching and learning.’

Two of the case study schools have dual SLT/SMT arrangements. At primary school L there is a senior management team, comprising the headteacher, deputy head, and assistant head that are concerned mainly with “nuts and bolts” (assistant head). The SLT also includes the office manager and other senior staff, and deals with wider strategic issues. Each SLT member has a range of responsibilities, which are clearly set out in documents.

At special school R, the four-member SMT comprises the head, the two deputies and one assistant head, who is also head of the sixth-form. This is augmented by the addition of the other assistant head and the CPD (continuous professional development) co-ordinator to form the six-member SLT, which addresses “more strategic issues” (headteacher).

Regardless of whether the formal structure has one or two teams, most schools make a clear distinction between strategic and operational issues.

Leadership team practice

Cranston and Ehrich (2005: 83) urge the development of a shared culture, values and beliefs, and effective team work processes, among members of the SMT. Based on research from 100 major firms, Katzenbach and Smith (1993) argue that teams require clear goals, effective communication, and a ‘unique social dimension’, based on complementary skills and experiences that exceed those of any individual. Coleman (2006) suggests that team effectiveness may require cultural shifts for participants and adds that bridging between those with defined roles – establishing links but allowing for individual policies to emerge – may have advantages for strategic development.

Court (2007: 34) stresses that effective leadership teams ‘scheduled time together for professional dialogue’. Significantly, most case studies devoted considerable amounts of time to team meetings. The researcher observed an SLT meeting at all nine case study schools.

As noted above, two of the three primary schools do not have regular meetings but the researcher was able to observe a meeting at each school. The overall impression at all three was of a cohesive team, committed to the child and the school, but inclined to look to the head for leadership. The heads introduced most items and demonstrated a firm grip on the issues. All members of the SLT contributed and were expected to take the lead on issues relating to their areas of responsibility. At school M, the chair of governors also played an active part in the meeting. The head of school N asked questions, kept the meeting on track and ensured there were clear outcomes from the discussion.

The SLT at school G meets weekly. The first 30 minutes of each meeting is devoted to strategic issues. At the observed meeting, issues included the system of target setting and target reviewing, and the effects on the school of a new government, leading to possible changes in national policy. The second part of the

meeting addresses day-to-day management. The researcher noted that these included the management of student behaviour, Key Stage reports, 'a child at risk' issue, applications for a new teaching post, and CPD opportunities for staff.

The SMT at school R meets every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. SLT meetings which address "more strategic issues" (headteacher) do not meet frequently. At special school R, the focus of the SMT meeting observed by the researcher was on routine school issues. The issues discussed at the SLT meeting were mainly strategic in nature and included reports on school external initiatives, the performance management process, the recording of student progress and issues regarding communication with staff, parents, students and governors.

At secondary school P, the SLT meets every Monday evening. The main focus of the meeting observed by the researcher was strategic, including school improvement issues, departmental reviews, budget planning, and investment issues (buildings and teaching and learning). The budget item, in particular, suggested a strategic approach, preparing to deal with potential problems well in advance to avoid serious consequences, such as compulsory redundancies, and to keep the focus on teaching and learning.

At school S, the SLT meets every Wednesday and, briefly, every Thursday and Friday morning. The Monday meetings are "for strategic direction and planning" (deputy head), while the morning sessions are for everyday issues and 'to touch base'. At the observed meeting, there was a mix of strategic items, such as discussion of emerging Year 9 and Year 11 results, and operational issues, such as updates about a new building. The main strategic focus was on standards.

The SLT at school B meets every morning for a briefing, and then twice weekly for longer meetings. One of these meetings concentrates on business matters, while the second is more strategic. At the observed meeting, the main focus was on strategic issues, notably aspects of the new build for the school. The discussions then moved on to cover early entry for exams, self-evaluation meetings for departments, and improvement plans for departments.

The SLT at school Y has three different kinds of meetings. On Monday mornings, there is a short meeting that precedes the general staff briefing. This meeting concentrates on diaries, ensuring that all school events are covered. On Thursday afternoons there is a general SLT meeting, which tends to concentrate on business matters. Twice a term there is a strategic meeting at a local hotel, with a meal part way through the evening. The meeting attended by the researcher focused on the Ofsted criteria for outstanding schools. After the meal, the discussion was over allocation of office space and then onto arising, less strategic matters. Decisions were taken and priorities set for the coming months.

The overall impression is that leadership team practice at these schools is purposeful, as suggested by Thomas (2009: 2):

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

Purposes, roles and responsibilities of the SLT

Wallace (2002: 174) emphasises the importance of interpersonal relationships within teams, including shared purpose and core values, and monitoring to ensure continuity and progression. Earley and Weindling (2004: 102) add that the ability to trust and support each other is important and SLT members should have the opportunity to speak their mind and to express contrary views, but still work well as a team: "sharing a common purpose, clear roles, collective decision-making, joint responsibility, and presenting a united front", were all factors mentioned with regard to successful teams. These factors are evident in most of the case study schools.

The three primary schools all have child-centred visions; “the vision is about... giving children the chance to succeed” (deputy head, school L). A clear purpose was articulated at school L, providing the basis for the operation of the SLT and the school. Clear structures were in place and, according to the head, “routine is important. Primary schools thrive on consistency. The organisation is tight”.

At school M, all members of the SLT stress the importance of working as a team: “we are all included and there is a team approach, a united front” (assistant head). There are high expectations of SLT members, who each assume a number of responsibilities. A clear purpose was articulated at school N, and this provides a basis for the operation of the SLT: “there is structure and routine with good communication. Everybody knows what they are doing” (SLT member).

Role clarity is a key feature of both special schools. The roles of the SLT at school G were variously described as “strategic leadership” (executive head); “the day-to-day running of the school” (head of school); and “the well-being of students and staff” (administrative staff). The roles of the SMT and SLT at school R are wide ranging. In relation to the SLT, participants noted mainly strategic responsibilities, such as looking at new initiatives, and links with outside agencies, while the SMT has mainly routine responsibilities such as the day-to-day running of the school, pupil welfare, including child protection, behavioural and pastoral issues, and transport. At both schools, role clarity was regarded as a key factor in the team’s high performance.

The SLTs at the four secondary schools have wide-ranging roles. The headteacher of school P says that, in a sense, “it is everything”, while a deputy at school S comments that it is “the core of everything”. The overall vision for school P has been largely unchanged during the head’s 16 years in post. The specific roles of each SLT member are spelt out in a lengthy document – ‘Leadership Team Responsibilities’.

A deputy at school S says that the SLT’s role is to support the head’s vision for the school while the head notes that SLT deployment is “about who is effective where”. She also tries to extend their experience to provide both continuity and growth. Another deputy says that her main focus is on teaching and learning and delivering good outcomes for Year 11 children, including monitoring, tracking and evaluation. The chair of governors says that the SLT’s main focus is on children’s achievement – not just academically but all-round achievement.

At school B, one of the assistant heads summed up the key purpose of the SLT as, “making it happen”; facilitating things for other people. A head of department said it was about showing the rest of the staff the route, to support and encourage the rest of the staff, and to “share the vision”. This was echoed by the headteacher, who stated that the main purpose of the SLT was “strategic leadership in learning and teaching”, and to make sure that their leadership exemplifies the values of the school.

Participants at school Y say that the main priorities are school improvement, student attainment, high quality teaching and learning, and to take a strategic overview of the school. The SLT is regarded as “the main decision-making focal point of the school” by one Head of Department. There are clear job descriptions for SLT members.

The overall assessment is that role clarity is central, and that individual responsibilities should be linked to the strategic aims of the school. This supports the findings from Hall and Wallace’s (1996) research in six secondary schools, which pointed to the need for a clear understanding of individual and group roles, and careful management of team boundaries.

The SLT appointments process

New headteachers usually inherit a senior leadership team and have to work initially with this group, although it is possible to make structural changes, for example adding new staff to the SLT, or changing the ways in which it operates. If a member of the SLT departs, due to retirement or promotion, this provides an opportunity for heads to adopt a ‘zero-based’ approach to replacement. The head may look for a new member who might provide balance for the existing team, in terms of curricular or pastoral experience, or in terms of personal characteristics such as gender and ethnicity, subject to the requirements of legislation.

Hall and Wallace (1996: 302) say that:

‘Where a head was in a position to select new members to the SMT, criteria included whether to appoint internally or externally to the school, whether to choose a man or a woman, as well as evidence of the candidates’ competence in their area of responsibility, and attitude towards, and capacity for, teamwork. As with all selection decisions, there were difficulties in agreeing the priority to be given to selecting the ‘right’ personality, or the person with the right skills.’

Day et al (2007: 111) stress that, when appointing staff, “heads ensured that new personnel would share the vision for the school and embody it in their working practices”. Wageman et al (2008: 49) urge that ‘you should select the best, most appropriate members for the team purpose you have in mind.’ These points are reflected in the approaches taken at the case study schools.

Appointments at the three primary schools are underpinned by two main criteria. First, applicants need to share the schools’ child centred values. The head of school L says that new members of the SLT “have to be driven” and share the SLT’s values about children and the school. At school M, the head says that the first consideration in making SLT appointments is that people must be good teachers who place children at the core and who “have a shared vision for the school”. The head of school N says that enthusiasm, willingness to learn, a ‘have a go’ attitude, and recognition of the importance to continue moving the school forward are key requirements.

The other distinctive feature is that almost all members of the SLT at all three schools have been internal appointments. There is a positive ‘grow your own’ policy at school L. The head of school M says that internal appointments were “the best option for the school, we knew what they had to offer”. The chair of governors also stressed the importance of continuity and succession planning that “would enable planning and preparation for change”. At school N, there is also a positive ‘grow your own’ policy. The KS2 manager comments that “the head has people she wants. They’re home grown”.

At the two special schools, personal characteristics were seen as more important than specific skills in making new SLT appointments. The executive head of school G explained that they want “someone who has a clear passion and commitment to meeting the needs of students, potential to see the bigger picture and think strategically, and skills, knowledge and expertise relevant to the post”, as well as being an excellent teacher. She added that “a strength of the team is that everyone has a clear role – that’s very important, who’s leading on what”.

The SMT team at school R is very well-established and no new appointments have been made by the present head, although two additional colleagues were appointed to form the SLT. When making new appointments, the head explained that he starts with what the role requires and then considers personal characteristics, for example, ‘really good with people’.

Five considerations underpin the appointment of SLT members at the four secondary schools. First, the heads of schools P and S say that people must be good teachers who like children and people and have a commitment to standards. Similarly, a child-centred policy is central at school B. Secondly, continuity and a ‘grow your own’ policy are significant at school P, with six of the seven SLT members being internal appointments. One deputy comments that internal candidates tend to be strong because of “the way we work”. There is a similar approach at school S, although this is balanced by recognition of the need for the ‘fresh approach’ brought by external appointees.

Thirdly, sharing the school’s vision is important at all four schools but especially at B and Y. Appointments to the SLT at school Y depend on vision, enthusiasm, and “emotional intelligence” (deputy head). Fourthly, the right personal characteristics are important factors at school S, but less significant at school Y, because they can be acquired. Finally, Catholics are preferred at school P and this is a requirement for the head and deputies, leading to a “Catholic glass ceiling” (assistant head).

It is clear that participants at the case study schools regard making new SLT appointments as very important to maintain high performance. Sharing the school’s vision and values is more important than specific skills, and internal appointments are often preferred because the head knows whether or not such applicants adhere to those values. The commitment to ‘good teaching’ is unsurprising despite the fact that SLT members usually teach significantly less than other staff.

Allocating activities to team members

There is only limited literature on the process of allocating activities to team members. As noted above, there is widespread support for the notion of clarifying roles and responsibilities but much less guidance on how tasks should be distributed. Thomas (2009) argues for allocating responsibilities according to skills and school needs but most of the case study schools seem to prefer broadening the capabilities of team members to help career development and to take people out of their 'comfort zones'.

The allocation of responsibilities in the four secondary schools is linked to the integrated structure discussed earlier. All SLT members at school P have a faculty leadership role linked to oversight of one year group. The business manager leads the support staff 'faculty', which includes more than 100 staff. The head has the main role in allocating responsibilities. Each person has a mix of administrative and developmental activities but they may be allocated activities that they know nothing about. The senior deputy head confirmed this approach, saying that the head "has an idea of what needs doing" and that he may wish to move them "outside their comfort zone". He also coaches people through any new responsibilities.

The head at school S says that responsibilities are allocated through line management structures. The SLT shares issues and ideas, aiming to pick up early signs of problems in order to 'nip them in the bud', for example in respect of behavioural issues. The two deputies are acting as associate heads as preparation for headship. The acting deputy says that tasks and activities emerge from the school's priorities which are based on the head's vision.

At school B, the allocation of responsibilities to SLT members follows three tracks. The first relates to role; for example, one of the assistant heads was appointed with a specific brief for timetabling and curriculum. The second factor is aptitude; for example, the assistant head who deals with data does so because he has a penchant for numbers. The third track is about flexibility; the head says that "we all muck in, there are no tight roles". For example, each member of SLT has pastoral care as part of the remit for the years under their aegis. The roles were widely regarded as secondary to the values they served.

At school Y, the SLT considers what roles will be allocated to members in the coming year in terms of links with departments, year groups and other activities. SLT members do not link with their own subject areas, eg the member of SLT who is a chemist does not link to science. The teacher suggested that this was done to avoid self interest.

At the three primary schools, the heads have the main role in allocating responsibilities. At school L, as in many primary schools, members of the SLT take on a wide range of responsibilities. There is a strong emphasis on team work: "we help each other and reach team decisions" (assistant head). Similarly, at school M, SLT members have to wear 'lots of hats'. For example, one assistant head has responsibility for science, RE, history, collective worship and pastoral care. The head comments that "there is an unspoken reliance on each other to do things the same way. This is the result of working together over years". Members of the SLT at school N also take on a wide range of responsibilities and staff are expected to take on new roles. For example, the deputy has recently taken over as foundation stage manager having previously worked in KS2.

Role clarity is a key feature at the two special schools and responsibilities are generally allocated in relation to these roles, although the executive head of school G comments that some other responsibilities "bubble up" along the way. One of the heads of school agreed that allocation is "by role". The other head of school said that "there are a lot of negotiations in the SLT meetings...We are aware of each other's work loads". The principal of school R also says that the specific roles of each member are related to their job descriptions. Beyond these roles, "we are flexible enough to use people's strengths" (deputy head).

Overall, there is a clear link between SLT members' defined role, as set out in their job descriptions and the specific responsibilities they fulfil. However, a degree of flexibility is evident so that all activities are carried out competently, and to allow for senior staff to have development opportunities. The head has the final say in allocating responsibilities at all the case study schools. However, the allocation of roles according to members' specific skills, as advocated by Thomas (2009), is not a significant feature of the process.

High performance

The limited literature on high performing leadership teams offers a consistent view about what is required to engender effective team work. Gu et al (2008) show that shared values, beliefs and attitudes, notably in respect of teaching and learning, have a positive impact on student attainment. Similarly, Cawelti (1999) says that 'turnaround' schools in the US have common characteristics of sharing objectives, developing strategic thinking, drawing upon complementary strengths, and with a capacity to involve and enthuse colleagues at all levels. Jenewien and Morhart (2008), discussing Americas Cup racing, say that shared vision, mutual understanding, and co-operative working, are central to effective team work.

Maintaining team effectiveness also requires collaborative practice, shared values and the availability of appropriate training and development opportunities (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993; Katzenbach, 1998; Musselwhite, 2007; Taylor, 2006). Effective and open interpersonal and organisational communications are regarded as essential for teams to establish good working practices, and to promote institutional credibility (Bowers et al, 1998).

Shared values need to be underpinned by a determination to succeed. Katzenbach and Smith (1993: 194), referring to the business sector, show the importance of leadership in maintaining momentum:

'If the sponsoring leaders do not demand, and then relentlessly support, a fearless pursuit of performance by the teams involved, the efforts to secure and maintain change will produce nothing except more cynicism, more frustration, more risk aversion, and more playing it safe.'

The nine case study schools have all been deemed 'high performing' through the Ofsted inspection process. Almost all of them exemplify the centrality of shared values and objectives, mutual understanding and co-operative working.

Shared vision, good personal relationships, and high levels of trust, are significant features of the work of the SLTs at all three primary schools. The participants were pleased, but not complacent, about the accolade from Ofsted. The head of school L commented that "it's nice, but we know we're not outstanding all the time. We go the extra mile, in everything we do". The chair of governors adds that "external recognition is nice, but it's not everything. It's important to keep raising the bar and we have to continue to deliver".

School M's headteacher commented that "outstanding is fantastic, but it's implied that you cannot go any further. Yet we're always striving to do better". The chair of governors adds that the school cannot stand still. The head of school N notes that "we are outstanding, but it's not an easy school. It's crucial that we're always working to move the school forward". The deputy head claims that "we know what we're good at and what needs to be improved".

Maintaining high performance is underpinned by warm personal relationships at all three primary schools. At school L, "people are well looked after and they are the ultimate resource" (deputy head). School M participants all stressed the value placed on staff by the head: "The head looks out for staff" (assistant head). Members of the SLT at school N stressed that staff are motivated and that the head "places trust in what staff do. We have the freedom to make decisions". This last point echoes Fischer and Boynton's (2005: 119) comment that "there should be no micromanagement or intrusive scrutiny from above".

Another important consideration at the three primary schools is the continuity inherent in having long-serving staff at these schools. The head of school L stresses the importance of "a solid base of senior staff", while the need "to maintain continuity of staffing" is central at school M.

Role clarity is regarded as central to high performance at both special schools. Most senior staff at school G accepted the 'high performing' label and the executive head said that this is partly due to "clear roles and responsibilities". Additional factors are a "passionate commitment" to the vision of the school, clear systems and structures, and trust amongst team members; "whatever is said in the room is confidential". All respondents at school R agreed that both the SMT and SLT were high-performing teams. The head said that "I go to other schools and I can see the difference". As at school G, a major factor at school R is "clarity of role for all staff...".

All SMT members have annual measurable targets” (headteacher).

However, some staff at school G rejected the outstanding label, because communication was not regarded as good enough. The acting assistant head said that “there is a weakness of communication”. The class teacher agreed that the SLT needs to focus more on communication with staff. In contrast, participants at school R attributed their success, in part, to “communication” and “regular meetings”.

At the two special schools, the strategies used to maintain high performance were varied. As implied above, all members of the SMT and SLT at school R identified role clarity as the key to maintaining high performance. The head also mentioned the need to monitor, challenge and praise people but also to “set out what needs to be done and then focus – to be very, very rigorous”. This echoes Katzenbach and Smith’s (1993) emphasis on the “fearless pursuit of performance”. The assistant head added that “communication is a big thing – we have regular meetings”.

At school G, induction of new leadership team members is regarded as important in maintaining high performance. Attendance at external courses, eg National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) and New Visions, is also used to develop their leadership skills and the team also works with the School Improvement Partner (SIP). One of the heads of school pointed to the close relationships within the team, “we encourage each other and acknowledge each other’s strengths”.

The four secondary schools were also cautious about the high performing label. The head of school P stressed that success was “hard won”. He adds that “people tell us we do very well” but “we look at what we can do better”. He thinks that the school is high performing in terms of outcomes but “it is also about process – a journey towards an unchanged vision”. This aspiration is captured through regular subject learning reviews and through strong academic and/or pastoral links. One assistant head also refers to team unity; that SLT friction is “rare”.

Maintaining high performance at school P involves being “clear about what we are trying to achieve” – providing detailed support for children to succeed, for example in Year 10 and Year 11 maths and English, having an annual cycle of planning and review, and mentoring and coaching people to help them “to reach their own solutions, to be empowered, not deskilled” (head). A combination of continuity and job rotation helps to maintain performance (assistant head). The chair of governors also refers to a pipeline of potential leaders from NQTs through heads of department to senior posts.

The head of school S says that she thinks of the school’s rating as lower than that given by Ofsted. “we are quite modest and are devoted to raising achievement”. The SLT’s attitude is that “we need to achieve more; not sitting back”. One associate head adds that “there is no complacency” and “we challenge ourselves”. The chair of governors is “delighted by the recognition” but “not complacent – there is still a lot to be done”.

Maintaining high performance at school S arises from a strong focus on standards. The head says that there is “close data analysis” to identify progress, especially in Year 11, and she has a personal involvement in some standards issues. “People take it seriously if I’m involved – they know we mean business.” One assistant head says that there is “no complacency” and “no patting ourselves on the back – we are striving to do better”.

All staff at school B agreed that the school performs well but they also stress that there is still room for improvement. Staff were also clear that high performance is a product of the values that permeate the school; ‘Every Child Really Does Matter’. The head also insisted that there is distributed leadership in the school – that members of staff were given things to do, and ‘left to get on with it’, because a school needs leaders at all levels. The criteria used to assess high performance all relate directly to students – increases in numbers of GCSEs attained and, in particular, the number of Year 11 students going on to further education.

Alignment with school values is seen as critical in maintaining high performance at school B. This was clear in terms of the appointment process. The head mentioned the appointment of one of the deputies who did not have a wealth of experience but had values which aligned to those of the school. Those values were constantly examined and used as a basis for decisions. There are also high levels of trust among members of SLT, and between the members of SLT and the school. Distributed leadership rested on the trust between members, and between the head and the rest of the SLT.

The head of school Y pointed out that the outstanding classification was even more of an achievement because the sixth form had been judged unsatisfactory a few years ago. Staff did not see the outstanding

judgement as the end of a journey; “it [the high from the judgement] lasted about 24 hours and then it was back to work” (headteacher).

Maintaining high performance at school Y arises from a culture of “constant self-evaluation” (assistant head). Another factor was the leadership style: open, approachable, and without blame. According to the head of the sixth-form, “the key is trust”. This is based on a set of beliefs and “moral purpose and values” (headteacher). The long service of many staff was attributed to the positive atmosphere within the school.

Participants at two schools (S and Y) were conscious of the likely impact of the revised Ofsted criteria for achieving ‘outstanding’ ratings. SLT members at school S noted the outstanding benchmark has moved on and it would be more difficult to achieve this now.

Overall, participants are justly proud that their schools are rated high performing but stress the need to keep striving to raise standards and not to be complacent about their achievements. This can be achieved by a variety of strategies, including role clarity, clear expectations, good personal relationships and a climate of trust, underpinned by a shared vision arising from staff and SLT continuity. Practice at these case study schools supports Katzenbach and Smith’s (1993) emphasis on the ‘fearless pursuit of performance’, but within a framework of warm personal relationships.

Internal relationships

The literature provides evidence of the value of developing good relationships between the SLT and other staff. Wallace argues the need for strong links between the SLT and other staff, ‘which win their respect’ and ‘reduce the headteacher’s isolation from staff colleagues’. He adds that team effectiveness is inhibited if the other staff refuse to accord credibility to the senior leadership team. Referring specifically to primary schools, Wallace and Huckman (1996) note that teams are effective where positive attitudes towards the leadership team have been fostered in the staff as a whole and where there is effective communication with staff.

This issue was a central theme of the research and most of the case study schools appear to have given considerable attention to developing and maintaining good links with other staff. Participants from all three primary schools report good links between the SLT and the school staff. School L’s head says that “by acknowledging when people are working hard, they will go the extra mile”. This was strongly supported by the class teacher: “the SLT are open and there’s lots of sharing... there is an open door policy to the head, deputy and assistant and one of our strengths is that it is very open”. The senior teaching assistant commented: “we’re a family and there is respect for each other... there is a team approach and it makes a difference. The head always has time to see you”.

The head of school M says that “it’s not just my vision for the school. Staff are able to come to me and have ownership. It’s a shared vision based on the individual child”. This was strongly supported by the class teacher who claimed that “we are able to talk to the SLT and head about problems and issues”. Similarly, the head of school N says that “I believe in giving opportunities to everyone”. This was strongly supported by a class teacher who claimed that “communication is very good. There are open channels of communication... the head has the support of the staff”. The researcher saw evidence of constant dialogue and support for staff and the morning briefing provided an opportunity for all staff to contribute.

A striking feature of special school R is the very happy atmosphere. There is a great deal of informal, day-to-day communication between SMT/SLT members and teaching and support staff. “They keep me informed. I think we know about everything” (class teacher). The more formal mechanisms which link the SMT/SLT and school staff are daily whole-school briefings at the start of the school day, weekly staff meetings, and a weekly ‘What’s on’ newsletter.

The situation was different at school G, where the acting assistant head and the class teacher both suggested that communications between the SLT and the staff could be improved. The school has general staff briefings on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays and a staff meeting on Wednesdays. The classroom teacher noted that “things filter down to the support staff”, suggesting that communication is not overt.

Secondary schools provide a tougher communication challenge because many more staff and stakeholders are involved. The head of school P says that there is “constant interaction”, with a philosophy of “working with” – a position of service, not of authority. There is a staff briefing every morning and SLT members attend. SLT offices are spread around the school to facilitate interaction and “our doors are open”. There are

also regular head of faculty and head of department meetings as well as training days. One deputy head adds that there is “a very high level of engagement” and that SLT members’ faculty role helps to facilitate links with departments. The newest member of the SLT believes that the other staff regard SLT members as “role models”. This view is confirmed by the classroom teacher who says that the SLT are at the “forefront” of school life, while the head of department adds that the work of the SLT is “inherent in everything we do”.

The head at school S says that relationships are based on the philosophy that “we are all part of one family. There is a common vision and mission, which brings people together”. Her office is close to the staff room, to encourage personal relationships and avoid isolation. She comments on the low staff mobility, which provides helpful stability. The acting deputy says that the SLT has a “hands on” role in relation to parents, students and staff. One of the associate heads says that the SLT works to get the best possible ethos. The assistant head states that the school’s Staff Association is chaired by an assistant head and she is also responsible for surveying staff, students and parents. The bursar has regular meetings with senior support staff.

The links between SLT members and the wider staff at school B appear to be very good, judging by comments from SLT members and other staff. All members of SLT have line management responsibilities. The business manager line manages support staff, and the other members line manage departments and heads of year. According to one of the teachers, the briefings from these line managers are very important as they are one of the main ways of communicating formal items. There were also comments that the SLT, and the headteacher in particular, were “very, very human”; that they were approachable and that there was an open door policy.

SLT members link to school Y staff in a number of ways. First, all SLT agendas and minutes are posted in the staff room. Secondly, each year group relates to a member of SLT who does the performance management for that head of year and attends the parents’ evenings for that year. SLT members also link to two curriculum areas (except for the headteacher who only links to one). They provide the line management for the heads of those departments; the director of curriculum also chairs the heads of department meetings. There are two formal meetings per term for each curriculum group. However, a head of department pointed out that contact with his member of SLT was so frequent that there was often not much left to be done at the formal meetings. Staff also stated that they felt comfortable approaching any member of SLT, particularly the headteacher. SLT members commented on an open door policy, as did other staff, and this was also observed during the visit.

Overall, almost all these schools invest considerable time and energy in developing strong and effective communications with other staff and stakeholders. Hall and Wallace (1996) showed the dangers of SLTs being seen as remote from the rest of the school and eight of the nine schools appear to have worked hard to ensure cohesion. Only the SLT at school G seems to need to improve its communication with other staff.

SLT members' motivation

There is only limited literature on the motivation of team members, so this research seems likely to fill a significant gap. Katzenbach and Smith (1993: 111) refer to the presence of 'shared commitment' in high performing teams and add that such teams have 'a unique social dimension'. Cawelti (1999), referring to 'turnaround' schools in the US, says that leaders require the 'capacity to involve and enthuse colleagues at all levels'. Musselwhite (2007) notes that team members are more engaged when they are allowed to 'create their own solutions'. Johnson (2004: 85) adds that effective teams 'feel a responsibility for morale within the school'.

The evidence from the three primary schools suggests that SLT members' motivation was underpinned primarily by concern for the children. At school L, there is a clear vision around the child, accepted by all the participants and related to the school's Church of England status. There were frequent references to the importance of the child and offering them the best possible chance to succeed. According to the assistant head, "it's about making a difference". Similarly, the head of school M says that the school has a clear purpose based around the individual child. An assistant head notes that "all are valued, with the child at the centre, and they enjoy learning and being part of the community". The other assistant head says that SLT members are motivated by the "whole child and developing their self-esteem". There is a strong commitment to the school and to the other members of the SLT, which is the result of working together over a number of years. At school N, there is a clear vision, accepted by all the participants, around improving the life chances of the children who attend the school, summed up by the class teacher: "the reason for what we do is the child". An SLT member adds that "we want to give them the best start in life".

There was clear evidence of SLT members being highly motivated at both special schools. The head of school G says that this is "one of the factors in our success. They always come good under pressure". One of the heads of school said that "we are well motivated as a team, very honest and open with each other, very supportive of each other". At school R, the high degree of motivation, enthusiasm and energy of all SMT and SLT members was very evident during the researcher's visits. According to the CPD co-ordinator, "we are all well motivated in our own roles but also as a team. We all like our roles and take a pride in the school and want it to do well. We all want the best for the students". The head said that "there is a good team ethos; we think we're good as a team". The administrator noted that, "in some ways, it is the nature of the school. People who want to work in SEN (special educational needs) are caring people and the needs of the children are a priority - more than in mainstream". The deputy added that "mostly it is self-motivation, wanting to do the right thing for the students. All the individual members are highly motivated and the team is highly motivated".

The head of secondary school P says that SLT members "share the same aspirations". The school has GCSE grade A* to C goals but they also try to get the 'supply side' right, in terms of resources and relationships. The senior deputy notes that the school "is a really exciting place to work" and adds that it is "like a family" and has "moral purpose". One assistant head says that SLT members are "motivated by the children" and insists that the school "has to be the best". Similarly, the main source of motivation at school S is children's learning. "The SLT is motivated to achieve high standards and to help the children" (associate head). The acting deputy says that all SLT members are well motivated.

The children are also the main motivating factor for SLT members at school B. While this relates partly to achievement and to raising standards (all are aware of the need to rise above the national challenge threshold), the view of outcomes is wider than just grades A to C. The head was clear that one of the things she was most proud of was the large increase in young people going on to further education.

The motivation reported by members of school Y's SLT focused around two areas. First, the desire to improve the chances for all their students; "it's about improving the chances for everyone to achieve" (deputy head). Secondly, the motivation arising from within the team itself is particularly from the headteacher; "the head will carry us with her, pursuing improvements and goals" (assistant head). "We are motivated by the fact that we can see the high degree of motivation on the part of the SLT - we agree on the goals" (head of sixth-form). The headteacher reported that "they are loyal people and I like working with them". Others pointed out that it was a good place to work, and that this was one reason why people stayed so long at the school.

Overall, it is clear that these SLT members are highly motivated and that this is a significant factor in their success. Katzenbach and Smith's (1993) statement that "shared commitment is a distinctive feature of high performing teams", is borne out by these case study schools. However, developing such commitment

requires a deliberate approach: to build the team's ethos and to connect the team with other staff and stakeholders so that everyone can work towards a shared vision.

Is the SLT united?

While much of the literature assumes a 'harmony' model, where team members work collaboratively to achieve clearly articulated objectives, the reality is that teams may also experience disagreement, leading to conflict. Cranston and Ehrich (2005: 81), for example, refer to several factors that may impair team effectiveness:

'Failure to recognise systems, such as sufficient notice of meetings and agenda; tensions between people who do not feel valued or feel that others are preferred; individual or group micro-political pressures; defensive behaviour and power struggles, are mentioned as detractors from team effectiveness.'

Daniel and Davis (2009), referring to IBM, and Johnson (2004), in regard to schools, both point to the risk of 'tensions' within teams, an issue also discussed by Fischer and Boynton (2005). Asong (2005: 3) warns of the risk of conflict being 'swept under the carpet'.

These sources all imply that unity is a signature feature of high performing teams, and most participants at all the case study schools claimed that their SLTs are harmonious. Wageman et al (2008: 129) add that integrity is a key dimension if SLTs are to have credibility with other staff. "What you say and do when you are with the team is what you say and do when you are outside the team."

There was widespread agreement that the SLTs at all three primary schools are united. The assistant head at school L claims that "the SLT talk a lot to see the best way forward. There is a lot of team work and we help each other. Decisions are made as a team and, even when there is disagreement on policy, there is a common approach and staff work together". The other staff agree that the SLT is united: "the three of them operate as a team and they feed off each other. They get along very well together" (class teacher). At school M, an assistant head argues that "there is a united front and there is a team approach". This is supported by the other assistant head: "we work in a united way. We know each other well and for a long time. We all bring different strengths and weaknesses, and we're not afraid to say things, but we're a team". There was an acceptance from all participants that the school presented a united front.

The head of school N claims that her role "is to make people confident to make decisions, to empower people and give opportunities to everyone". None of the participants disagreed with this view. There was widespread trust amongst the SLT and the KS1 manager summed up the general feeling: "we're working on maximum, but there is such a high level of trust and support from the SLT".

Similarly, the two special schools appear to be united. At school G, one of the heads of school said that "we challenge one another and therefore there is a good level of discussion before we present things to the staff. Then we have a very united front... That makes it easy for people to have confidence in us". The deputy head agreed that "if we arrive at a decision after a debate, we then present a very united front". The SMT and SLT of school R also appear to be very united. "We rub off each other, we encourage each other" (assistant head). The main reasons for this appear to be:

- each member's deep commitment to the school: "we are all proud of the school and its achievements" (headteacher)
- their commitment to the students: "we all want the best for the children" (SLT member)
- their respect for the head, "[the head] drives it very well. [The head] keeps a tight ship but everybody has a specific role and we gel as a team, as a decision-making body" (deputy head)

The position is very similar in the four secondary schools. The head of school P says that SLT members are very individual people but "they talk the same story" and he has not seen any dissent. This is confirmed by a deputy head, who says that "we may have different opinions within professional discussions but, once a decision is made, we go with it". An assistant head makes a similar point, saying that there are different opinions but, once consensus is reached, there is "no public disagreement". The other staff agree that the SLT is united. The head of department says that "there is a consistent message" while the classroom teacher

comments that there is “one message” and the support staff person says that it is “consistent”. The chair of governors echoes this view but adds that “there is some deference to the head”.

The head at school S says that there has to be “common expectations”. She believes that everyone in the school should have responsibility for achieving high standards. One associate head says that there may be “fierce discussion” in SLT meetings but there is a “single voice” when relating to staff. The other associate head makes a similar point, noting that there is “frank and open” dialogue in the SLT but then a “cabinet” approach once the decision has been made. The acting deputy says that the united front is underpinned by a common vision while the assistant head says that “unity at the top is needed for unity in the school”. The remaining staff largely endorse the view that the SLT is united. The classroom teacher says that SLT members are “not dummies”, although he can hear the head’s voice in their comments. The senior teaching assistant notes that the SLT members “really gel... the school would not be where it is today if SLT members were at loggerheads”. The chair of governors also believes that the SLT “speaks with a single voice”.

At school B, it is clear that discussion, even dissension, is acceptable “in camera”, but not outside the SLT itself. More than one respondent referred to “cabinet rules”, meaning that full and frank discussion was acceptable among the SLT, or between SLT members and the headteacher, but that a united front was to be presented to the school. The uniting factor in the SLT is the shared values, which can be summed up in the simple phrase from one respondent, “every child really does matter – and we were doing that before it became national!”

Within school Y, there was agreement from all parties, within and outside the SLT, that the team appears united to those outside the team. The team do not always agree among themselves, and there can be lively debate among the team. However, two members of SLT made the point that the disagreements were about ideas and policies, rather than about personalities.

The overarching message from the research is that the SLT, as individuals and as a group, must present a united front even where this masks tensions within the team. Most of the case studies appear to be genuinely unified, although the research team acknowledges that this may be partly presentational. However, there is unanimity that any differences that do arise should not become evident outside the SLT.

SLT leadership

Leadership of senior leadership teams provides a test for the normative shift away from solo leaders towards distributed leadership. The literature provides only limited insights on this issue. Wageman et al (2008: 129) stress the need to maintain a strategic view but also to delegate so that this can be implemented. Delegation, of course, is not the same as distributed leadership, and implies a strong role for the headteacher.

Margerison and McCann (1984) point to the essential role of being the ‘linker’ for the team – without this understanding, team members are not helped to cohere into a working group. The authors contend that leaders should be aware of the differences in personality and attitude of every member of the team. If teams are to maintain their effectiveness, the leader must appreciate the personal characteristics, and their management, so that their approaches and contributions to the team can be recognised.

The case studies all show that headteachers retain a central role in team leadership, notably in drawing up agendas, chairing meetings, and providing the school’s vision and sense of direction. As reflected in much of the literature (eg Bush, 2010; Gronn, 2010; Harris, 2010), distributed leadership depends heavily on heads’ willingness to operate in this way.

The heads of all the primary schools chair all SLT meetings, but other members of the group lead on particular items. At all schools, there was strong emphasis on the importance of a team approach by all participants. A number of participants at school L spoke about distributed leadership: “it’s distributed leadership or collegial leadership” (headteacher). According to the chair of governors, “there is a collegiate approach. People do buy into her agenda”. Similarly, the class teacher at school M commented that “it’s a team approach; we share issues with the SLT”. An assistant head stated that “we’re a strong team right down to the cleaner”. The other assistant head claimed that “the head does lead, but it’s very much a team”. At school N, several participants discussed distributed leadership.

The two special schools operated in different ways. There is a shared model at school G, with the heads of school taking turns to chair SLT meetings. The conduct of the meeting observed by the researcher was informal and discussion was very open with no clearly identifiable chair. Each item was introduced by the lead member in relation to the particular topic, which was followed by an open discussion in which all members participated on an almost equal basis. A head of school commented that “there are roles – a clear structure – but we all lead on certain things. We sometimes challenge each other and disagree or argue until agreement is reached... There is no resentment or disagreement”. However, the deputy head said that “[the exec head] is a much more powerful figure than you might think. [It is] democratic but there is a subtle hierarchical force”. This example supports Gronn’s (2010) notion of ‘hybrid’ leadership, combining solo and distributed elements.

In contrast, the head of school R chairs all SMT and SLT meetings when he is present. In his absence, one of the deputy heads takes the chair. One of the deputy heads described the SMT/SLT leadership style as “a mixture of directive and democratic. Everyone has the opportunity to bring things up and discuss things but we do have an agenda”. The assistant head said that “it’s quite a relaxed, democratic situation. We are all asked what our views are and we could take a vote if necessary. But we generally discuss things until a consensus is reached. I don’t remember ever having a vote”.

The secondary school heads chair all meetings when they are present. Minute-taking is rotated. At school P, the more experienced deputy chairs meetings in the head’s absence. The chair of governors comments that there is “distributed leadership”. An associate head of school S notes that others used to chair but the headteacher was not comfortable with this, suggesting a residual reluctance to “over distribute”. One of the associate heads takes the chair if the head is absent. The acting deputy adds that others lead on particular items, a process observed by the researcher and confirmed by the assistant head.

At school B, it is clear from observation of the SLT meeting and from interviews with staff that the head leads from the front. The head says that “the ultimate decision is mine”. However, it appears that there is a distributed form of leadership in the school. Responsibility is devolved to members of SLT, including the power to exclude (temporary exclusion), which is usually reserved for the head and deputy heads. SLT members lead on different agenda items. The head introduced each item, handed the discussion over to the appropriate member of SLT (or staff), and then summed up at the end of the discussion. The head also controlled the flow of the meeting, keeping it from going off task and bringing conversations to a close when they were no longer fruitful. Staff also made two general points about the leadership of the SLT. The first was that the headteacher provided clear leadership and took the ultimate decisions when necessary; this was generally couched in a phrase such as “that’s the job of the head, after all”. The second point was that, once SLT members had earned the trust of the head, they were expected to “get on with it”, to fulfil whatever duties they were given without interference from the headteacher.

SLT members at school Y were seen as leaders throughout the school. “They will do things to make things happen” (head of department), and they are seen to be taking a lead on whole school issues. One middle leader described them as “a group of hard working, intelligent people who will listen and take on board ideas” (head of department). Leadership was seen as distributed throughout the school – there are very strong middle leaders (head of sixth-form) and middle leaders felt able to take on tasks and make decisions without “checking every little detail” (classroom teacher), reporting only that decisions had been taken and why.

The case study evidence shows that the heads retain a powerful role despite the rhetoric of distribution. This supports Gronn’s (2010) concept of “hybrid” leadership. The next section examines the specific role of the headteacher.

The role of the head in team leadership

It is apparent from the literature and the case studies that the head retains a decisive role in school leadership. Given the accountability frameworks within which schools operate, this is inevitable and it is the head’s judgement about the extent and nature of distributed leadership that is usually the decisive factor. The discussion below shows how the case study heads operate.

The head of school L says that “consistency, openness and temperament are important factors in leadership. I have to be the facilitator and creator of a united team. They have to have the similar drive

and determination". She added that people are the priority but the head has to be prepared to take tough decisions: "people need to know you care and that people are valued. You've got to be yourself. There has to be an iron fist underneath a velvet glove, you have to have inner determination". There was strong support for the head and the approach she has fostered in terms of involving all staff and encouraging them to take individual responsibility. The class teacher commented that "there is an open door policy to the head, deputy and assistant. One of the strengths is it is very open. The head is very important to the school. She will always take the time to see you" (senior teaching assistant).

The head of school M says that her role "is to give support to others and to help them improve. I believe in teamwork". There was strong support for the approach she has fostered in terms of involving all staff and being prepared to fulfil a variety of roles. According to the class teacher, "the head makes it her business to know what's going on and the trust in the school is enormous".

At school N, the head says that her role "is to give opportunities to everyone", with a strong belief that it would lead to high standards. "It's risky, but you've got to try and trust people. As a result, the management team can make the school strong. People bring different skills and we can work through others". The head argues that her style "is to make people confident to make decisions. It's to empower people. There is totally distributed leadership at all levels in the school". The deputy head says that "there is delegated leadership" while another SLT comments that "we're allowed to go with good ideas". The chairs of governors stressed the head's role "in building a team and a structure within the school". The head's role is best summed up by the comment from a member of the SLT: "The head knows where she wants to move the school to. The head provides the vision".

Special school G has an executive head, who describes the leadership of the team as being "led by a triumvirate – the three heads", while she regards her own role as providing an "overview". The chair of governors believes that it is "collaborative leadership, a joint strategy, a discussion, a democratic decision making process".

The head of school R is highly committed to the school as exemplified by his presence in the school every Saturday and most Sundays. The head chairs all the SMT/SLT meetings when available and provides a very strong lead. "He's the leader –*definitely*– but he allows others to have their say... he knows what he wants from colleagues and makes their role very clear" (assistant head). The class teacher says that the head "mirrors what he wants us to do". All the SMT/SLT members were complimentary about the head and his leadership of the teams.

The head of secondary school P says that he "can see the whole picture", for example, looking at post-16 participation rates after 2013, making budgetary plans, and assessing changes in the locality. The senior deputy notes that the head wrote a "vision" for the school when he became head, "which has stayed the same since". She adds that he "gets the best out of people" and "makes it look easy". Other SLT members are also complimentary about the head. Another deputy says that he is "inspirational" while an assistant head comments that he has "extraordinary vision" and adds that "we trust his judgement". The other assistant head states that "he commands respect" while the third assistant head notes that he provides the vision and the long-term plan. The other staff all make similar points, commenting that the head is "inspirational" (head of department) and "authentic, passionate and consistent" (classroom teacher).

The head of school S says that she knows that is happening in every aspect of the school. She pulls together that knowledge and makes sure that the team responds. For example, in respect of behaviour, she "intuitively feels what is happening". The other SLT members focus on the head's "passion" and "vision". One associate head refers to her passion and commitment to the school, while the other associate head says that she is "driven and has a passion for the school, the children, and the community... she does not accept failure". The acting deputy says that the head provides the long-term strategy and the vision, while the assistant head comments that she is "a very good listener" and "an absolute figure-head". The bursar adds that there is "no doubt" that she is "in charge". The head of department and the senior teaching assistant both also stress the head's listening skills. The chair of governors notes that she has "kept the SLT in good shape" and "brought the school to a high standard".

At school B, the word 'values' recurred. The main value from the headteacher was summed up by another SLT member as "every child really does matter". Others expressed the same value in different ways – to allow every child to achieve to the best of their ability; to improve the life chances of these children. A number of staff see the school as a stabilising force in the lives of their young people, and this value is attributed first

and foremost to the headteacher and from her to the rest of the school. It is clear that the head leads ‘from the top’ but this manages to be forceful without being overbearing. There is no doubt who is in charge but staff report complete support for her.

Respondents at school Y also made the point that the head was very supportive; that mistakes were handled in a positive way. She is “not the kind of person who takes a dictatorial approach” (head of sixth-form). A teacher pointed out that she had felt able to begin and progress initiatives, because she was trusted. The head herself held that she was a “terrier”, and would not let things go, but also that she was aware that her role was more of an overview. The chair of governors made the same point, that the SLT (and head) were an “umbrella” over the school and that, because it all worked well, they did not have to be involved in minutiae but rather were free to take a strategic view.

These vignettes suggest a strong focus on solo and charismatic leadership in most case study schools. The heads are highly regarded and have evidently contributed strongly to the schools’ ‘outstanding’ ratings. There are elements of ‘distribution’ in these schools but this is within the gift of the head rather than being institutionalised.

Succession planning

Given the central role of the head discussed above, succession planning is seen as important, particularly in those schools where a date for the head’s retirement has been announced, is anticipated or has just recently happened. The reactions of colleagues range from anxiety to equanimity as the case study reports demonstrate.

Within the three primary schools, there was little concern about the prospect of the head’s departure. The chair of governors at school L claimed that “the systems are embedded and strong. There are lots of good quality staff and people ready to step up”. During the previous academic year, the head had been leading another school for part of the week and the deputy assumed overall responsibility. According to the assistant head, “the systems were in place... the test was when [the head] wasn’t here and the systems were in place and worked”.

Similarly, the chair of governors at school M claimed “that continuity was the key and that it was important to have succession planning in place”. The head commented that “it wouldn’t fall down if I left. We’re in a circle and have developed a sharing and caring ethos”. The appointment of two assistant heads has provided opportunities for future succession planning to take place. Equally, school N’s chair of governors claimed that “the head has built a team and built a structure within the school”. The deputy head stated that “we could run without her, the systems and individuals are in place. There is consistency in the staff and in the team”. During the previous academic year, the head had been leading another school and the deputy assumed overall responsibility, so there is satisfactory experience of managing without the head.

There are three heads at special school G and this was seen as a clear advantage in terms of succession in the event of one or more heads being temporarily unavailable. One head of school stated that “if one of us would leave, the impetus would remain the same – it’s a strength of shared leadership. It can only be like that if we are singing from the same hymn sheet”. The chair of governors said that “this school *is* run by the SLT” (i.e. as a team). The executive head agreed. “With the leadership style of a new head, there would be changes but a new head would inherit a very strong team. The dynamic would change but the team is flexible enough to accommodate change”.

The head of school R is highly respected by all of the SMT/SLT members and all said that, if he left, he would be sorely missed. “He would be a hard act to replace. In the short term it would just carry on but in the longer term you would need somebody in overall charge. The systems are very well embedded, and I would hope that a new head would be very sympathetic to a high performing school, and not want to change too much” (assistant head). The chair of governors thinks that “it would be self-sustaining... Because of the strength of the team, I don’t think it would be a problem”. The head said that “it can operate without me. I’m out of school for a lot of the time anyway working with the [local authority]”.

There is considerable apprehension at the prospect of the head’s departure from secondary school P. An assistant head comments that “we are very reliant on him and need to develop our independence”, while another assistant head fears that “it would be a difficult transitional period”. The chair of governors says that

the head's departure would be "a point of significant risk". The head says that he plans to retire at 60, and people would know well in advance and be able to "smooth the transition". He adds that he "needs to make sure that people can do the job that I am doing". He also wants to make sure that internal people could step into the role.

The school's 'grow your own' strategy will be tested when the head departs and there is a strong body of opinion that an internal appointment should be made. One assistant head believes that it is "essential" that they appoint an internal person who knows the school while a deputy head would prefer an internal person "to maintain the ethos". The deputy head thinks that one SLT member might apply but she believes that the way in which they work is so "ingrained" that it would continue with an external candidate. The head of department hopes that an existing SLT member "would step up" while the classroom teacher notes that one SLT member "could do it". The chair of governors who will oversee the transition says that a new head would bring a different model but hopes that there would not be major changes because "it works" and is "built around the collective". If there is an external appointee all participants hope that there will not be major changes. The assistant head says that the new person should look at what works and not make change for its own sake. The deputy head mentions that the existing SLT members would introduce the new head to "the [school name] way" but they would also be excited about what the new head could bring.

The first head of school S founded the school in 1992 and retired at the end of 2010, after 18 years in post. She prepared for it by making the two deputies associate heads. She felt that this arrangement provided continuity but suggested that an external candidate could offer freshness. She added "change still occurs with internal candidates because the external environment changes" and "there will be turbulent times ahead".

Initially, there was widespread anxiety amongst the staff. A classroom teacher says that the first head was difficult to replace and he feels comfortable with the interim arrangement. "If we are outstanding, why do we need new ideas - what will the new person do that the present team does not do?" The acting deputy points out that the first head's very long service meant that the school was "very much her thing". He believes that they are currently operating with a "safe pair of hands" but perhaps the school needs a "fresh pair of eyes" in the future. The bursar says that this arrangement has provided "some safety" because of the associate heads "institutional memory" but also acknowledges that an external person would bring new ideas. The long-serving chair of governors will lead the replacement process. He says that "I thought it would be difficult" to replace the first head as her approach was "the only way we knew", but this interim arrangement has given us time to build a "desired profile" of skills and attainment that will drive the school forward.

Although it is accepted that the headteacher of school B will retire a short time after the school moves into the new build (2012), there was little expression of overt succession planning. However, the job share for the deputy headteacher was reported to have been seen by Ofsted as a form of succession planning. The headteacher is also aware of the potential of a number of younger staff to go far in their careers, and the associate member of SLT has that role to give her whole school experience. When a team member takes over a new role they shadow the person who current holds that role for a period of time, up to a year, thus learning the role without having the responsibility yet.

The SLT at school Y operates an associate member's scheme. These are middle leaders who join SLT for a year. This addresses a two-fold need: first to broaden the scope and membership of SLT, secondly to offer whole school experience to middle leaders as part of their professional development. In terms of succession planning for senior roles on the SLT, the deputy feels that he would be ready to apply for the head's post, should she leave, but does not expect that to happen soon, or to be handed the post without a transparent process of advertising and interviews. Other members of staff, though acknowledging the gap which would be left by a long serving, outstanding head, are sanguine about an eventual change of leadership, providing any new appointment was first, the "right person" and, second, willing to fit in with the ethos of the school.

The departure of a successful head at a high performing school is bound to lead to speculation and uncertainty. These case studies collectively show the great importance of the headteacher role, even within a framework of team leadership. While participants at most schools are not anticipating an early change, it is evident from their responses that this is a major issue for all stakeholders. Most people believe that the systems and culture in place are robust enough to accommodate an external appointment, except those at schools P and S who are more anxious and would prefer an internal candidate.

Team building and professional development

Whilst there is a raft of literature on professional development for leadership, there is comparatively little on the development of teams. The capacity for team development is fundamental to the National Standards for School Leadership. While explicit for headteachers, the requirements are implicit for all involved in school leadership because they are leaders of teams in increasingly complex organisations, as outlined by National College for School Leadership (2009). Ritchie and Woods (2007: 378) offer a school framework within which distributed leadership can underpin all team activity. Their prescription includes the use of role modelling (especially by headteachers) and coaching; structures to foster leadership learning; support for teachers taking on 'acting' roles; early internal promotion; shadowing subject leaders; and use of performance management interviews to discuss teachers' leadership.

The provision by the National College is becoming increasingly diverse. For example, Working Together for Success (WTFs) was offered to senior leadership teams in schools. Leadership teams were encouraged to develop new ways of working, with a consultant to act as confidante, expert and facilitator. Its main content was the battery of techniques introduced to participants and designed to bring about changes to team practice. Participants were encouraged to evaluate their school's involvement in the programme through a 'what works well' and 'even better if' approach (Bush, et al, 2005).

The case studies show that some SLTs had engaged in formal learning, such as WTFs, but most had chosen to focus on internal development activities.

Team building at the three primary schools had many similar features. Participants mostly reinforced the significance of working together over a number of years and knowing one another well. Promoting from within supported this ethos and staff were encouraged to take on new responsibilities. At all three schools, social activities outside school were also identified as a positive means of team building. At school L, the morning briefing provided a good opportunity for team building. The SLT also had 'away days' where strategic issues could be reviewed and discussed in detail. There was a strong emphasis on coaching and mentoring in the school. Individual professional development was also strongly supported. Good communication and an 'open door' policy facilitated trust.

At school M, the importance of networking was also identified. There were a number of opportunities for the SLT to participate in training and meetings involving a cluster of small schools. Job sharing also provided further opportunities for the assistant heads to share good practice and information. The head also identified the governing body as a significant resource in providing support and an outside perspective. The approach was similar at school N.

SLT members at both special schools do not engage in explicit team building activities or formal professional development related to team performance. At school G, one head of school said that "we don't do any of that. With our relationship, there is no need". However, there are opportunities for informal team building activities at social events. However, SLT members do engage in individual professional development. All four heads, including the head of the federated primary school, go to the Heads' Conference together and all the deputies go to the Deputies' Conference. SLT members are also committed to their personal professional development: "We (the heads) have all done the NPQH and New Visions" (head of school). One of the deputy heads at school R said that "we have time together in meetings - we meet often" and this means that formal team development is not required.

Secondary school P participants reinforced the earlier emphasis on mentoring and coaching for all staff, including senior leaders, and on the value of 'away days' for team building and strategic thinking. SLT members also work in pairs, for example in designing workshops or conducting learning reviews, and may also visit other schools. The head also stresses the value of informal professional development activities, for example at SLT meetings, where members are "encouraged to ask questions" (headteacher). The school also has its own training facility.

The SLT of school S took WTFs but their collective responses mainly relate to the benefits of the bi-annual away weekends, where they work hard but also socialise together. One of these weekends focuses on the School Development Plan. The head also stresses the value of the regular weekly meetings for team building. The male associate head stresses that the school tries to grow its own leaders through recognised leadership programmes. The assistant head stresses that staff are encouraged to identify their CPD needs through performance management targets.

There were no reports of recent team building exercises or experience at school B. Staff reported that professional development opportunities are available to individuals but there has been no overt development of the SLT as a team. There was a residential for some members of the SLT and other staff, when the school took on a new teaching and learning programme, but that was focused on that programme, rather than on the SLT. The headteacher says that SLT members got onto SLT “by having those skills in the first place”, by which she meant skills in communication, working with others and leadership.

Most SLT members at school Y did not remember taking part in any formal team building exercises. However, they reported that the work they did and the way they went about it forged the bonds between them, particularly the meetings off-site, which included time for strategic thinking and some socialising over a meal. What builds and cements the high performance of the team is the trust that others will work to the best of their ability, as well as the shared ethos of the school. SLT members have the same opportunities for professional development as other members of staff, opportunities which were reported as being generous. If the activity could be linked to the school, department improvement targets or personal development targets, the request for development was likely to be granted.

Answering the research questions

What factors are important in recruiting individuals for high performing leadership teams?

The nine case studies collectively identify five major factors in appointing senior leadership team members. These are:

1. sharing the school's vision
2. commitment to the school
3. a good teaching record
4. caring for the children
5. continuity of service to the school

1. Sharing the school's vision

Day et al (2007) argue that recruiting compatible colleagues is important as new personnel are expected to share the vision for the school and embody it in their working practices. This approach has been adopted by many of the case study schools. Linked to this is the need to be aware of the 'bigger picture' and to think strategically. Shared vision and values are regarded as more important than specific skills.

2. Commitment to the school

Commitment to the school is a central requirement at many of the case study schools. This is linked to 'passion' for teaching and leadership and for transforming the lives of children and students, especially in disadvantaged communities.

3 A good teaching record

As these are leadership positions, it might seem surprising that a good teaching record is stressed at most of the case study schools. This is partly because senior leaders often have a significant teaching load and effective classroom practice helps to establish their credibility with colleagues. It is also linked to the schools' determination to maintain, or enhance, academic standards.

4. Caring for the children

Particularly, but not exclusively, in the three primary schools, caring for the children is seen as a priority. This links to the preference for a good teaching record and can be regarded as a 'standard' requirement for all appointments.

5. Continuity of service to the school

One of the unexpected findings from the research is the widespread view that continuity - a record of service to the school - is an important factor in appointing new SLT members. This inevitably leads to a propensity for these schools to favour promotion from within; a 'grow your own' approach. Heads and governing bodies are aware of the need to balance internal promotions with external appointments but, in practice, continuity is often seen as more important than a fresh approach. However, the need for a transparent process is stressed, leading to the appointment of the 'best' candidate.

What factors facilitate the establishment and development of high performing leadership teams?

There is no straightforward 'recipe' for developing high performance and five different factors emerge from the case study evidence:

1. shared values and a common purpose
2. role clarity
3. developing a long-term approach
4. continuity of service
5. professional development

1. Shared values and a common purpose

Cranston and Ehrich (2005) urge the importance of clearly defining the roles and objectives of the SLT; developing a shared culture, values and beliefs; and developing effective communication with other staff. Uniting behind a common purpose or goal is a key factor in high performance at the three primary schools while clarity about values and ethos is seen as important at some schools.

2. Role clarity

This was seen as particularly important at the two special schools but was also a factor elsewhere. Clarity enables team members to carry out their responsibilities with a sense of certainty about their roles and the confidence to enact them without close scrutiny from the head. This links to the high levels of trust underpinning the success of several schools.

3. Developing a long-term approach

There is often understandable pressure on heads to 'turn round' underperforming schools quickly but the message from the case studies is that sustainable improvement takes time. A firm foundation is required to underpin strategic development and 'quick fixes' are unlikely to succeed.

4. Continuity of service

We noted earlier that continuity is an important consideration in recruiting new senior leadership team members. It is also regarded as significant in establishing high performing teams. This links to the long-term strategic perspective essential to sustainable development, for example in the three primary schools.

5. Professional development

Individual and team development are also seen as vital to establishing high performance. Most of the schools eschew formal development programmes but seek informal opportunities to develop team members. For example, extended team meetings and social events provide the scope to underpin school values. Coaching and mentoring are also used by heads to guide colleagues taking on new responsibilities.

What factors are important in maintaining a high level of effectiveness in the performance of senior leadership teams?

The literature suggests that team work based upon shared values, open communication, and the availability of appropriate development opportunities, are key dimensions in maintaining high levels of effectiveness. Much less attention is given to continuity within the leadership team but this was the main factor to emerge from the case study schools.

Continuity

As noted above, long-serving senior leaders are seen as critical in maintaining team effectiveness. All members of the three primary school SLTs were internal appointments while this is also a major factor at some of the other case schools.

Shared values

The shared vision at these high performing schools is underpinned by common values. These values, in turn, influence leadership practice and enable the mutual trust that allows senior leaders to carry out their responsibilities without close scrutiny.

Open communication

Open communication is a feature of most of the schools, with regular team meetings, widely distributed leadership team minutes and informal contacts at all levels. These schools also acknowledge the need to maintain good links with other staff, to avoid a 'them and us' mentality. The only exception to this norm was at one of the special schools where some staff complained about weak communication between the SLT and other staff.

Development opportunities

As noted above, the case study schools focus strongly on developing leadership team members through team meetings, informal occasions, and coaching for new responsibilities.

What are the characteristics, strategies, and approaches which are critical to the effective leadership of high performing teams? What are the potential pitfalls to be avoided?

Characteristics

Landrum et al (2000) say that no school can manage without an effective leadership team and a strong commitment to distributed leadership. National College for School Leadership (2009: 13) also stresses the importance of succession planning so that middle leaders are encouraged to develop senior leadership aspirations.

Most of the case study schools have an exemplary approach to developing and maintaining high performance. It begins with the heads' vision and clarity of purpose, supported by the shared values which underpin the strategic approach of these SLTs. The vision is maintained by a de facto policy of internal appointments for staff that are seen to endorse and embody the school's values. However, the risk of such a strategy is that the school might not benefit from fresh ideas.

Clarity of roles is also regarded as an essential factor in high performance, notably at the two special schools. A strong focus on standards is important at many schools. Most leadership teams also spend a lot of time together, with regular meetings and social events. High performance is also maintained by a lack of complacency at all the schools.

Pitfalls

According to Cranston and Ehrich (2005), and Johnson (2004), the main pitfall to be avoided is that of division and micro-politics within teams. The potential for these should not be underestimated. Indeed, it is noteworthy that some individuals in the schools which participated in this study [all of which had been assessed as 'outstanding' by Ofsted], reported similar concerns, for instance in terms of inflexible job descriptions, feelings of isolation, concerns over transparency, experiences of micromanagement and a perceived lack of trust.

Hall and Wallace (1996) point to the risk of SLTs being inward-looking and not communicating adequately with other staff. This appears to be a problem at one of the case study schools, where weak communication with school staff was cited as a pitfall by the non-SLT members.

What are the implications of this for new headteachers?

Newly appointed headteachers are faced with assessing the context within which they are to work, establishing relationships with senior staff, in particular, and developing strategies to maximise the potential for school improvement. Day et al (2007) suggest that, in the initial phase, new heads prioritise restructuring the senior leadership team and reviewing its roles and responsibilities.

The case study evidence points in a different direction, focused mainly around whether the new head is an internal or external appointment. Internal appointments imply continuity, similarity of approach and building on the achievements of the previous head. Particularly where the school is seen to be successful, external candidates should also be wary of making precipitous change. New heads should spend time assessing the school and undertaking situational analysis. Changes should be introduced cautiously, building on previous approaches and, in consultation with existing staff and the governing body, to ensure widespread support.

What are the implications of this for professional development for teams?

The literature offers two different perspectives on team development. First, there is an emphasis on developing individual team members. Lewis and Murphy (2008: 10), for example, say that the leader should work with staff in personalised ways, 'addressing their particular issues and needs, and tailoring staff development in very individual terms'. Secondly, there is a view that the main focus should be on *team* development. Musselwhite (2007: 2) argues for a three-part strategy:

1. Promote understanding of the team's shared goals and what each member brings to the team.
2. Ensure that the team has adequate knowledge to complete its tasks.
3. Facilitate effective interaction, to ensure good problem-solving, decision-making and co-ordination.

The lesson from the case study schools is that team development has to be fostered and supported. Their heads invest time and resources in a carefully planned programme of development, including away days, social events, opportunities to mix with staff from a wide range of schools, and training programmes for SLT members and other staff. Members of these SLTs have been supported in their professional development and given opportunities to take responsibility at an early stage of their careers. In several schools, mentoring and coaching are used by the heads to develop their leadership team members. Development has been a long-term process, not a 'quick fix', and this serves to emphasise that sustained success requires a strong foundation.

In less successful circumstances, professional development will need to be directed at strategies to raise performance and to 'turn round' the school's fortunes. Greater use of external stimuli, including National College programmes, may be helpful in improving average or dysfunctional teams.

Conclusion

Distributed leadership is strongly advocated in the literature (eg Harris, 2010) and there is emerging evidence that a distributed approach leads to enhanced student outcomes (Leithwood et al, 2006). Senior leadership teams can be regarded as a vehicle for the implementation of distributed leadership. The nine case studies provide fascinating insights into the operation of SLTs in high performing schools. While distributed leadership was often mentioned by case study participants, most of these schools appear to offer a more nuanced approach, mixing solo and team leadership in a manner consistent with Gronn's (2008, 2010) 'hybrid' model.

Recruiting SLT members

The literature (eg Day et al, 2007) stresses the importance of compatibility and the need for the new appointee to share the school's vision. This links to the emphasis on values and the 'right outlook' at two of the secondary schools. The primary and special schools, and secondary school P also stress the need for continuity, linked to a record of service to the school. Most of the case study schools have many long-serving leaders who embody the school's values; caring for the children and achieving high standards. At school P there is also a strong moral dimension. The emphasis on continuity leads to a preference for internal appointments at some schools, when a suitable candidate is available, although there is also recognition of the merits of the 'fresh thinking', which external candidates could offer.

High performance

Cranston and Ehrich (2005) stress three aspects of high performance. First, there is a need for clearly defined roles, a point particularly evident in the two special schools. Secondly, shared values are seen as essential, a factor endorsed at school B. Thirdly, effective communication with other staff is required, a theme mentioned at several case study schools. Continuity is emphasised at all three primary schools, at both special schools, and at one of the secondary schools. The head of school P refers to the long-term nature of progress, noting that it took six years for the school to become highly effective. Coaching and mentoring appear to have played an important role in developing leaders. High levels of trust are seen as vital at two secondary schools (B and Y) while SLT oversight of academic progress and pastoral care is central to the success of school S.

Maintaining high performance requires many of the factors identified above but there is also a commitment to ongoing improvement and not resting on their success or becoming complacent about their Ofsted ratings. Two of the schools, in particular, are very conscious of the likely impact of the tougher new criteria for outstanding.

Avoiding pitfalls

Unity is a key dimension of effective teams and the main problem to be avoided is that of division or micro-politics (Cranston and Ehrich, 2005; Johnson, 2004). There is little evidence of such division at these high performing schools, although this was mentioned as a potential problem in the school Y case report. The major perceived pitfall at two of the secondary schools is the retirement of the head but participants appear sanguine about this at the primary schools. Weak communication between SLT members and other staff was perceived as an issue in one of the special schools, echoing the earlier research of Hall and Wallace (1996).

Implications for new heads

Day et al's (2007) research suggested a three-phase approach for new heads but the case study evidence does not support this, perhaps because their heads have all been in post for a significant time. The lessons from this research are that new heads should spend time assessing the school and the SLT rather than making precipitous changes. Where changes are envisaged they should be discussed with staff and the governing body to maximise support.

Professional development

The literature suggests a bi-polar approach to development; working with individual team members and also focusing on team development (Lewis and Murphy, 2008). The case study schools largely eschew formal team development, preferring to enhance team performance through a range of internal strategies including 'away days', social events, mentoring and coaching. Much of this is targeted at inducting new SLT members to work in ways consistent with the school and SLT culture. However, greater use of external programmes is likely to be desirable for average or dysfunctional teams.

Overview

These nine schools are all high performing and it is not possible to generalise from their experience to provide a 'blueprint' for all SLTs. School leaders wishing to emulate their success need to reflect on the key findings. These are that a clear vision needs to be articulated and that time should be invested in obtaining wide support for this vision. Achieving a successful school and leadership team takes time, commitment and continuity. Developing leaders requires a deliberate approach designed to build individual capability and team unity. SLT involvement with other staff and with all aspects of the school is necessary if they are to be seen as credible by other staff and stakeholders.

Recommendations for new heads

The nine case study schools are very different but they share the 'high performing' classification. Drawing on their collective experience, the research team offers six specific recommendations for new heads. In doing so, we acknowledge that the approach is likely to differ depending on whether the appointee is an internal or external candidate.

Encourage continuity

The heads and senior staff of the case study schools all value continuity and actively encourage long service. It is clear that this is a significant reason for their success. New heads are advised to nurture continuity but also to find a judicious balance between long-serving leaders (to underpin school values and 'memory'), and new appointees (to encourage fresh ideas).

Regular leadership team meetings

Most of the case study schools have regular and frequent meetings. This is done to ensure a consistent strategic overview but also to facilitate team building. New heads are encouraged to establish or maintain a regular pattern of SLT meetings so that collective leadership of the school is nurtured and its values are elaborated and sustained.

Nurture SLT unity

Participants at the case study schools were adamant that SLT unity is central to the schools' success. While internal debate and disagreement were accepted, all SLT members were expected to follow 'Cabinet' rules in displaying a unified approach to other staff. New heads should nurture SLT unity and develop a 'single voice' culture for SLT members. This aim will be easier to achieve if the head also aims to motivate SLT members by involving and enthusing them.

Provide sound links between the SLT and other staff

The literature warns of the risk of SLTs being seen as remote and unresponsive by other staff. The case study schools avoided this problem by encouraging active engagement between SLT members and other colleagues. This has an informal dimension, for example through 'open door' approaches, but is also built into the structure in many cases, notably through giving SLT members oversight of subjects and pupil welfare. New heads are advised to ensure that there are strong structural links between SLT members and other staff.

Develop a strategic approach to high performance

The case study schools are all deemed 'outstanding' by Ofsted but it is clear that achieving high performance is a long-term process not a 'quick fix'. New heads should develop clear but achievable targets and motivate SLT members and other staff to work towards them. They should also discourage complacency and nurture a culture of continual improvement.

Balance solo and distributed leadership

Despite the contemporary focus on distributed leadership, heads retain a central role, not least because of the accountability framework within which schools operate. The growth in the size of SLTs testifies to the demanding, and increasing, leadership and management load in most schools. It is no longer possible for heads to lead all aspects of their schools. Distributing leadership is essential not only to ensure that all

leadership activities are handled competently but also so that the collective talents and experience of all SLT members are deployed to best effect. Heads need to find an appropriate balance between solo and distributed leadership.

Recommendations for additional research

- The nine case studies collectively provide powerful evidence about how successful leadership teams are developed and sustained. However, they do not provide a reliable guide to practice in average or low performing schools. It would be valuable to conduct a similar study with such schools in order to facilitate comparisons between high performing and less successful schools.
- The nine case study schools all have long-serving heads. There would be merit in conducting a follow-up study of successful schools which have relatively new heads. This would provide a focus on the initial actions of heads in establishing and sustaining their teams, and in working towards high performance.

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Further reading

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