Building leadership capacity – helping leaders learn

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This paper argues that our current thinking about leadership development is too heavily focused on the career of the individual and ignores the potential that exists in every organisation. Morally and practically, the emphasis on the leader is inappropriate and needs to be replaced by recognition of leadership as a collective capacity that is reflected in structures, processes and relationships.

Leadership and hierarchy

Much of the current writing about leadership reinforces long-standing historical and cultural perspectives leaders are individuals who wield power and authority. Much of the discussion about leadership centres on the role of the individual in charge of the organisation. We talk of the boss who is usually identifiable through the trappings of power and status. Our culture celebrates the individual as leader and we defer to the hero-leader the person endowed with superior qualities. We talk of the born leader and hope that they emerge in times of crisis. Our history is often presented as a succession of heroic individuals who singlehandedly changed the course of history the term charisma is still used without irony in many circles.

Organisational life reflects this approach most organisations are structured as hierarchies with one person at the top and everybody else in descending levels of authority and responsibility. We construct elaborate structures with clearly delineated levels. Many aspire to move up this hierarchy, each level offering greater opportunities to exercise control, greater personal rewards and improved social status. Careers are defined in terms of vertical mobility in fact, our social understanding of leadership seems to confirm and be confirmed by the laws of nature. Every social animal appears to live in a hierarchy; social groups have a leader – that is the way of the world.

Of course, the reality is much more complex and the manifestation of power is far more subtle. However, it is true that many educational organisations are dominated by a relatively few individuals who exercise disproportionately significant levels of influence and power, and on whom the rest of the organisation depend for approval, permission and advancement. This can have the effect of creating dependency, minimising individual potential and creating a permission-seeking culture.

Towards a collective approach

There is an increasingly important debate around the idea of moving from the view of leaders as the product of individual characteristics to seeing leadership as collective, shared potential in the organisation. There is a number of reasons for questioning our historical and cultural dependence on leaders as dominant individuals:

- It is an inappropriate model for a professionally staffed organisation.
- Organisations that are focused on the learning of children should have structures that reflect learning relationships.
- The job is far too challenging for any one individual.
- The increasing difficulty in recruiting people to school leadership positions.
- The challenges facing educational organisations require the optimum levels of leadership if they are to respond to the demands of a rapidly changing world.
- There is a need to develop a systemic approach to building leadership capacity.
Many organisations outside education have recognised this with real attempts to distribute and share leadership across the organisation. Layers of middle management have been removed, there is a greater emphasis on the importance of team-based working and leadership development is a generic entitlement rather than an exclusive induction process. It is worth remembering that in many education systems in the world, school leadership is seen as a democratic process rather than the creation of an elite. Schools and other educational organisations in England have been rather slower to consider radical change. Only in recent years has there been a systematic approach to preparing teachers for extended, or new, responsibilities. The emphasis was on post-facto training, now there is an increasing recognition of the need to develop leadership potential in anticipation of career development. While individuals undoubtedly have rights to advance their careers, there is a fundamental tension between the creation of a structure that facilitates the career of the individual and the most appropriate design of an organisation focused on learning.

From leaders to leadership

Moving from a focus on leaders to a focus on leadership can be seen to have four main components:
- building trust
- redesigning jobs
- changing organisational structures
- creating a learning culture

These changes assume a shared understanding of the nature and purpose of leadership. It might be argued that those aspects of any educator’s work that are not directly concerned with children and young people (teaching, caring etc) can be classified as leadership, management or administration. This approach has led to the artificial reification of roles, the creation of elites and the commensurate marginalisation of core functions. In fact, it is much more appropriate to see leadership and management as components of every role in a school, the effective classroom needs leadership as much as any aspect of the school’s work.

Leadership, management and administration

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Administration</th>
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<tr>
<td>doing the right things</td>
<td>doing things right</td>
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<td>path making</td>
<td>path following</td>
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<td>complexity</td>
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In this model, leadership is a distinctive activity that is concerned with principle how we should be, purpose what we should do and people how we work together. These factors apply as much in the classroom as the whole school. The engagement with principle, purpose and people has to be found in depth it is impossible for one person to ensure that they are all being addressed by all people all of the time.
Building trust

Trust is the social glue of organisational life. Organisations that the high on trust tend to out-perform those that are not. Trust is the basis of personal and organisational effectiveness. Developing personal potential, securing commitment and engagement, and maximising learning are all products of trust.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Immature</th>
<th>Mature</th>
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<tr>
<td>Personal power</td>
<td>Shared authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hierarchy</td>
<td>Teams</td>
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<td>Low trust</td>
<td>High trust</td>
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*Figure 1: Leadership, organisational design and culture*

Dependency

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<tr>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Delegation</th>
<th>Empowerment</th>
<th>Subsidiarity</th>
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This diagram shows the stages in moving from the immature organisation based on control to the fully mature one based on subsidiarity; the movement away from control is characterised by a growth in trust.

Control is exemplified when one person is responsible for all decision-making, when power and authority are exercised without consultation, when individuals carry out orders. There are circumstances when this is appropriate in an emergency or crisis but over time it usually serves to create dependency, passivity and alienation.

Delegation is how most organisations work individual are given limited amounts of authority and responsibility within highly defined levels of tasks and outcomes.

Empowerment means that high levels of authority are devolved what has to be done is usually defined but how it is done is left to those who have the responsibility. This implies control over resources, methods and decision-making.

Subsidiarity means that power is fully distributed across the organisation. Just as in a federal state (like Germany or Australia), a wide range of powers are discharged at local level without reference to the centre.

The organisational implications of the movement from control to subsidiarity can be represented in the following diagrams.
The crucial shift in this movement is an increase in the amount of trust that is available in the organisation. With control, there is virtually no trust, no choices, few opportunities for autonomous action and the need to seek permission for most activities. The move through delegation and empowerment to subsidiarity sees a growth in trust and, thereby, a growth in the leadership capacity of the organisation as more people have opportunity to lead.

Redesigning jobs

The move from control has to be demonstrated through a significant rethinking of how jobs are designed and defined. The principle is very simple: jobs are defined in terms of leadership responsibilities rather than tasks. I once had a job description for a senior role in a school that was a list of 45 tasks. This was on the borderlines of control and delegation. It might have been more appropriate to identify my leadership responsibilities for securing a range of negotiated outcomes.

The crucial movement from administration (no choice) to management (some choices) to leadership (making choices) is a direct reflection of the level of trust and this has to be clearly set out in any job definition. This in turn serves as a basis for:

- recruitment to the job (identifying the appropriate level of skills, knowledge and personal qualities)
- identifying outcomes for which the post-holder is responsible so enabling performance management and accountability
- strategies to support professional development and learning
Changing organisational structures

A key principle of good design is that form follows function. An organisation that is focused on learning and shared leadership clearly needs a different structure to one that is based on control. The classic hierarchy, with its levels of authority and responsibility often limited with line management and the chain of command, is probably the least appropriate structure for an educational organisation. If the function is learning and the shared leadership then the form needs to something more flexible, diffuse and federal. This probably means a team-based structure with a coalition of teams each having responsibility for a specific function or project.

Such teams are often referred to as structural or protean respectively; the latter are created and disbanded according to need. Thus, a school might have structural teams to focus on leadership, learning and organisational matters, and protean teams to manage projects such as improvement planning, innovations etc. Teams are overwhelmingly the most appropriate model in this context if they display the following characteristics:

- a shared sense of purpose
- clear values
- agreed protocols for working
- an emphasis on building effective working relationships
- leadership which is rotated according to need, not status
- a clear focus on learning through group processes

Teams are probably one of the most powerful ways of developing leadership potential and capacity. They can be seen as nurseries where there are abundant opportunities to develop and learn the artistry of leadership in a secure and supportive environment. The authentic team is both a powerful vehicle for effective leadership and one of the most effective and fertile contexts for learning.

Creating a learning culture

Leadership cannot be taught; it has to be learnt. The most powerful means of developing leadership is to create an organisational culture, which values the sorts of learning most likely to enhance the capacity of individuals to lead.

In identifying such learning, it is firstly necessary to identify the most appropriate mode of learning. Three modes of learning can be identified: shallow, deep and profound.

- Shallow learning is concerned with the acquisition of information. It is largely demonstrated through memorisation and replication, and it can result in compliance and dependency.
- Deep learning, by contrast, is focused on the creation of knowledge through the development of understanding. This means that the knowledge can be applied on the learners own terms.
- Profound learning describes the situation where knowledge is converted into wisdom and where understanding becomes intuition.

My ability to work with ICT is based on shallow learning. I can use a computer but do not understand what I am doing when things go wrong I have to get help. Shallow learning provides important foundations to build deep and profound learning. Going on a course or reading a book will usually provide only the information needed to start the learning process. Deep and profound learning require two specific learning strategies to really make an impact.
Firstly, there has to be the opportunity to reflect to review one’s own practice, to review working with others and to explore how theory and practice interact. Time and space to reflect is an essential component of leadership learning. One of the most significant characteristics of the effective team is the way that it builds in time for individual and shared reflection. Reflection is the means by which we make sense of the world it allows us to clarify, analyse, prioritise and, crucially, to understand. Reflection is the bridge between theory and practice; it is how experience is understood and converted into knowledge. It is the crucial process in moving from shallow to deep learning. Reflection is central to any conceptualisation of the learning process for the individual, the team or the organisation.

The second component is coaching, which is probably the most powerful learning strategy for developing leadership potential. Coaching is the essential learning relationship and, at its best, has the following characteristics:

- shared commitment to learning and growth
- excellent interpersonal relationships
- clear and shared standards of performance
- regular feedback and review of practice
- the identification of developmental strategies
- balance of challenge and support
- a long-term strategy.

The characteristics of effective coaching have much in common with the leadership of an effective team.

**Conclusion**

In a somewhat bizarre reversal of what was argued at the beginning of this article, it might well take an individual leader to initiate the process that develops shared leadership potential. This is an inevitable feature of the transition process it has to be started by someone who is willing to preside over the diminution of his or her own power. The benefit of this is that it will almost certainly improve the quality of that leader’s life and produce a more fundamental and lasting commitment to organisational effectiveness.

It would be wrong to underestimate the complexity of moving from a focus on leaders to shared leadership it has to be viewed as a learning process. Such a process involves the deliberate and systematic creation of opportunities to lead, to reflect on that experience and to consolidate that learning through extended practice. The final issue to be raised is that, once leadership has been developed in all the adults in a school, it might then be appropriate to include young people in the development of leadership capacity and potential.

**Questions for discussion**

1. What are the key arguments for building leadership capacity across the school?
2. What evidence would demonstrate that a school has developed leadership in depth?
3. What are the practical implications of building leadership capacity for a school’s structures and processes?
4. What are the barriers to the development of the model advocated in this paper? How might they be overcome?