

Becoming a professional learning community

Propositions

- Leaders aiming to create learning communities will be committed to developing sustained professional relationships, with high levels of trust, high levels of mutual self-awareness, and a shared and negotiated set of purposes.
- Such leaders will therefore be committed to trying to understand themselves and their impact on others, and to lead by example – that is as a lead learner.
- If explicit attention is given to individual and group needs, to emotional as well as cognitive dimensions, and the group's learning is seen to be part of the real work of the school, the work of leading a learning community itself develops leadership capacity.

Issues

- Many school leaders recognise their responsibility for the development of colleagues. However, they feel a sense of uncertainty about how to create the conditions in which a wide range of adults can work collaboratively to promote both their own learning and the learning of pupils.
- Professional learning communities sometimes do not become established because leadership teams do not make it explicit that they, too, are learning.
- Learning communities offer the prospect of significant professional development for individuals and groups, but they also represent a way of responding to new learning requirements and the changing nature of schooling itself.
- A learning group needs facilitation, rather than 'chairing' or leading in a hierarchical sense.

Effective approaches

There are a number of national leadership development programmes that provide opportunities to engage in both reflection and collaborative work (see Suggested further reading). Nonetheless, much of the real leadership learning takes place in the course of work.

Studies of leaders of learning communities in the NCSL Networked Learning Communities Programme have revealed some approaches which work by generating enthusiasm and energy whilst increasing the discipline and rigour of the learning. These increase the impact in school and develop the widespread leadership that is needed to enable the learning community to grow:

- Create a community which benefits from diversity and multiple **perspectives**, which includes more experienced and less experienced colleagues, and people from different positions in the school's hierarchy, colleagues who teach and those who have other roles in the school.
- **Start with a group of enthusiasts** no matter how experienced or inexperienced in enquiry.
- **Be open** in early discussion about how the group can develop a culture of openness, trust and challenge. Create a working environment where people feel not only that it is acceptable, but that it is also desirable, to take risks in order to learn from them; that is, a no-blame culture.

- **Lead by example (1)** – Make sure you have your own enquiry focus. Use your own mistakes as professional challenges or learning opportunities for yourself and the group.
- **Lead by example (2)** – Become a member of a learning community of leaders from other schools who are engaged in similar work.
- **Focus on improvement and development** – Make sure your learning community is focused on learning about issues that are important to the improvement and development of teaching, learning and achievement in your school.
- **Set ground rules** to ensure the group stays focused on learning; on listening to and questioning others; on allowing all members an equal part and on reflection based on evidence rather than anecdote.
- **Spread facilitation** – Involve others in facilitating the group as soon as you see that they are gaining in confidence. Use coaching strategies to support them as they embark on the new responsibilities.
- **Use the knowledge of group members** as well as external theory and research. Engage the group in discussions that challenge their thinking, support their reflective skills and deepen their understandings by relating their own practice to a wider knowledge base. This is a basis for moving towards developing new knowledge which can be applied and shared.
- **Access external knowledge** – Find ways of helping your community of learners to access the 'knowledge-base' easily and effectively. (Collect good websites, for example, and e-mail each other the URLs.)
- **Use established learning methodologies** such as action learning, peer observation and coaching, classroom action enquiry, research lessons, enquiry visits.
- **Make sure the learning is seen to be part of the real work of the school** – Plan regular sessions when members share their enquiry work with colleagues as part of regular school business. For example, include these on staff meeting and departmental meeting agendas.

Suggested further reading

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MacGilchrist, B., Sammons, P. & Myers, K. (2004) *The Intelligent School* (2nd Edition). Sage Publications Ltd.

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