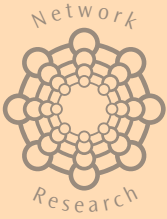
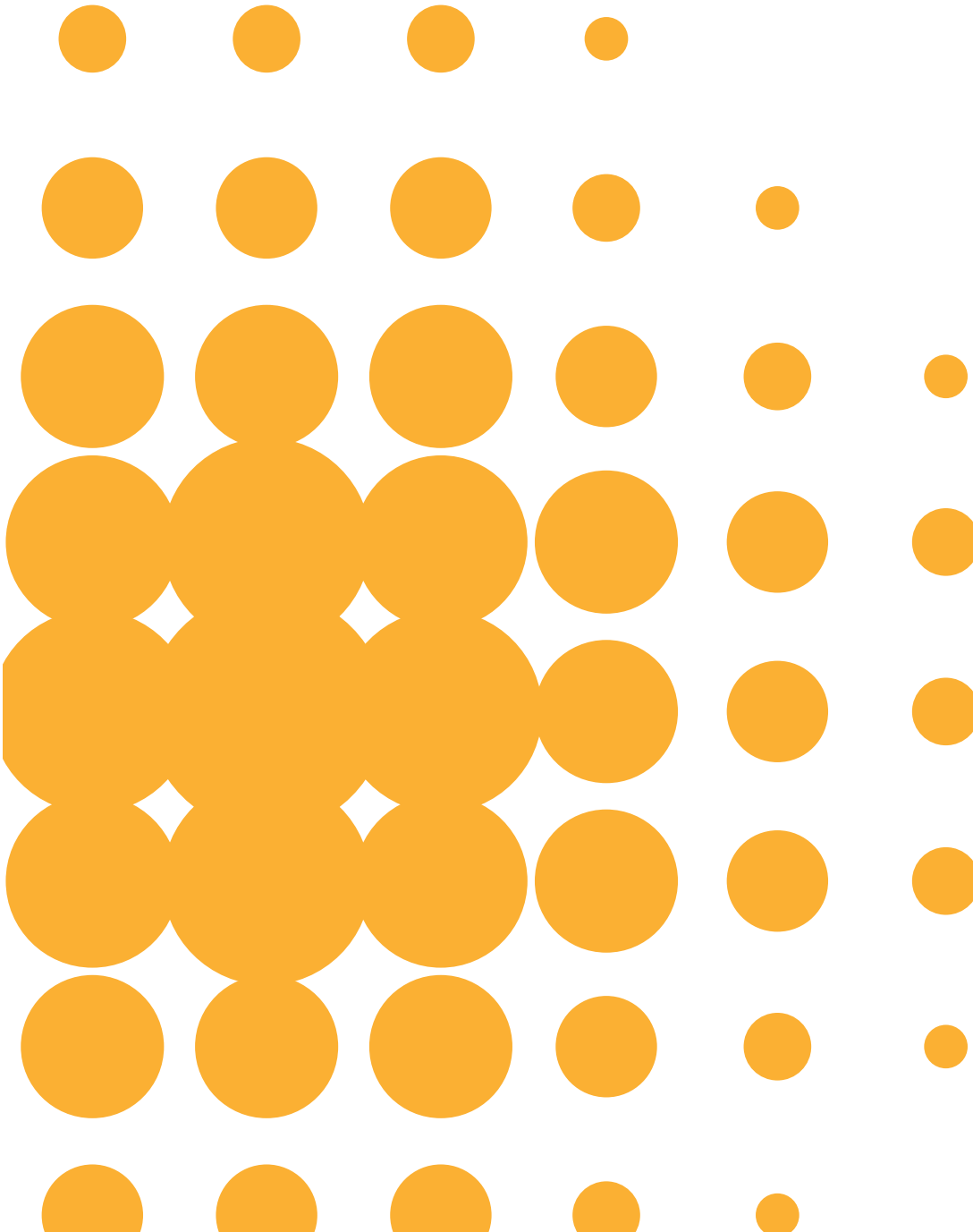
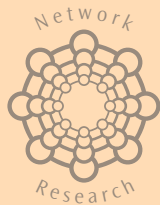


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# System leadership in action: Leading networks leading the system





## Leading networks leading the system

### Account of practice

Perrie Ballantyne, David Jackson, Julie Temperley  
and Michael Jopling with Ann Lieberman

## Introduction

Through the writing of international thinkers (Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves among them) and ongoing work at the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), a theory of system leadership is beginning to emerge. We are starting to understand in practical terms that system leaders are leaders who build leadership capacity within their own schools at the same time as working beyond their schools on behalf of all children in their locality. They care almost as much about children in other schools as they care about those in their own. They view their role as being one of 'educational leadership', rather than 'institutional leadership'. They are moved to make a difference – and to do so across a local system and in partnership with others. System leaders are those who are in the front line, wrestling with the complexities of local context, asking better and deeper questions of themselves, of others and of 'the system'.

What would characterise such a system? Emerging evidence suggests that it is networks of schools that are creating the kinds of environments in which school leaders – headteachers and others – can respond to the challenge of leading development work and learning beyond their own schools, with wider locality challenges driving their concerns.

Put simply, networks are *where* system leaders work; they are *how* system leaders work and they are where system leaders *learn* to extend their leadership influence - to lead beyond their own context.

With this in mind, and working in partnership with Ann Lieberman, Senior Scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Development of Teachers, NCSL commissioned research to trace the leadership journeys of network participants and the increasing breadth and depth of their leadership influence. What has started to emerge is a theory of system leadership development, which is firmly rooted in network theory and in empirical evidence about how practitioners learn to lead.

The evidence gathered suggests that system leadership is about both the collaborative environment in which it operates, and the roles that individuals perform. It is as much about a system receptive to and generative of broader forms of leadership as it is about the leaders themselves. It tells us that we should think about system leaders as being of the system: creative and skilled individuals to be sure, but nurtured, supported and promoted by the systems that they build around themselves and, crucially, by the skilled and creative colleagues with whom they work.

This paper draws on key messages from interviews with 13 system leaders who have been involved in a range of network-based reform initiatives, including networked learning communities. It explores the contexts that networks provide for leaders to develop the strategic thinking, moral purpose and wider engagement increasingly identified as core characteristics of system leadership. Further to this, it offers insights into the experiences of network leaders, their perspectives on network leadership practice and makes explicit the connections between network leadership practice and system leadership development.

<sup>1</sup> NCSL, 2006, 'Where do system leaders come from?' In System leadership in action, Nottingham, NCSL.

## Networks create the conditions for complex relationships to work

When system leaders<sup>2</sup> reflect on their early experiences of network involvement, they speak of a time of genuine challenge. Stepping outside the context of their own schools and beginning to get to know their colleagues and their often very different home contexts, took them outside their zone of natural confidence and into unknown territory. Those who were headteachers often realised how inward-looking and insular, and also how culturally distinct from one another, schools, including their own, could be. Every school has its own way of working; every organisation its own peculiar pressures and contextual challenges – and the nature of these needed to be properly understood before anything else could be expected to happen.

"When you exchange practice, you can't just pick something up from one place and drop it in another, thinking it will work. Schools are just so different, so you need to mutate and transform that practice."

Louise Raymond

System leaders in the study speak of periods of real professional challenge, during which they had to readjust their assumptions and expectations. They tell of time spent learning to listen to others; getting to know others' schools and allowing professional trust and respect to develop. They emphasise the importance of finding a common language and establishing a common purpose. If there is one abiding lesson that system leaders learn it is this: *"Until the relationships are right we're not going to be able to do business."*<sup>3</sup>

"One of the things networks teach you is how different schools can be from one another in the way they work. You need to be sensitive to people's priorities and situations and to know why they aren't returning your phone calls. Sometimes you also have to accept that people might be 'out of action' in the network for a time."

Stefani Sheddon

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper we have taken as 'unproblematic' the notion that the sample of 13 school leaders in this study have been functioning in system leadership roles. For ease of reference they will be called 'system leaders'. Their biographies, included in the study, offer further portraits of their work in these roles. For details see *System leaders in profile*, Nottingham, National College for School Leadership

<sup>3</sup> Sue Egersdorff

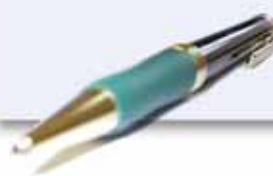
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### How does this link to system leadership?

Evidence suggests that effective networks establish collective vision and values early. In many cases the role of leaders in articulating this vision has appeared to be crucial in building relationships and fostering common purpose. One of the indicators of growing network maturity may be the movement from minority leadership visions, however flexible, towards dynamic, mutual, enacted values.

How could you promote ownership and shared values in your context?

Please use this space to record your thoughts



## Networks enable honest professional exchange

"If we have the outcomes that we are hoping to deliver for children then it's our responsibility to ask each other hard questions."

Sue Egersdorff

Purposeful school networks are 'safe but challenging' environments in which school leaders can have honest exchanges about the difficulties they face in their schools. System leaders have found it liberating to work with their professional peers in a way that transcends a culture of looking inwards and an orientation towards competition between schools in the system. They find it empowering to begin with a basic premise that no one has all the answers and that all leaders and other professionals continue to learn. Networks work best when they are driven by "conversations about what you don't know and what you need to learn"<sup>4</sup> and when the level of trust is such that participants feel able to broach their most difficult issues with each other.

"The heads are very open to sharing their problems. No one's afraid to sort of say, 'Oh, this is absolutely dire at the moment. I just don't know how to go about this. What do you suggest?' We have been fortunate in that we have got to a point where I really don't think there is anything any of the heads would be afraid of saying to each other."

Nikki Thomas

"The moment you start being complacent or assuming that things can't be done differently, you're in trouble. When you've been a headteacher of a school for a long time as I have, one does actually go out of one's way to glean information from newcomers to the school community. You know, 'what do we do that's stupid?' Because you undoubtedly will be doing something that's stupid - it's only because we've been doing it for such a long time you cease to see it in those terms."

Alan Steer

*Pause for thought...?*

### How does this link to system leadership?

Sharing leadership in networks has highlighted the value of learning together. Network leadership is often about finding a balance – between shifting leadership roles, or between encouraging independence and maintaining coherence. The responsibility of attempting to maintain multiple roles can be overwhelming at times. One leader has spoken of the importance of sharing responsibility by '*building contacts and establishing good lines of communication*'.

What issues would you face when developing and facilitating a distributed system?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

<sup>4</sup> Martine Sinker

## Networks provide a model for effective professional and leadership learning

"When I began to visit other schools, I often thought, 'That's a good idea. I want to experience that, I want my students in my classes to experience that'. But later I learned that sharing practice is a two-way street. You've got to give as well. And there is so much satisfaction in someone else taking on your idea and using it."

Robin Casson

Networks provide a model for effective, sustained, and highly motivating professional learning. Those who learn in networks can't conceive of a return to previous models, in which schools learnt alone and experts from the outside told them what they needed to be doing better.

"Through being in a network you realise that good practice is there in the system, you just have to bring it out of people and share it. Our networks focus on the questions: What do we do? What are our problems? Can we do things better? Will this practice translate into the system? What are the barriers and how will this translate?"

Ray Tarleton

School leaders are inspired by the opportunities networks have given them to move around the system and to learn from their peers as they watch and work with them in context. They appreciate an approach to learning that values them as professionals who, as well as having things to learn, also have important things to offer the wider system.

"The network involved such a breadth of opportunity. You were adding the capacity of 33, 34 different schools. You therefore had the opportunity for leaders to test out their ideas, to learn from the practice of others. You got a greater opportunity for building capacity than you have within one school. It created a bigger stage I suppose."

Robin Casson

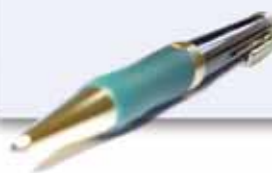
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**How does this link to system leadership?**

Evidence suggests that leaders modelling mutual activity such as collaborative enquiry, in ways which would not be available in a single leader structure, is crucial in creating learning communities. Learning from others builds relationships and trust and helps to break down traditional leader-follower models of dependency.

How would you go about creating a professional learning community in your context?

Please use this space to record your thoughts



## Networks are hothouses for innovation

"If you put talented people in a room together, and empower them to create, there's no end to what they'll come up with."

Martine Sinker

Networks give leaders, practitioners and schools conduits to knowledge, practice and ideas that exist elsewhere in the system. Without doubt, networks increase access to good ideas. But system leaders also emphasise that networks offer much more than a relatively passive means of exchanging practice.

By bringing people together into situations of genuine collaboration, networks create dynamic conditions for the generation of new ideas and practices. Once relationships of mutual trust and respect have developed, networks become environments in which educational leaders can think creatively and act bravely. System leaders describe their networks as being driven by a risk-taking energy that challenges people as it supports them to 'just do it'.

"You have to have the courage to step out of your comfort zone, but you also need people who will catch you when you fall. It's important for people to know that you'll never be on your own when you take risks. We talk about planned accidents: having faith in people and in the idea that solutions will emerge if we just keep at it."

Graham Tyrer

*Pause for thought...?*

**How does this link to system leadership?**

Networks seem to have empowered leaders to empower others, who feel they have autonomy and permission to take risks:

*'In essence it's about trying to keep people going as much as possible, trying to keep people excited as much as possible with what's possible, and trying to take the lid off people's imaginations and allowing people to risk-take'.* This creativity is anchored by commitment to the network's strategic and moral purpose.

In what ways could you build leadership capacity in your situation?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

## Networks build bridges between different agencies

"There might be a difficult road ahead but if it's with people that can be trusted then you're prepared to take the first step."

Sue Egersdorff

Networks are a way to forge new and effective relationships between schools and other agencies, which is crucial to the challenge of delivering the five outcomes of the *Every Child Matters* agenda. They offer a 'new unit of meaning and engagement' which allows other agencies to participate in the redesign of historical practices. In this way, networks have given people the confidence to work beyond their zones of familiarity and comfort. Leaders in networks learn through engagement how difficult it is to broker relationships between different agencies and to establish a common language and a common purpose. They also learn that new ways of working are distinctly possible when conversations start from a commitment to common purposes.

The new leadership approaches within networks involve system leaders themselves learning new skills. Working beyond their school context involves engaging with other people's realities – in which the art of listening plays a crucial role. Through networks, system leaders are learning to lead in complex and unpredictable environments.

"I think the new agendas require you to face outwards a lot more and actually look for opportunities to work together in different ways with other schools, with other agencies. You would limit opportunities for your school community if you decided to be inward-looking."

Sue Egersdorff

*Pause for thought...?*

### How does this link to system leadership?

Network leaders have spoken of adopting new, broader perspectives and of enlarging their area of engagement. Leadership establishes a common language between different parts of the system by acting as interpreter: *'It's about taking this wider perspective and then translating into what it looks like in the classroom with the teachers'*.

What steps could you take to extend your influence?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

## Networks are a rich source of support

"Well, if ever I have a problem now or I need a bit of support or a colleague needs a bit of CPD or we've stuck for something, my first thought is – does it exist in the network? Can I find it there?"

Nikki Thomas

Networks provide participants with a rich resource of professional and leadership support. Headteachers in networks say that they no longer feel they need to face every challenge alone. They feel empowered to turn, to their colleagues for guidance and support – support that they know will include challenge and critical friendship. In turn, they have devised effective ways to extend the offer to particular colleagues who might have difficult problems to address. Networks have rallied around schools that are facing difficult inspections or which have been placed into special measures, pooling all kinds of resources – leadership, practitioner expertise, time and sometimes money – to bring about improvements.

"Schools in the network were lending teachers – the culture of sharing rather than 'doing to' has been extremely helpful. Our feeling was that staff want to be seen as professionals who are helping other professionals to solve a problem, rather than 'us' coming to solve 'their' problems."

Alan Steer

Leaders in networks have developed a range of strategies to enable them to extend leadership influence beyond the context of their own institutions. The model is less directive and more facilitative. It emphasises sharing, joint problem-solving and enabling, rather than the imposition of solutions or 'doing to'. As one system leader put it, "you don't tell people what they've got to do; you just help them do what they know they've got to do. The day we say 'you must' is the day we get it wrong."<sup>5</sup>

"In my consultative visits to schools, I go in on invitation: I never just impose myself, because that's not my role. When I go into other schools I literally only have three things to ask: what do you want, what do you need and how can I help?"

Martine Sinker

### Pause for thought...?

#### How does this link to system leadership?

The autonomy which encourages innovation also has to be supported. Network leaders have spoken of brokering connections and building leadership capacity by strategies such as moving people into collaborative decision-making. This fosters the collective and collaborative responsibility which is key to sustaining learning communities.

How would you broker relationships with key people to ensure sustainability?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

<sup>5</sup> Sue Egersdorff



## Networks offer unique opportunities for leadership development

"Networks offer so many developmental opportunities for people; they are important for everyone's professional development."

Ray Tarleton

Networks have afforded unique and widespread opportunities for learning about leadership through practising it in partnership with others. Participants – whatever their age or position in a school – find opportunities to take on leadership roles within a network which would not be available to them in the context of a single school. These are leadership roles designed to generate beneficial change across a network's schools. Teachers learn that you don't need to be a headteacher to be an influential leader within and beyond a school.

"People's lives do change through networks. People's career trajectories take off. They get promotions. People's professional lives get richer and richer and they feel that more and more is possible"

Graham Tyrer

Meanwhile headteachers are developing skills and strategies for leadership that enable outward-facing and collaborative work to happen. They are distributing leadership and growing leaders within their own schools, and building meaningful working relationships with other leaders in the system.

System leaders have developed the skills and the confidence to lead with others in unfamiliar and often uncomfortable territory, and this is having a marked effect on the directions in which they are taking their careers. They are playing 'beyond school' roles whilst continuing to lead their own schools, brokering relationships across schools or between schools and other agencies, and moving into different roles within the wider system.

"I learned to lead in a network. It is the best thing that has ever happened to me professionally. I have developed leadership confidence; it has increased my ability to take risks; I have increased my knowledge and know more about what makes good relationships between colleagues."

Graham Tyrer

*Pause for thought...?*

### How does this link to system leadership?

It has been suggested that networks' shared leadership model is important, not only because co-leaders learn and develop together at the same time, but also because it begins and enacts a process of expanding leadership capacity without which networks find it difficult to sustain.

What leadership practices could you model?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

<sup>6</sup> Nikki Thomas

<sup>7</sup> Alan Steer

## Networks are loci for system transformation

Networks are organisational forms with huge transformative potential. Despite system structures that continue to make it difficult for schools to avoid feeling pitted against each other, system leaders are attracted to networking because they believe that greater professional collaboration is the only way to bring about transformational changes in children's learning and children's lives. Our sample system leaders were driven by versions of the sentiment that school leaders:

"...should be working together; we shouldn't be fighting each other for those same children. We need to work with each other, share what we know, pool resources and put everything together for the benefit of the children."

Hilary Craik

System leaders who are also headteachers notice that strong professional relationships outside their school have made a difference in their schools. They can implement changes more quickly knowing how to access knowledge and support, and have the confidence to be "*more innovative and imaginative*"<sup>6</sup> in what they attempt. All claim that this has enriched their children's learning experience, as well as their own.

Even more significantly, networks are breeding a culture of optimism and aspiration amongst school leaders. System leaders believe that the knowledge, ideas, and capacity needed for positive system change already exist in the system – the trick is to unlock this leadership capacity and to focus, align and deploy it effectively. System leaders believe in the powerful notion that, with a collaborative approach to working and a moral purpose that is clearly defined, "*you will find a solution; you'll meet the people you need to meet; the ones who can help you.*"<sup>7</sup>

*Pause for thought...?*

### How does this link to system leadership?

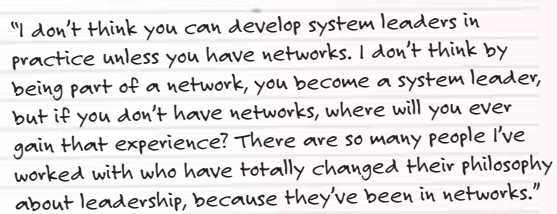
There is evidence that network leaders are becoming increasingly influential beyond their immediate environment, as successful networks raise leaders' profiles. In addition, networks require leaders to be more flexible and to challenge existing ways of working, enabling them to engage more effectively with the demands of the wider system.

How will you engage with the wider system so that your voice is heard?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that school leaders who 'step into the space' to become involved in networks aspire to ambitious purposes and to effect change in ever-widening contexts. They have learnt to think and work beyond the confines of a single institution and are able to see how different parts of the system are inhibiting development, or how new models of practice could enhance it. They have learnt the skills needed to broker relationships between disparate groups and organisations, and understand the importance of getting this right before anything else can be achieved.

Most importantly, they have developed the confidence to lead across a larger canvas and to do so in complex, unpredictable and challenging environments. Significant in this is the fact that they have learned to be system leaders through the act of doing it within a wider context that is both receptive and also rich in learning:



"I don't think you can develop system leaders in practice unless you have networks. I don't think by being part of a network, you become a system leader, but if you don't have networks, where will you ever gain that experience? There are so many people I've worked with who have totally changed their philosophy about leadership, because they've been in networks."

John Baumber

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