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Succeeding in middle leadership: exploring five key areas to focus on
David Crossley

Opinion piece

Resource

Succeeding in middle leadership: exploring five key areas to focus on

David Crossley, independent education consultant specialising in leadership and strategy

Your approach to leadership

Which approach to leadership makes a successful middle leader? The good thing is that it is the same as for any other leadership role. The great thing is that the foundation stones of successful middle leadership apply and can and should be built on in subsequent leadership roles.

First, there is a need for clarity of aim and purpose and the ability to create something that the team as a whole shares and buys into. In education and in our schools, the core aim is a moral one, enabling every young person in your care to achieve their potential, and most things follow from this. This is something you can all unite behind and relate more specific objectives to. The second aspect is related to the way you lead and assure quality. Jim Collins (2005:10), in a powerful monograph written to accompany his international bestseller *Good to Great* (2001), describes what is needed. In his view leadership requires something very different from the deployment of traditional executive power or simply telling people what to do. Collins uses the analogy and experience of the leader of the American Girl Scouts to illustrate the role leaders at all levels need to play and how they should act. As Frances Hesselbein, the Scouts' chief executive has remarked:

> Oh you always have power, if you just know where to find it. There is the power of inclusion, and the power of language, and the power of shared interests, and the power of coalition. Power is all around you but it is rarely raw and visible.
>
> *Hesselbein, cited in Collins, 2005:10*

I would argue that the use of traditional executive power can be regarded as a sign of weakness and will rarely lead to sustainable success in any organisation, let alone within an immediate team of colleagues. Leadership is more about shared objectives and creating the right conditions for the right things to happen.

Creating capacity

Being a middle leader can sometimes feel like being in the middle of an egg-timer. You face the demands from the school leadership plus external pressures on the one hand, and the never-ending demands of the students and sometimes members of your team on the other. In addition, there is very little time to lead and manage. Teaching is both a demanding and all-consuming job. In my most recent book (Crossley & Corbyn, 2010:17 22), I reflected on a version of the 80/20 principle which suggests that 20 per cent of what we do makes the key difference. The challenge is to identify what this 20 per cent is and ensure that sufficient time is allocated to it. I make two suggestions that may help you increase capacity for yourself and within your team.

A focus on implementation

The first is to focus more on implementation. Most thing fail not because of the idea but because of the quality and effectiveness of implementation. This can be something we either neglect or take for granted in schools and it is not necessarily something we are very good at. Efficient implementation is both a satisfier and motivator and it can also create the capacity to do the things we never seem to have time for. Sir Michael Barber's comment in his book Instruction to Deliver (2007:73) that:

> whilst there are thousands of people in government bureaucracies whose job is to complicate things, to get things done, a counter-veiling force is required; people who will simplify, keep bringing people back to the fundamentals

may surprise many teachers. The job of the middle leader placed in what is the engine-room of any school is to focus on the fundamentals and to ensure things get done. Interestingly, Barber (2007:78) also provides an important description of what the fundamentals are by citing John Kotter's list of the eight most common errors in change programmes. These include:

- failing to create a sufficiently powerful guiding coalition (ie buy-in from the team)

- permitting obstacles to block the new vision (blockers and those that say it can't be done)

- allowing too much complacency

- failure to create short-term wins

There are important practical aspects of successful implementation too. It is always important to record how you do things as a team and to agree how you will ensure that you all do what you say and say what you do. In education we tend to be better at writing policies rather than operational plans, which is how they are to be realised in practice. I vividly remember my first full school inspection as a headteacher. The lead inspector said to me, "You have no policies in this school." There was what seemed a very long pause and then he said, "You have very clear statements that describe what you do and how you do it, and that is good enough for me." Part of this involves not being too idealistic; a good test of any system or process is not that it works at the start of a new school year, but whether everyone is still sustaining it on a wet Monday in November. Day-to-day habits and standard operating procedures matter and they are the hallmark of the operation of most successful teams.

Abandonment

The second, more radical way to increase capacity and to ensure sustainability is connected to the notion of abandonment (Crossley & Corbyn, 2010). In schools, when something new comes along, we usually add it to what we do already. This has two consequences. The first is that you do something you did before less well and the second is that there is not enough time to do the new thing well either. The answer is to reflect on what you do already and abandon things that are not making a difference, and redeploy the resources including staff time that abandoning something has liberated. How do you decide what to abandon? One way I suggest to turn this into a reality is always asking the question of anything you do as a team – will it raise achievement and does it positively impact on students and how do you know? If not, stop doing it. The key is to encourage your team members to recognise the choices they have but also to ensure that their choices are informed.

Making the most of the teachers you have

My next suggestion for how to succeed at middle leadership comes from Hargreaves and Fullan's book *Professional Capital* (2012). In their words, 'successful and sustainable improvement can therefore never be done to or even for teachers. It can only ever be achieved by and with them.' It involves making the most of the teachers you have. It involves distributed leadership, division of labour and playing to people's strengths. Politicians and the media probably put too much focus on failing teachers. This is something that has to be dealt with, and courageous conversations are something that you must be prepared to have, but it is not where the main work lies. The real work involves helping every teacher be the best they can be. You probably can't help a teacher move from satisfactory to outstanding but you can help a teacher move from satisfactory to good and that will make a significant difference. You can also ensure that you play to the strengths of each member of the team instead of expecting everyone to be omni-capable. They and you are not, which is why we have a team.

Developing informed professionalism

Making the most of your team extends to creating a learning team by fostering and developing informed professionalism both in yourself and your team members. This view is reinforced by the work of Mourshed, Chijioke & Barber (2010:42) that the best systems rely on informed professionalism to make them great. In their words:

> the journey from great to excellent systems focuses on creating an environment that will unleash the creativity and innovation of its educators.

This is something a middle leader can ensure is a focus whatever stage of the journey the team has reached. In terms of informed professionalism, the key word is informed and this is something we have neglected in the English system where the focus has been on delivering what was prescribed from above. For all the right reasons we are outcome-focused and practice-driven. Academic research, action research and analysis of what works in practice enable us to really understand and reflect on what will enable us to improve. I was delighted recently when visiting a school on another matter to see both engagement with the impact on student outcomes and commitment to the use of research embedded – truly embedded – in the end-of-course celebration of the National College's school-led Middle Leadership Development Programme. It bodes well for the future. Teachers instinctively know what is working in their classrooms but knowing why and how to make it better can take it to scale, strengthen it, validate it and also offers the opportunity for wider impact. It motivates us, professionalises what we do and helps us improve.

Peer-to-peer collaboration

We know that in the best school systems, peer-to-peer support and collaboration make these systems great (Mourshed, Chijioke & Barber, 2010). Hargreaves and Fullan (2012:7) persuasively argue that we must develop more professional capital among the vast majority of teachers. In their words, 'People are motivated by good ideas tied to action; they are energized even more by pursuing action with others'. Further, they argue that 'cohesive groups with less individual talent often outperform groups with superstars who don't work well as a team' (ibid).

It is this approach that is making systems as diverse as those in Finland (Sahlberg, 2011), Alberta (Hargreaves et al, 2009) and Ontario (Levin, 2009), and many of our own best schools great. Yet teaching by design seems to work against this. It is an individual activity and each teacher spends most of the day working alone in the classroom.

There are three important forms of peer-to-peer support: within the team, within the school between teams and with peers from other schools. It is important for a middle leader to recognise the importance of this and to find ways of creating opportunities for both you and your team to collaborate. Within the team is linked to creating capacity and time as we have explored above but there is also real value in finding ways of building it into the teaching day by creating opportunities for teachers to work together in classrooms too. Within school collaboration can come from a school-led initiative, but informal links are also of value. Within-school variation is bigger than between-school variation, and good within-school collaboration can reduce this and help you learn from other pockets of greatness within the school. Finally, between-school networks provide support for you as a middle leader as they enable you to link with peers in other schools and share solutions to challenges, explore new ideas and work together on new developments.

Summary

In summary, a middle leader is in a unique position to foster leadership at all levels and peer-to-peer collaboration. It is also important to focus on what you can rather than can't do, recognise the choices you have and make the most of these opportunities. The approach and attention to the key elements I have described will make a difference and will also help you learn and embed a philosophy and approach to leadership that will help you succeed, stay with you and serve you well throughout your career.

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