

System Leadership and Governance

Leadership beyond institutional boundaries

Introduction

The aim of this think piece is to stimulate thinking about leadership and governance that operates across local systems rather than within institutions.

This implies the need for some fresh thinking. Contexts are changing. The old models of leadership aren't able to meet next practice challenges. They have not delivered and cannot deliver the achievement levels that we know to be possible for students, nor can they achieve socially just outcomes, for all young people.

A good example of the inadequacy of the current models is seen as we move towards collective, locality-wide provision of 14-19 education. The implementation of local 14-19 entitlement provision for young people has commitment from both government and the profession. However, despite the best efforts and aspirations of localities across the country, the necessary moves towards collective planning and provision remain in tension with institutional autonomies. The gap between leader's espoused and enacted commitment to an entitlement 14-19 provision remains huge in most cases. This at least in part explains why recent statistics show school sixth form provision currently to be more socially exclusive than universities.

Similar locality leadership and governance challenges apply where a group of schools, a network or 0-19 cluster, seeks to work together in the interests of all children. Or when a range of public services, including schools, try to work collaboratively to implement the Every Child Matters agenda, crossing traditional service lines.

The problem is that all these examples run against the grain of institutional self-interest – which is either incentivised by other aspects of current policy, or by institutional accountabilities. To be successful, institutional governance may need in each case to take a back seat to locality or collective governance, but there have been few models of practice upon which to build.

In the same way, these same desired outcomes are unachievable without leadership that acts out its roles and authority beyond the boundaries of the individual institutions. Leadership in such contexts will inevitably be stretched across localities and services and will need to inter-relate with the existing leadership and governance arrangements of schools and other services. It will probably have new sets of roles and relationships and be more about connection than separation. It may be collective rather than individual. It is likely to have lateral and enabling characteristics as well as (or instead of) hierarchical ones. It may need to achieve its strength not from position but through collective agreement, influence and the brokering of relationships and alliances.

In truth, we don't yet have definitive models; the examples are emerging.

System governance, however configured, will probably need to set policy, define strategy and decide resource allocation and accountability strategies across several institutions. It may impact

on service providers other than education. It might be much less committee-bound, more active than ceremonial. And it might involve new and different actors in new and different relationships.

Again, we just don't yet know with any authority. In the case of both leadership and governance, next practice models are still few and far between.

Because they are interdependent, you can read the next two sections in either order. We have chosen here to start with leadership, but could just as easily have started with governance.

System Leadership

What is it?

As has already been said, much attention is currently being paid to the concept of 'system leadership'. At the same time, interpretations vary and definition is elusive, but this is hardly surprising. System leadership is an emergent concept – it will, in the end, be defined by practice, as the education system evolves and reshapes itself to meet broader twenty-first century challenges and aspirations.

This section does not seek to achieve definition. Instead, it is intended to provoke thought and to stimulate dialogue about new and, perhaps, better designs to meet the aspirations of particular local contexts.

Firstly, it is values driven. In a recent Demos paper, written for NCSL¹, Tom Bentley and John Craig set out a powerful underpinning values dimension:

System leadership involves a shift in mindset for school leaders, emphasising what they share with others over how they differ. Where they can, system leaders eschew 'us and them' relationships – with their community, with other schools and professionals and with the DCSF – and model a commitment to the learning of every child.

This moral dimension is an important component of professional leadership in the public sector. It could be argued that since the days of the Education Reform Act schools have become increasingly autonomous, not only from DCSF or Local Authority control, but also in many cases from one another and from their communities. What is implied in the concept of 'system leadership' is a move towards a more deliberately collaborative and interdependent system, and probably one more orientated towards the locality. This is also a move away 'institutional leadership' and towards 'educational leadership' – responsibility for leadership of public services that benefit all young people. As such:

System leadership maximises the influence and effect of leadership across a system. It represents both a shift in the practice of leaders to ensure wider influence and in the system itself to make this possible. (Demos/NCSL)

This analysis fits well with Michael Fullan's description of system leadership activity as a 'very different model of leadership from the traditional single school model – one that is extended beyond the school, highly interactive both horizontally and vertically, and engaged in communication and critique of policies and strategies'.²

A capacity for 'system thinking' self-evidently becomes a key competence required of system leaders. This means both knowing how to exercise leadership within a connected system, and knowing how the system can be damaged (in its aspiration to succeed with and for all pupils) if you don't. For tomorrow's leaders this means the ability to understand one's own responsibilities and the range of relationships, resources and activities which one's leadership can influence. Crucially, it also means that not applying systemic thinking – not seeing one's role within that wider

1. *System Leadership*, John Craig and Tom Bentley, Demos/NCSL (November, 2005).

2. *Systems Thinkers in Action*, Michael Fullan, The Innovation Unit and NCSL, 2004

moral and practical canvas – can have restricting and even harmful effects on the whole of the local system.

In other words, the stakes are high: how each head teacher behaves has consequences for other schools and the life chances of the young people within them. It is just no longer sufficient to see the work of leadership as limited to one's position in a single organisation.

What does system leadership do?

In a sentence, system leadership sees, and acts on, the *system as a whole*. It recognizes the interdependence between schools, and between schools, other public institutions and communities. It recognizes, too, that the relationships between them can have profound effects on the outcomes for young people.

If we accept that this is the basic territory for what system leadership will do, then it is clearly a different set of skills and behaviours that are required by those exercising locality leadership. There is no blueprint, but both writing and practice in this field suggest some common elements.

The first feature is in the area of vision and purpose. All effective leadership requires the generation of collective vision and shared purpose. Across localities system leaders have the double challenge of making this both a more broadly-based and a more compelling one – a living vision capable of enrolling diverse groups. Radical change across organisations has to take everyone with it, and do so without the authority of institutional position.

The second relates to leadership capacity-building. System leadership is both an individual and a collective role. It expands its scope and influence through the collective. System leaders create opportunities for joint work and analysis of past practices – activities that can liberate creative energies by challenging historical assumptions. In so doing they also distribute leadership opportunities – creating space for new system leaders to grow. Put another way, this capacity-building part is about system leadership more than system leaders.

The third feature involves creating a climate of professional generosity and exchange. System leaders open up professional practices to external scrutiny and for wider adoption. They make professional learning public and shared (as has long been the case in law and medicine). A system will only thrive through the collective and cumulative contributions of multiple participants and stakeholders.

In addition to 'what' leaders do in leading across systems, 'how' that leadership enacts itself is also important. Recognising the importance of, and potential in, these interconnections, system leaders seek not only to do different things but also to do things differently in the interest of the wider system. According to Demos, system leaders build structures, processes and cultures which:

- 1. Recognise that in systems made up of people there will be multiple perspectives on a problem or situation.** This means that change is most likely to be achieved through drawing on those diverse perspectives.
- 2. Build the autonomy of those in the system by setting a few simple rules, but maintaining high minimum standards.** To marry flexibility with quality assurance, this needs to be done within a clear overall framework.
- 3. Support autonomy with connecting individuals to one another.** Allowing people autonomy within systems does not mean leaving them in isolation – systems can help them to solve problems together and to share learning.
- 4. Support learning and continuous improvement by creating feedback loops.** This means giving people access to information that can help them understand the factors affecting the performance of the system.

5. Maintain an open and vibrant learning culture. Learning cultures need leaders to recognise and model the importance of learning.

The National College for School Leadership has recognised some practical aspects of what system leaders need to do. This involves:

1. *Building sustainable capacity in their own institutions* – thereby allowing system interest to supersede self-interest.
2. *Developing sustainable capacity beyond their institution* – reaching out beyond the school to forge new alliances around shared purposes, so establishing local confidence.
3. *Contributing to the wider system* – to open up local work in order also to contribute to national strategic development or the learning of other localities.

However, as we suggested earlier, you don't have to travel far down this road of leadership across localities, or between schools and services, to see that it requires a new source of authority and legitimacy – and a capacity to hold it to account and to ensure sustainability. System leadership and system governance are inextricably interconnected constructs.

Governance

What is governance?

When first considering what we are here calling 'locality change', you are likely to be drawn initially towards the evident need for some form of system leadership. However, leaders only have to take the first steps outside their institutional roles (across localities, across services, across schools) and issues of accountability, authority and legitimacy make us quickly aware that new forms of governance are the inevitable flip-side of the system leadership coin. It is obvious that we need next practice models of governance as much as we need next practice models of leadership.

The term 'governance' is not just about governors or governing bodies. For schools, the experience of governance may often be lived out as a 'governing body' and its 'committees', but in this paper we are talking about a much wider concept.

Governance provides the ground rules for activity; it sets the direction; it defines the boundaries; it provides resources; it allocates permissions; and it holds to account. And, in doing these things, where system leadership might be engaged in 'locality place shaping', governance has the responsibility to be a guardian of what is termed 'public value'.

Historical models of governance in education have always had an institutional flavour. School governors may well be drawn from wider stakeholder groups and be perceived in part as custodians of community and system expectations, but their primary orientation is the school and its performance. They set school policy, manage its resources, appoint and performance manage the head, and hold the individual school to account.

Within the context of this think piece about system leadership, 'system governance' describes the agreed processes and principles that shape how decisions are made and how authority and leadership are created, legitimised and distributed across a locality or a distributed organisational form of some kind. The net effect should be to help the people in the 'collaboration' create new ways of working together better to achieve their common purpose.

What does governance do?

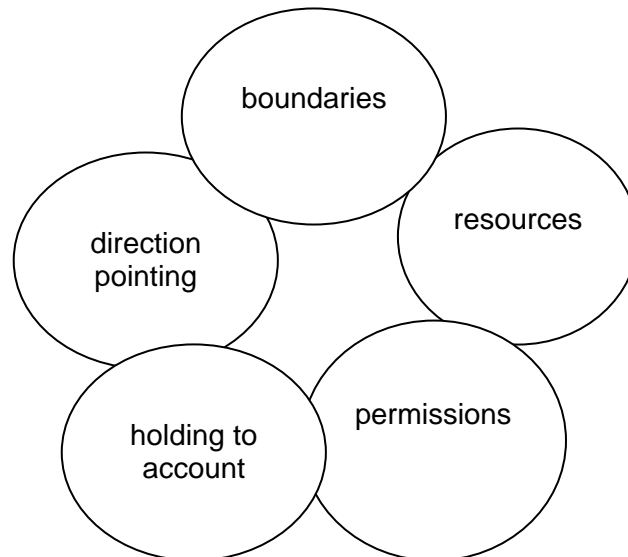
Governance is a universal phenomenon and governance arrangements cross time and span geography and culture. The most primitive tribes had governance strategies ('elders') and so do the most formal of contemporary organisations ('boards'). This is because governance is partly about getting things done together without re-inventing the wheel every time. It's about tried, tested and trusted patterns of interaction that help us to decide on the most efficient and legitimate way of achieving a common purpose.

Three features of governance are particularly important:

- i. how it is constituted (who governs and how are they chosen)
- ii. how it operates (how governors fulfil their functions)
- iii. its defining features or spheres of operation (what governance does and in what domains).

The first and second of these will be key areas of debate for localities exploring new sets of arrangements. In this section, though, we are considering in particular the third, what governance does.

As suggested above, governance is exercised in five domains; there are five things that we expect governance to do:



Direction pointing

Governance defines purpose. It determines the reasons for the existence of the ‘organisation’ and lays out what is being attempted. So, for example, governance decides that schools are places for learning, hospitals are places for healing. Or it might go further and decide which form of learning or which healing specialisation. In consortia or collaboratives, or local systems, it is the governance that overarches and underpins the collective; that defines ***and continues to define*** the terms and extent and core purpose of the union. The italics are important, for it is also governance that offers the potential for, or which protects, continuity and sustainability beyond leadership tenure. System leaders come and go, but governance is for the long haul.

Boundaries

Governance also defines what can't be done, what is not acceptable, and so puts boundaries around the scope and sphere of influence of system leadership.

In this way governance establishes the frame for leadership and its legitimate sphere of application. The authority and freedom to act lie within these boundaries, as do the accountabilities. Once leadership steps outside the relatively contained boundaries of individual institutions, once it becomes leadership across a local system, the significance of the boundary-setting role of governance becomes obvious.

Resources

For those wishing to work across organisational boundaries, access to shared or collective resourcing strategies is enabling – the opposite can be debilitating. Although financial resources will be one part of the resource capacity in mind here, it is far from being the only one. The lateral deployment of people, professional development, time and influence are equally important – as are the collaborative and collective utilisation of existing resources and expertise.

This last point is important. Public sector collaborative efforts are always likely to take place within a climate of financial constraint. And anyway, history tells us that extra funding tends to lead to bolt-on and ultimately unsustainable approaches. Disaggregating institutional ‘pots’ to create

collective capacities and capabilities offers new and sustainable possibilities – but the governance challenges to such a strategy are obvious.

Permissions

Permission, the authority to act, especially actions that are different from historical ways of working, lies within the realm of governance. This might mean a heavy emphasis on central control, or it might mean very few restrictions upon actions in order to encourage creativity pursuit of innovative solutions. Context and purpose will dictate which.

As the public sector reinvents itself to become more user focused, more personalised, more flexible, connected and collaborative, so new models of governance – new permissions – become evident, increasingly designed to stimulate creativity and innovation. The health service example below is illuminating:

The science of complex adaptive systems brings new concepts that can provide fresh understandings of troubling issues in the organisation and management of delivery of health care. We have argued that effective organisation and delivery of health care does not need detailed targets and specifications, nor should it focus primarily on “controlling the process” or “overcoming resistance”.

Rather, those who seek change should harness the natural creativity and organising ability of staff and stakeholders through such principles as generative relationships, minimum specification, the positive use of attractors for change and a constructive approach to variation in areas of practice where there is only moderate certainty and agreement.

“Complexity, leadership and management in healthcare”, Plsek & Wilson³

Determining the level of control required and the degree of permission given to those who lead across and within local systems is a function of governance.

Holding to Account

In all institutional forms this function is the flipside of the freedoms and scope that leadership enjoys. The more space for leaders to lead, the more important it is that everyone knows that there is a framework of accountability. In system leadership the scope and flexibility are by definition expanded across localities or services. The spheres of influence and responsibility are increased. Governance defines and exercises the nature and form of the accountabilities that are a part of the necessary checks, balances and celebrations.

These five things are what public sector governance does. In doing them well it also protects public value.

Why leadership and governance?

These new ways of working involve an expansion of boundaries for leadership and, as John Craig and Tom Bentley argue⁴, effective system leaders are also able to understand the ‘hidden wiring of governance relationships’. Yet often, new purposes and activities are occurring in contexts where the governance framework was designed for individual and separately functioning institutions.

Next practices in system leadership require new frameworks of governance to be fashioned (new governance models) if leadership and governance are to be aligned and if higher order purposes are to be sustained as key people come and go. Once leadership begins to function beyond the boundaries of a single school, new variables emerge which raise questions about legitimacy and accountability. Even more vexing is the question of how the authority of system leaders butts up against the institutional autonomy of other schools and the role of each school’s governing body. Such issues of ‘subsidiarity’ have to be resolved on a case by case basis.

³ *Complexity, leadership, and management in healthcare*, Paul E Plsek, Tim Wilson, BMJ, 17 April 2006

⁴ *System Leadership*, John Craig and Tom Bentley, Demos/NCSL (November, 2005).

The sections above on governance and leadership across localities – system leadership – demonstrate both the potential and the complexity of emerging or next practice arrangements. In particular, they seek to show both the necessity of considered and conscious design approaches to new forms and new arrangements, and also to show the dynamic interdependence of the two elements.

Some moves to more systemic approaches are initiated by an energy from ‘governance’, by policy levers, resource allocations, new accountabilities, sometimes initiated by local authorities in response to national policies or to local circumstances. Well intentioned as these are, such approaches seldom win the hearts and minds of a critical majority of key local actors – the people and the institutions that they serve. Others moves arise through the energy of local leaders and the will to work to achieve together for children what they have come to realise cannot be achieved alone. Frequently these initiatives are rooted in deep collective commitment, but experience shows that they are vulnerable to changes in personnel or that the collective commitment remains more rhetorical than practical, or even that the wider system – local authority, national policy, accountability levers – continues to work against the grain of the local aspirations and hence frustrates and confounds local efforts.

Putting the pieces together

The issues and questions raised by this think piece provide a starting point for dialogue. It raises themes that will need to be debated for any complex cross-institutional project.

There will need to be an overt consideration of governance issues by key actors, and application to their particular context. The nature and form of the governance, the number of governors, the criteria for election or appointment or selection, the representative basis of the membership, the style of operation, the degree of control, the level of direct accountability - these and other key decisions will have to be worked through.

In turn, these governance considerations influence the shape and scope of leadership.

This might embrace the nature and shape and sphere of responsibility of leadership – its scope and style, its make-up, the knowledge and skills required, issues of sustainability and succession, the particularities of the local context and the shared purpose that informs the local vision or aspirations.

Conversely these leadership decisions influence the shape and style of governance.

Finally, discussion has to lead to collective action – consideration of the steps you will take to establish new governance and leadership arrangements in pursuit of your collective purpose.

The Innovation Unit has developed expertise and tools designed to support these processes. You can find out more at www.innovation-unit.co.uk.