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Mission Possible: strategies for managing headship

How can the role of headship be made possible, maintaining a headteacher's energy and enthusiasm?

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

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Introduction

This study was motivated by two separate but interrelated propositions. Firstly, that the nature of headship in schools has changed markedly in recent years, and is increasingly characterised by high levels of complexity, accountability and relentlessness. Secondly, that a shortage of applicants for headship roles has become increasingly common in some schools. Evidence indicates that this is largely a result of demographic factors, but also reflects negative perceptions of the role of headteacher.

This study therefore seeks to address the following question:

How can the role of headship be made possible, maintaining a headteacher's energy and enthusiasm?

There were two sub-questions to this:

What is the nature of a headteacher's working week?
What approaches and strategies can be adopted to help headteachers deal with the demands of their role?

Through reading this report, it is hoped that:

- serving headteachers will be able to draw on the experiences described in this study to help them make their own role more sustainable;
- those who have a part in shaping the future of headship will give thought to the tensions within the role and to the continuing professional development of headteachers, in order to make it a more sustainable and attractive profession.

Review of relevant literature

It has long been recognised that the role of headteacher is demanding, but there is no indication that this is abating with the passage of time. For instance, Fullan notes how:

The head is in the midst of ever increasing demands, overload and imposition on schools by political forces at all levels of society. (Fullan 1992: vii)

As the number and variety of tasks and responsibilities has increased, the role of headteacher has become more challenging and complex. Initiatives such as the introduction of local management of schools, increasing accountability through Ofsted inspections and the unrelenting focus on standards have all contributed to this complexity. For instance, Ofsted states that:

Since 1997, the Department for Education and Skills has introduced a wide range of initiatives with the aim of raising standards, both overall and focusing on schools in difficult contexts. These initiatives are making additional demands on headteachers and key staff. (Ofsted 2003: 5)

Indeed in recent years the pace of change and the demands placed on headteachers has continued to gain momentum, with initiatives such as workforce reform, extended schools, increasing networking and multi-agency working. The PricewaterhouseCoopers' (PWC) review of school leadership found that:

... most importantly, the social and policy landscape has changed completely, so that what school leaders are expected to do now and in the future is significantly different from what it was even a few years ago. (PWC 2007: v)

The report continues by noting that:

For example, the remit of schools is expanding as they become increasingly responsible for the delivery of solutions to issues such as social cohesion, citizenship and childhood obesity. (PWC 2007: 2)

Further evidence for this comes from Mahony (2004: 9), who states that, 'the current job of the headteacher demands a different mindspace from even that of just five years ago. If you remain in that older mindset, you inhabit a dying planet'.

An additional concern relates to the extent to which these trends impact on the perceived appeal of headship for would-be heads. Several writers have concluded that the extended and complicated nature of headship is having a negative effect on potential recruitment to this position. For instance, Munby states how:

70% of middle leaders say that they do not aspire to headships. Reasons cited include accountability pressures and other work stresses. (Munby 2006: 3–2)

PWC's review (2007) of school leadership drew a similar conclusion.

However, there is no simple path through this, and authors such as MacBeath and Myers (1999: 83) have stressed the absence of a 'simple one-fits-all solution to the dilemmas that heads experience'. Despite this, a number of consistent themes have emerged which writers believe headteachers need to consider in order to make their role more sustainable. These centre on:

- vision
- delegation
- networking
- leading learning
- time management
- well-being.

The remainder of this sub-section considers each of these issues in more depth.

Vision

Vision building is widely recognised as a key part of leadership. For instance, PWC (2007) suggest that the headteacher should concentrate on building the vision:

Despite the view that the role of the headteacher is becoming more administrative and business-like, the literature suggests that the head should focus on: building vision and setting direction; understanding and developing people; redesigning the organisation; and managing the teaching and learning programme. (PWC 2007: 35)

Mahony (2004: xv) agrees:

As a headteacher, facing the unknown wonders of the future.... Where will your security lie? Isn't the best place in your own principles, your own beliefs and values?

Delegation

There is evidence from the literature that heads need to take responsibility for workload in terms of their ability to prioritise and to delegate. For instance PWC note that a solution to the headteacher's excessive workload is increasing delegation:

From our research, the six key areas on which headteachers spend their time are: strategy; teaching and learning; staffing; networking; operations; and accountability. While the balance of time spent will depend on the context of the school (as

previously noted, it is unlikely that all heads will need to concentrate equally on strategic issues), there is evidence to suggest that heads need to focus to a greater extent on the strategic vision; teaching and learning; and staffing issues. The operational and accountability elements of their role could be distributed more effectively throughout the school, particularly in regard to issues such as extended services, finance and the supervision of pupils. (PWC 2007: 35)

Mahony (2004: 125) agrees that the ability to delegate is a vital component of an effective headteacher, but recognises that this is a major challenge for successful headteachers.

Davies (2005: 180) also argues that 'sustainable leadership spreads: it sustains the leadership of others'. He notes that sustainable leadership builds capacity through effective delegation to others, developing human resources.

Effective delegation allows others to perfect their leadership skills and to be coached and developed as future leaders. The 'hero' head can no longer exist:

In a complex, fast-paced world, leadership cannot rest on the shoulders of the few. (Hargreaves & Fink 2006: 95)

As a result, there is considerable evidence to show that headteachers need to recognise, utilise and develop the skills and capability of others within the organization, freeing themselves up to make their role sustainable:

Delegation ... it amounts to the advice to try not to do anything that someone else in the building can do, because heads need to spend their time on what others in the building are not in a position to do. (Fullan 1992: 51)

Networking

Networking with other headteachers can alleviate the feelings of isolation and provide critical friends who truly understand the role of headteacher and its pressures.

Davies (2005: 50) notes that the 'Nurturing of a personal support group' is fundamental to headteachers' well-being.

Ideas can be shared without the individual needing to 'reinvent the wheel', issues can be discussed and solutions facilitated through the support of the network. Fullan indicates this when he writes that:

... heads who go out of their way to work cooperatively with other heads ... develop both a reputation and a set of relationships which serve them well at points of critical decision. (Fullan 1992: 53)

However, the main benefit of such networks clearly comes from the headteachers having a strong professional focus, rather than the notion of networking for its own sake (Hargreaves & Fink 2006: 190).

Leading learning

It is important that headteachers take the lead in promoting a learning ethos within the school that begins with headteachers themselves. Bennis and Nanus (1985) and Fullan (1988) have both highlighted the importance of demonstrating a commitment to this core aim of schools. Similarly Davies (2005: 187) has noted the importance of this in relation to building leadership capacity and promoting an adaptive culture:

... leaders develop sustainability by how they approach, commit to and protect deep learning in their schools; by how they sustain themselves and others around them to promote and support that learning; by how they are able and encouraged to sustain themselves in doing so, so that they can persist with their vision and avoid burning out.

Time management

Time management has been raised as an important issue for many years. This is not simply about the methods and systems of time management but also about mindset. Effective time management is critical in promoting the long-term sustainability of the school and its leaders.

Well-being

Work–life balance and stress management have been high profile issues in education over the past few years. The introduction of the Workforce Agreement and planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time for teachers have brought in greater focus the obligation headteachers have to be mindful of their staff’s work–life balance.

At the same time, though, increased attention has been placed on the need for headteachers themselves to give sufficient priority to their own work–life balance and well-being. As Hargreaves and Fink note:

Sustainable leaders also sustain themselves, attending to their own renewal and not sacrificing themselves too much as they serve their community. (Hargreaves & Fink 2006:272)

Meanwhile, Fullan (1992) has written about the need to establish ‘rituals’ which are energy recovering. Examples of these include journal writing, eating habits, physical fitness and meditation.

Methodology

The study was undertaken by six serving headteachers using an action research methodology. The profile of these headteachers and their schools is summarised in Table 1.

Headteacher	School type	Local authority	Number on roll	Length of time in headship	% of teaching commitment during time log period
A	Community junior	Sheffield	245	5 years	2
B	Community junior	Derby City	232	5 years	0
C	Community primary	Lincolnshire	273	5 years	16
D	Voluntary controlled C of E primary	Leicestershire	430	6 years	0
E	Voluntary controlled C of E primary and nursery	Nottinghamshire	74	6 years	30
F	Foundation junior	Lincolnshire	240	6 years	20

Table 1: Profile of headteachers involved in the study

The headteachers took part in a series of meetings over the course of a year. Individuals carried out tasks and background reading. They researched the literature around headship and sustainability and undertook a series of activities including time logging, structured interviews, data collection and analysis. At the conclusion of each meeting they evaluated the effectiveness of the activities undertaken and adapted them as necessary through reflection and re-planning.

The four main elements of the research were:

- time logging and reflection
- stakeholder perspectives
- interviews
- application and feedback.

Time logging and reflection

Over a two-week period, each headteacher recorded how they spent their time. See Figure 1 for an example of a completed time log. Activities were later coded and classified according to an agreed set of categories.

Time	Activity	Duration	Category	Planned	Reactive
8.04	Arrive. Unblock photocopier	5			✓
8.09	Switch on computer	0		✓	
8.09	Talk with teacher re personal issue	1			✓
8.10	Unblock photocopier	1			✓
8.11	Check diary	1		✓	
8.12	Check emails	0		✓	
8.12	Look for teaching resources for supply	6			✓
8.18	Open door for delivery and sign	1			✓
8.19	Show resources to supply teacher	1			✓
8.20	Phone call re sick child	1		✓	
8.21	Make tea. Chit chat	5		✓	
8.26	Find QCA test papers for teacher	3			✓
8.29	Phone call re sick child	1			✓
8.30	Fill in sickness absence book	1			✓
8.31	Talk with teacher re leave for appointment	1			✓
8.32	Talk with teacher re educational visitors	2			✓
8.34	Talk with admin re building quote	4		✓	
8.38	Check finance system for expected income	3		✓	
8.41	Talk with admin re building quote	1		✓	
8.42	Prepare meeting with deputy	4		✓	
8.46	Talk with teacher re educational visit	1			✓
8.47	Prepare meeting with deputy	7		✓	
8.54	Meet with deputy re SATs, action plan review and professional development plan	1h 12		✓	
10.06	Go through in-tray	2		✓	
10.08	Check emails	1		✓	
10.09	Walk round playground	12		✓	
10.21	Break	13		✓	
10.34	Look at map for afternoon meeting venue	3		✓	

Figure 1: Example of a time log recording

Reflecting

The headteachers then completed a reflection pro forma at the end of each day, when the day had been time logged and also at the end of each week. An example of a completed daily reflection record is shown in Figure 2.

<p>How do I feel about today? Why? Okay Had time to read coaching booklet Staffing is still a really big headache. Took a lot of time but also a lot of mulling over when on other tasks.</p> <p>How much of what I did today was about my personal well-being? Nothing again.</p> <p>What frustrations have there been today? Getting involved in the dining room at lunchtime.</p> <p>How much of what I did today reflected my priorities for the school? School council, time talking to staff.</p>
<p>How much about what I did today was maintenance, and how much was moving my school forward? Mainly maintenance School council was moving things on.</p> <p>What should I not have done today? Run the school council meeting? Check everything?</p> <p>What should I have done that I didn't do? Can't think of anything</p>
<p>Who do I feel was controlling my agenda today? (me, staff, pupils, parents, governors, local authority) Was this a good or a bad thing? Pupils, it felt like. That's a good thing.</p>
<p>What would I have liked to have changed about how I spent my time today? Short time I spend on things. Is it because I get interrupted or need fresh challenges?</p> <p>What would I like to change about how I work/manage my time? Read articles/booklets more rather than just filing them.</p> <p>What can I do to implement these changes? Block time off for it on my timetable.</p>

Figure 2: Example of a daily reflection log

Analysis of the time log

The group then categorised each time log activity against the National Standards for Headteachers (2004). The standards are set out in six key non-hierarchical areas. These areas, when taken together, represent the headteacher's role.

- shaping the future
- leading learning and teaching
- developing self and working with others
- managing the organisation
- securing accountability
- strengthening community.

The task required the application of judgement to 'best fit' the activities against one of the six key areas. This activity involved much discussion among the group. Once agreed on, the group ensured that their 'best fit' judgements were consistently applied to all the time logs for all the headteachers. Example activities were:

Shaping the future: ICT infrastructure planning, proposed build planning meeting.

Leading teaching and learning: discussions with subject leaders, school council meeting, lesson observations and feedback, planning for twilight sessions.

Developing self and working with others: meetings with other headteachers, coaching staff, advice for/from headteachers, discussions with staff about advanced skills teachers (ASTs) and the National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH).

Managing the organisation: staff briefings, updating policies/procedures, day-to-day arrangements, sickness cover and ramifications, meeting the deputy head.

Securing accountability: discussing targets and tracking with school improvement partner, updating the self-evaluation form, work on the school profile, preparation and attendance at governor meetings.

Strengthening community: seeing parents, special educational needs (SEN) issues, paperwork, reviews, Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meeting, discussions with visitors to school (school nurse, secondary school volunteers, local football team), visit to local church for a service.

A seventh category was used designated as 'administration and other', and an eighth category designated as 'teaching'. These additional categories were included to incorporate activities that the headteachers undertook that did not feature in the National Standards.

The group recognised that this was not an exhaustive list and there would be debate as to how tasks had been categorised. However, the key learning was analysing and questioning each task, which encouraged the group to challenge the way they spent their time as headteachers. The group then calculated the length of time they spent working on each of the key areas.

Stakeholder perspectives

The group felt it was necessary to collect stakeholder views of how headteachers should spend their time. It was assumed that these stakeholder priorities might be in conflict with the National Standards. Through asking stakeholders, the headteachers felt that this perceived difference in priorities could be brought into focus.

From each school stakeholder views were sought from the following:

- 6 governors
- 16 parents
- 8 staff (4 teachers, 2 teaching assistants, 2 others)
- 16 pupils

The same number for each stakeholder group was selected in each of the six schools. This number of stakeholders was chosen to take account of the smallest sized school in the research.

Individual stakeholders were chosen at random from each group. Views were solicited in response to the question:

What do you think a headteacher should be doing in the 21st century?

Please identify the five activities/actions/tasks that a headteacher should be doing that you think are the most important.

There were differences in various groups' priorities, although some common themes did emerge. Responses were grouped into areas, which were then ranked in order of priority for each group of stakeholders. For parents the main priority was approachability/visibility/communication, whereas for staff the main priority was staff management and supporting development.

The results for the groups were then amalgamated and ranked to provide one overall stakeholder list of priorities, presented below in rank order:

1. Leadership
2. Working with stakeholders
3. Budget/resources
4. Working with staff
5. Monitoring and evaluation
6. Managing behaviour of pupils
7. Welfare of pupils
8. Standards
9. Teaching

Leadership was the highest priority overall. However, there was some variation between stakeholder groups as to what this meant, as is illustrated by the following quotations:

'... an inspirational, motivational, authoritative leader.' (parent)

'... look after the school and take assemblies.' (pupil)

'... provide leadership to staff – setting the ethos of the school itself.' (governor)

'... lead the staff to ensure they are giving their best.' (staff member)

Interviews

To provide a further level of challenge, each headteacher was interviewed in relation to their individual time log data and reflections. This process helped the group to identify a range of inhibitors that prevented headteachers from working effectively and in a sustained manner, and to start to identify possible solutions that they could put into practice.

Application and feedback

As a result of the process each individual decided on some practical changes to their practice. For instance when shown the findings from their time log, one head observed:

'This shows I flit, I need to chunk time to ensure I achieve what I need to.'

Another reflected that:

'I need to change the way things are booked into the diary; to say "no", to prioritise my diary in order to leave large gaps for development work. I need to try to remain more in control of the agenda, for example, refusing to attend meetings.'

Over a period of two months the headteachers attempted to change their practice as a result of the main findings from the study up to this point. Each individual then reflected on the changes they had made, and the extent to which the changes were as a result of the process, or of external influences (for example, staff changes or Ofsted).

Each member of the group talked for about 20 minutes on the changes they had made in their practice, and the impact this had had on their emotional state and relationship with the role. The group then commented on and questioned their responses. For instance, one headteacher reflected on the following changes they had achieved:

'What have I changed?

- Blocked time for specific tasks – not to be disturbed.
- Realised when I work more effectively, time slots/days.
- Kept rigidly to blocked slots when appointments are made, if they weren't suitable for me they didn't occur.
- Made an effort to see all staff on a regular basis, realised that I spend a lot of time with staff but not with every member of staff.
- Accepted I'm not a teacher, teacher files thrown out.
- Dealt with things first time, didn't keep returning to things.
- Reduced teaching activities and looked for other opportunities to interact with pupils.
- Confronted mediocrity.
- Been proactive in involving governors in school.'

Main findings

What is the nature of a headteacher's working week?

During the course of the study, on average the group of headteachers worked 42.5 hours per week. There was relatively little variation between individual members of the group.

This relatively low figure may be explained by a variety of factors. Foremost amongst these was the period of the year the research was undertaken, and also the stage of development that each school was at with its current headteacher. Most critically, though, the study dealt only with the time that headteachers spent at school during the official working week. Indeed, when the group considered their 'full' unofficial working week, they averaged 62.4 hours in total.

In terms of the focus of the activity itself (see Figure 3), on average, more than one fifth (22%) of the headteacher's time was spent on administrative tasks. Slightly less (20%) involved developing one's self and others. Managing the organisation and securing accountability both took up 16% of the head's time. Only 1% of time was spent shaping the future.

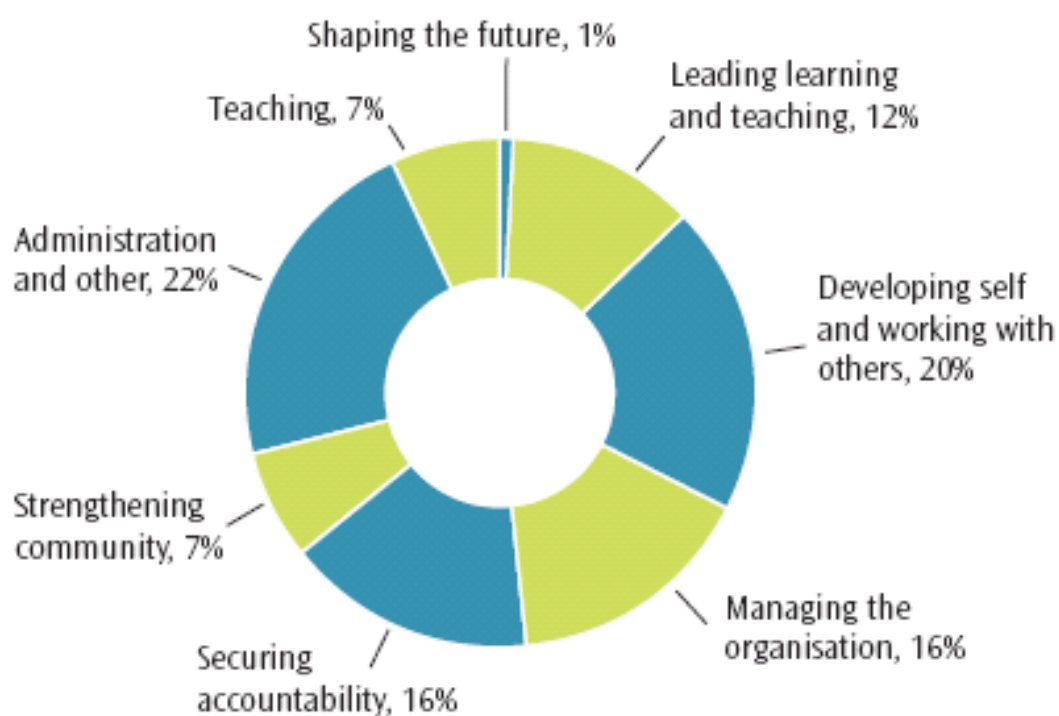


Figure 2: Use of time by headteachers in relation to the National Standards

While there were similarities with the overall amount of time that the headteachers spent each working week, there were large differences in what they spent the largest and least amount of time on. For instance, time spent on securing accountability ranged from 7% to 27%. Similarly, time dedicated to developing self and working with others during this period ranged from 5% to 32%. These headteachers identified four main reasons as to why the time they allocated to this work may have increased:

Perceived circumstances: “It was not a surprise that I spent more time on teaching than the average for the group as I have a 0.3 teaching commitment. However, doing the analysis gave opportunity to consider the effect this has on my overall role as headteacher”.

Development cycle of the school: “I am surprised by this, I don’t wish to be a ‘community leader’, however, the extended schools agenda is making networking with the community an increasing essential part of the leader’s role”.

Short-term fix: “The review of data highlighted the disproportionate amount of time I spend on administrative tasks. This is one of the difficulties of a small team, particularly when there are staff changes. There are times when the choice is I do the task or it doesn’t get done. Consequently I will often do the task to ensure the smooth running of the school. This maintains the running of the school in the short term but ends up reducing my effectiveness as a headteacher driving the school forward”.

A genuine priority: “I try to read other educational materials, eg research in order to keep up to date. This is an area that I decided I needed to prioritise when I was doing my ‘New Visions’ course and I always timetable some time for reading into my week”.

Conversely, instances when markedly less time was allocated to specific areas were characterised as falling into one of three main groups:

Not being a representative week: “I was surprised that I did so little monitoring and evaluating the quality of learning this week as this is an area I spend a great deal of time on. However, it is an area of work that I block into a couple of weeks each half term”.

A result of a successful initiative: “I had altered the ethos so much over the previous four years, including everyone and involving everyone that was clearly bearing fruit”.

A surprise: “I have not previously seen myself as someone who ‘should’ shape the future of a community directly; more a servant of that community. Perhaps I need to change my mindset in this and become a thinker for the longer-term future of the community”.

In general, the study found that headship in these contexts demanded a focus on the operational rather than the strategic. This encouraged the heads to challenge themselves as to what the role of head should be.

Common inhibitors to effective practice and sustainability

Each headteacher identified the factors that they felt inhibited their effectiveness in their role. They also sought to identify specific practices that helped them to overcome these barriers.

Inhibitors could be classified as either emotional or operational in nature. The remainder of this sub-section explores these aspects in more depth, describing the issues or characteristics associated with each and some of the potential ‘solutions’ identified by respondents. In addition, relevant quotations are included by way of additional evidence and illustration.

Emotional inhibitors

The *emotional* inhibitors that had the biggest drain on the headteachers' sustainability were *guilt* and *anxiety*.

Guilt

Issues

- Most of the guilt that headteachers felt was in fact, self-imposed. Much of it was due to how the individual perceived stakeholders' expectations of their role, and the mis-match between this and the headteacher's ability to maintain a work–life balance.
- The headteachers wanted to be seen to support each aspect of school life but this is a huge time commitment.
- Headteachers felt that the demand to attend meetings, to move the school forward and be more outward thinking, was at odds with the perception that staff, pupils and parents have, for headteachers, to be in school at all times.
- Whether or not the headteacher should teach was seen by two heads as not being the best use of their time. However, it was recognised that staff expected them to do so:

'We need to win our spurs to then be able to have credibility when making judgements in lesson observations.'

'I often feel guilt, both about needing to put my own children first, but also about having to be at school when my own children need me.'

Potential solutions

- Putting a high value on their own well-being, their own learning and maintaining a work–life balance.
- Realising that stakeholders' expectations of headteachers are less wide-ranging than headteachers may assume them to be.
- Using time as a resource, like the budget, so prioritising and not feeling guilt about what cannot be undertaken:

'That's the nature of the job, it's not to be liked and to be perceived to be doing the right thing, it's actually doing the right thing.'

Anxiety

Issues

- Most of the anxiety experienced by the headteachers centred on confronting difficult issues, particularly those involving members of staff.
- Not being able to meet deadlines from both within and without the school.
- The sense of isolation at being the sole decision maker, which is not helped by short time frames.

Potential solutions

- Recognising that the worry about the consequences of an action is often more of a problem than the consequences themselves.
- Preparing as much as possible for meetings, including gathering in-depth knowledge about potential questions and objections.
- Aiming to build capacity through distributed leadership as a way of garnering wider support across the school team.

- Putting feelers out so staff reactions could be anticipated and allies identified, to avoid being the lone voice.

Operational inhibitors

The *operational* inhibitors varied dependent on context, personality and working style. However, some common inhibitors were identified, which were characterised as flitting, fire-fighting, procrastinating, administrating, maintaining and controlling.

Flitting

Characteristics

- Spending very little time (sometimes less than a minute) on an activity, before moving on to another task.
- Avoiding particularly taxing issues that enable headteachers to use flitting to give the impression of looking busy.
- Getting involved in the minutiae of school life to feel in control.
- Inability to trust others to do a job as well as they could and therefore flitting between a number of low order tasks rather than focusing on the important:

'I have a low concentration on tasks.'

'I was surprised to discover how much I flit. I need to chunk time to ensure I achieve what I need to.'

Potential solutions

- Blocking time for specific pre-determined activities and also planning ahead for major pieces of work.
- Focusing on macro management rather than micro management, enabling others to deal with the day-to-day issues.
- Ensuring that systems for management are in place for different aspects of the school.
- Defining roles clearly within the staff team to build capacity more widely so that all perceived decision making is not solely with the headteacher:

'I now flit a bit less, and spend more pockets of time with people instead of always having an eye on the clock.'

There is nothing wrong with saying no. Managing time is related to both attitude and technique. Protecting priority time, sometimes fiercely, is a must. (Fullan 1992: 50)

Fire-fighting

Characteristics

- Spending much time dealing with immediate issues such as pupil behaviour and staff cover.
- Being accessible all of the time to staff and parents leading to a constant drain on time and also a dependency culture.
- Creating short-term fixes that are not based on sound strategic leadership.
- Being reactive rather than proactive:

Heads, above all, are 'victims of the moment'. Because of the immediacy and physical presence of interruptions, heads are constantly dragged into the crisis of the moment. (Fullan 1992: 49)

Potential solutions

- Putting in place people or systems to cope with the immediate, so that the headteacher can concentrate on the important.
- Having an established chain of command so that not everything needs to be communicated to the headteacher.
- Creating and protecting blocked time free from interruptions. Possibly working from home periodically:

'I now feel I have the people and systems in place to deal with day-to-day issues.'

'True delegation has meant that my staff feel confident and supported in making decisions.'

Procrastinating

Characteristics

- Putting off the big tasks or difficult decisions, such as tackling staffing issues.
- Realising that the consequences of our actions and decisions can be huge and therefore making it more difficult to make a reasoned decision.
- Feelings of isolation, even with support networks, so deferring making crucial decisions.
- Believing that there are too many things to tackle all at once:

'Maybe I'm not very good at confronting difficult situations?'

'I put big decisions off and don't finish tasks.'

'I need to stop pussy-footing about. I avoid confronting issues because I'm scared of upsetting other people.'

'I know it's the right thing to do but I need to pluck up the courage to do it.'

Potential solutions

- Having the confidence to tackle difficult issues.
- Prioritising those things that will have the greatest impact, therefore picking battles wisely.
- Building up emotional strength to cope with the unpopularity that inevitably comes from making difficult decisions.
- Recognising the difference between procrastination and reflection.
- Ensuring peer support is in place to lessen the feeling of isolation and drawing on others' experience where necessary:

'Sometimes I avoid things. Maybe I need to be brave and tackle issues.'

Administrating

Characteristics

- Carrying out tasks that others should be doing such as opening the post, answering the telephone, writing standard letters.
- Conducting the administration connected with the governing body.
- Filling in for deficiencies of other staff.
- Being responsible for the organisation of supply staff:

'... telling admin staff how to do things will take as long as doing the task myself.'

Potential solutions

- Considering whether the headteacher is the best person to be doing a particular task, or whether it can be done by other means or by another person.
- Getting the staffing structure right; this could include forward thinking for the future if this is not possible now.
- Prioritising support staff in the school budget:

... try not to do anything that someone else in the building can do, because heads need to spend their time on what others in the building are not in a position to do. (Fullan 1992: 51)

'Meetings – is it important that I go, should it be someone else, does anyone need to go?'

'Governors felt that we couldn't afford additional office hours, I insisted that we couldn't afford not to.'

Maintaining

Characteristics

- 'Filling the gaps': for example, supply teaching, supervising lunchtime, unblocking drains.
- Covering tasks due to the lack of clarity in others' job descriptions.
- Undertaking duties or activities due to the historical legacy of the previous headteacher.
- Attending all meetings and functions as the figurehead of the school.

Potential solutions

- Maintaining the headteacher's focus for effort and energy on the core purpose, their vision and values, ensuring that the headteacher's input is moving the school forward.
- Creating systems which release the headteacher from 'filling the gaps'.
- Defining the headteacher's role to others.
- Ensuring that job descriptions have clear divisions of responsibility:
'I need to be more selective about external pressures, such as meetings, so that I feel more in control by spending more time in school, to enable me to get more things done during the school day.'

Controlling

Characteristics

- Needing to know everything that is going on in the school.
- Wanting to have an input in every aspect of school life.
- Lacking trust in the ability of other staff to execute tasks to the same level:

Once you become a successful head, the biggest personal challenge for you in that future is likely to be in letting the warrior role go – letting go of the need to demonstrate your own performance and achievement and giving your controlling powers away, appropriately. (Mahony 2004: 125)

Potential solutions

- Having the confidence in others to distribute leadership.
- Being a hero maker rather than a hero:

'Some of the best heads I've worked for, at the time I thought were lazy, but it's only with knowledge and hindsight of headship that I realise how good they were at delegating and empowering others.'

'Perhaps I am a control freak and need to let go.'

'I have to recognise I can't know everything that's going on, although it's embarrassing when a parent asks something and I don't know the answer.'

Common themes

From this research several common themes emerged. Foremost among these was the idea that, as there are 21 tasks which teachers must not be routinely required to undertake (DfES 2007), a similar core group of activities could also be identified as being beyond the remit of headteachers, but are nevertheless routinely performed by them. Such tasks/activities can be summarised as:

- being tied to commitments for historical reasons;
- assuming stakeholders' views of their role;
- being deflected from the important by the immediate;
- carrying guilt;
- avoiding issues.

In contrast, headteachers should be encouraged to focus more on:

- being committed to developing themselves as leaders and prioritising their own learning;
- building capacity in their staff for leadership and initiative to be distributed;
- valuing their own well-being;
- concentrating on their vision and core values;
- being ruthless with their own time, blocking time to protect core activities;
- allowing time for reflection;
- celebrating success;
- working in collaboration with peers.

Benefits of peer support

A second major finding from this study was that individual headteachers benefited greatly from the peer support they received while undertaking this review of their approach to work. As one head noted:

'... the group has been central to my sustainability as a headteacher.'

These headteachers felt that the effectiveness of this approach was increased by the process of peer support. For instance, peer support was seen to encourage greater honesty because of the deep trust that was established within the group. It also provided a sounding board for reflection, as each member of the group was a serving headteacher and had something to contribute in this regard.

The fact that individuals were from different authorities was seen as positive as it increased the range of experience that could be shared and also avoided issues of 'local' politics.

In order to make the most of these opportunities the heads themselves had to be prepared to work outside their comfort zone during the process, both as interviewee and interviewer. Similarly, they were quick to recognise that working collaboratively was an essential factor in coping with the demands of the role and for the approach

to be successful, a high level of commitment was needed to the success of the group and the process as a whole.

Developing a model for critical self-reflection

The third major finding from the work and a key output was the development of a methodology for undertaking critical self-reflection, with a view to increasing the overall strategic effectiveness of the headteacher.

This sub-section revisits the methodology, described above, and describes the rationale for the approach and the benefits of its adoption.

Description of the toolkit

The toolkit was devised as an outcome of the process of action research carried out by the six headteachers involved.

Toolkit stages

- Time logging
- Daily reflection
- Weekly reflection
- Analysing
- Reflections on the analysis
- Interviews
- Application and feedback

Regardless of context, experience and personality, the process that informed the toolkit enabled these headteachers to identify priorities, develop strategies and be empowered to be increasingly effective and sustainable.

Time logging

Rationale

Why time log? To identify what it is that headteachers actually spend their time doing, on a day-to-day basis, and how much time they spend on different activities.

Application

This is achieved through the use of the time log pro forma to ensure that each headteacher records their day in a consistent manner, which can then later be used for comparison and analysis.

Benefits

One benefit of time logging is the creation of factual, measurable data that is directly relevant to each participant.

Daily reflection

Rationale

Time logging alone, however, is not sufficient to elicit common themes and solutions. The reasons for activities are as important, if not more so, than the activities themselves. Therefore, the use of a reflection pro forma is essential to help

headteachers delve below the surface of their actions to identify the emotions that both sustain and demotivate.

Application

At the end of each day the reflection pro forma is used in order to consider some key questions. These questions focus on the impact of the headteacher's actions each day, both in terms of moving the school forward and the emotional impact of the day on the headteacher.

Weekly reflection

Rationale

Although the daily time logging and reflection tools are very useful, they are not sustainable for use over a long time period. Therefore, a weekly reflection tool is used, which summarises the headteacher's activities and elicits the key issues for the headteacher's working practice.

Application

At the end of each week the reflection pro forma is used.

Benefits of reflection

This weekly reflection is a manageable tool that can be used over the long term.

Some members of the group found the reflection tool extremely valuable, and are still using it to reflect on a daily or weekly basis:

'I find the reflection tool very powerful because it helps me to identify what I have achieved each day, what causes me frustration, and what I can do to be more effective and happier in my job.'

Analysing

Rationale

The reflections provide an individual's response to how and why headteachers spend their time. In order to compare this with external expectations further analysis is needed. The external expectations used for comparison are the National Standards for Headteachers. The reason for this is that the research determined that the views of stakeholders are very similar to the National Standards.

Application

The length of time each individual spends working on each of the categories is calculated:

- shaping the future
- leading learning and teaching
- developing self and working with others
- managing the organisation
- securing accountability
- strengthening community
- administration and other
- teaching.

The additional categories are included to incorporate activities that headteachers may undertake which do not feature in the National Standards.

Using the time logging pro forma each activity is categorised with a number from 1–8. The task requires the application of judgement to ‘best fit’ the activities against one of the eight areas.

Benefits

This analysis provides an insight into the areas that most time is spent on, and areas that may be neglected. It helps to clarify understanding of the role of headteacher and what that means in practical terms: how the headteacher spends time and emotional energy.

The group was surprised that the stakeholder views were so similar to the National Standards. It made them question whether some of their activities were based on a false assumption of the expectation of their stakeholders. For example, some of the headteachers felt an obligation to spend a percentage of their time teaching, under the impression that this was expected by stakeholders; the evidence proved otherwise.

It is recommended that anyone undertaking this type of analysis in the future categorises against the National Standards for Headteachers only.

Reflections on the analysis

Rationale

This reflection allows the individuals and the group to consider the percentage of time that they had spent on activities in relation to each of the National Standards.

Application

The time log data is collated in order to compare each individual’s activities with the group norm. Each individual studies the analysis of their own data. Individuals then further analyse the ‘other’ activities to determine if they are necessary and if they could be better carried out by someone other than the headteacher.

Benefits

This comparison enables individuals to consider why they spent more or less time than their colleagues on particular activities. For example, one headteacher spent 750 minutes over five days on administrative tasks that they recognised as an inappropriate use of their time. Many were surprised at how little time they spent on shaping the future, and how much time was spent on ‘other’ activities which did not relate to the National Standards.

Interviews

Rationale

In order to provide a further level of challenge, and to elicit a deeper understanding of each headteacher’s motivations for their actions, interviews are used. Each headteacher is interviewed using a set of questions based on their individual time log data and reflections. In the role of critical friend the headteachers need to be prepared to ask probing questions to help the individual tease out what they spent

their time doing, and, more importantly, why and what effect this had on their well-being.

It should be noted that this process can be challenging for all parties and therefore it is essential to establish protocols of confidentiality, honesty and challenge and adhere to them strictly for the following reasons:

- The headteachers can be totally honest about what they did, the impact of their actions on the school, and the impact on their emotions and well-being.
- Having to listen in silence to the group discussion means that the individual is not given the opportunity to justify their actions on a superficial level.
- The level of challenge from other professionals, who are respected, ensure the individual is taken out of their comfort zone to think deeply and reflect on uncomfortable issues.
- The final stage of the interview helps the individual to identify possible changes in practice and attitude.

Application

The group prepared questions based on the data, to help the individual tease out what they spent their time doing, and, more importantly, why and what effect this had on their well-being. This was supported by a number of agreed protocols. In this instance, these included:

- electing a scribe to capture learning;
- having general statements comparing data/graphs of the individual with those of the group;
- encouraging consistency in the areas covered in their interviews, for instance in relation to the context of the period covered, or issues that the data analysis raised for them.

Examples of the questions covered included:

- How do you get anything done? Clearly you get a lot done, but you appear to flit from task to task.
- According to your reflection this particular week was a good week for you. What made it a good week?
- Are systems of communication effective across the school? Is there a formal system? Are you happy with the systems?
- You spend a lot of time dealing with behaviour issues. What happens when you are out of school?
- According to your reflection you didn't sleep for two nights. What makes you worry?

Benefits

'The protocol is vital in order to maintain the structure, to keep the process the same and to really draw out the learning.'

As a result of the interview, each interviewee will have a better understanding of their own motivations, vision and values, and an improved understanding of their own inhibitors to more effective practice and sustainability.

As part of the interview, each headteacher verbalises their learning and a plan of practical changes to their working practice they intend to make.

Application and feedback

Rationale

In order to determine if the toolkit has changed current practice, each headteacher needs to return to the workplace and implement the changes identified over a period of several months.

Application

The changes to practice that are made are as according to the plan each individual has devised. Before meeting again, as a group, each individual then needs to reflect on the changes they have made and the impact this has had on their working practices – the school and themselves as individuals. In order to help each headteacher understand their change in practice and whether or not the changes are sustainable, the group meets again to share their learning and continue the questioning process.

Benefits

If the individual has engaged fully with the process, they will have made changes to their practice that will enable them to approach the role of headship in a more sustainable manner.

Conclusion

The process of time logging, reflecting and interrogation of data by trusted peers represents a potentially effective toolkit in examining and improving practice and in changing attitudes to the role. Regardless of context, experience and personality, this process enabled headteachers to identify priorities, develop strategies and be empowered to be increasingly effective and sustainable:

The starting point for what's worth fighting for is not system change, not changing others around us, but change in ourselves. (Fullan 1992: 33)

The headteachers all felt empowered and re-energised to take their schools further forward, and steer a path through the ever-increasing complexities and relentlessness of headship in the 21st century. The 'mission impossible' had become 'mission possible' after all:

'The whole process made me feel very positive about myself and how I use my time. Personal reflection on my own practice allows me to work in the way that best suits me, to be effective and to maintain enthusiasm and sustainability.'

Individually all of the headteachers felt that they had gained more insight into the role and increasing confidence in the daily choices that they make. But even more than that, the process altered attitudes and levels of engagement with the role. As one headteacher said:

'This process has re-ignited my passion for the job and my whole raison d'être.'

Headteachers are therefore actively encouraged to take part in a reflective and rigorous process to evaluate the use of their time and energies. Where this process takes place as a group exercise over a period of time and in an environment that provides total honesty, confidentiality and real challenge, the process is likely to be more productive and rewarding.

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Daily reflections after time logging

How do I feel about today? Why?
How much of what I did today, was about my personal well-being?
What frustrations have there been today?
How much of what I did today reflected my priorities for the school?
How much about what I did today was maintenance, and how much was moving my school forward?
What should I not have done today?
What should I have done that I didn't do?
Who do I feel was controlling my agenda today? (me, staff, pupils, parents, governors, local authority) Was this a good or a bad thing?
What would I have liked to have changed about how I spent my time today?
What would I like to change about how I work/manage my time?
What can I do to implement these changes?

Weekly reflection

What sort of things did I do this week?
How do I feel about this week? Why?
How much of what I did this week, was about my personal well-being?
What frustrations have there been this week?
How much of what I did this week reflected my priorities for the school?
How much about what I did this week was maintenance, and how much was moving my school forward?
What should I not have done this week?
What should I have done that I didn't do?
Who do I feel was controlling my agenda this week? (me, staff, pupils, parents, governors, local authority) Was this a good or a bad thing?
What would I have liked to have changed about how I spent my time this week?
What would I like to change about how I work/manage my time?
What can I do to implement these changes?

Protocol for interview

- Elect a scribe to capture learning.
- General statements comparing data/graphs of the individual with those of the group.
- Individual responds to data summary.
- Individual talks about the context of the period of the time log and whether it was a representative period.
- Individual talks about issues that the data analysis raised for them.
- Individual identifies and explains any changes already made as a result of the process.
- The group asks the prepared key questions for information.
- The group discusses the individual's working practices and possible inhibitors and solutions – the individual listens without interruption.
- The individual responds to the group's discussion – with group clarification.
- The individual summarises their learning from the interview, with no interruptions from the group.

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