

The cover features a dark background with several concentric circles. One circle is a bright yellow, while the others are white. The text is centered within the innermost white circle.

SSAT on Leading

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FROM HEADTEACHER TO CHIEF EXECUTIVE?

The challenge for school leaders has been to provide sustained success in a single institution. An Ofsted grading of outstanding along with very good examination results have usually defined success nationally. (Locally, parents and other stakeholders may have broader criteria.) Unsurprisingly the credit for the success of the school is given to the headteacher. This has led to successive governments believing that successful headteachers can turn around failing schools whatever their context, and the myth of the ‘hero head’ – usually a man – who would go into a failing school and turn it around in a limited amount of time. The National Leaders of Education (NLE) programme was introduced to enable successful heads to support failing schools – an approach that fits with the ambition of having a school-led system.

The facts are that this approach has had mixed success. I believe that the system needs more than a small number of outstanding leaders: to be world-class, our system needs exceptional leadership at all levels.

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In my earlier pamphlet, *What the new professionalism means for England*, I quoted Sir David Carter when he was the regional schools commissioner for the South West: “The future will need more system leaders. Leaders of educational systems will be outstanding strategists, highly competent financial managers, and knowledgeable about school improvement while never losing sight of the moral purpose that defines the core business.

“System leaders will create legacy. They will have developed new leaders, new opportunities for children to learn in different ways as an outcome from horizon-scanning across a rapidly changing landscape. The post-2010 political arena will focus on holding the system to account in a more mature and localised model than before. System leaders will be in the vanguard of this and will determine the speed with which our education system can rightly call itself world class.”

Who are the system leaders?

Who are the system leaders? In a school-led system, I would have assumed that it would have to be the majority of school leaders, along with exceptionally strong middle leaders. SSAT has always used David Hargreaves’ ambitious definition of system leadership: “System leadership in education has to be about how all those with claims to be the system leaders come to agree about the purposes of the system, how it should be designed and operated, and how the success of that design can be judged.”

But Carter talks of the larger trusts (those with 30+ schools) as the system leaders – this is a much smaller number, and not all the chief executives will be former headteachers. With the headteacher boards and regional schools commissioners, perhaps this is what is meant by a school-led

system – a successful few telling the rest what to do?

Leadership roles within the system are changing. As the multi-academy system has developed, different approaches to the operation of a MAT have been adopted and each has had particular impacts on the role of the lead person. Small MATs tend to have executive principals/headteachers, but as the MAT grows the tendency is to appoint a chief executive. There are no standard job descriptions for these roles and numerous models of operation. Some MATs do not have headteachers leading a school, but instead appoint heads of school, who have less authority.

Now that the threat of compulsory academisation and organisation into MATs has been removed (for the time being, at least), some schools will still operate as freestanding, single institutions, but this is likely to be a minority.

All these differing structures will affect the pipeline for system leaders and the training of school leaders. Arguments can be made about which are the best ways to develop school and system leaders, but more importantly we have to show potential school leaders at all levels that leading in the current schooling system is worth doing. We have a leadership crisis – a lack of high-quality leaders, made worse by losing the expertise of many outstanding leaders who are retiring.

Sir David talks of not “losing sight of the moral purpose that defines the core business.” In the book *Leading*, written with Michael Moritz, Sir Alex Ferguson writes: “I cannot imagine how anyone without firm convictions and beliefs can be an effective leader.”

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Sir Alex Ferguson

SSAT has always advocated that principled school leadership should have a strong influence throughout the school.

Newly appointed teachers start to consolidate and develop their key educational principles and beliefs from the first day in the classroom, and these principles are honed and refined as their career develops.

THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

It is these principles that should always be the first reference point in the decision-making process. Steve Baker, principal of Lipson Co-operative Academy in Plymouth, is one of the outstanding principals that I have had the privilege of working with. He has dedicated his life to working with schools in challenging circumstances, developing the next generation of school leaders and ensuring that the needs of young people always come first. He retired in summer 2016, and the academy will be led by Lynda Budd, who was a participant on SSAT's Developing Leaders programme and is one example of Steve's legacy.

Steve has provided his thoughts on the key principles and values that headteachers need to adopt in the current schooling system.

“Walking into the school I would go on to lead for over 21 years was a special moment. I deliberately stopped in the large courtyard, looked around me and ensured that feeling was forever printed on my brain. I constantly remind myself of that wonderful moment because leading a school in challenging circumstances should be both a privilege and a joy. Capturing that unbridled optimism of the new leader and renewing it every so often reminds you why you are doing such an important and fulfilling job.

“And isn't it great when you embark on your vision and

start to live and model your values? And isn't it heart-warming to see staff, parents and students responding so positively? And isn't it like Tom Peters once described, just like 'dancing with gorillas'? Oh yes, the gorilla loves this new attention and loves the new things you are doing. However, you try telling the gorilla to stop. Welcome to the principle of continual improvement. The benchmarks for all things related to staff expectations, student outcomes and parental satisfaction will continue to accelerate upwards throughout your leadership. Sometimes at an exhilarating, sometimes at an alarming rate. Steven Covey compares this to white water rafting. Change is now a constant principle of leadership.

"Thinking big but starting small is a principle that has served me well in headship over the years. Having a dream that inspires a community is important, but so too is having a team around you capable of constructing and implementing a well thought out plan. How do you eat the elephant? In small bites. This means having an eye for detail and really knowing your own school within its unique context. You will therefore develop rich evaluative skills that enable you to analyse key performance indicators and set out new plans to attain them. Some of you will be brave enough to set what Jim Collins referred to as 'big hairy goals'. I sometimes use the phrase 'simplicity' to describe the deep knowledge needed to master what needs to be done, allied with the ability to communicate this simply and effectively.

"To achieve big hairy goals in an ethical way, WE Deming and the TQM gurus insisted it was important to differentiate between common cause and 'special' cause variation – ie between normal day-to-day variations and specific variations that can be attributed to significant changes in causation or performance. All too often ministers, inspectors and lead-

ers have attributed judgments and made sweeping policies without really having grasped concepts of causation within a multivariable system. Accuracy, digging deeper, and astute understanding of data leads to greater fairness and ultimately to the principle of a peer-led rather than fear-led system of continual development. Within the current reductionist climate, driving fear from the system represents the greatest ethical challenge for leaders.

“Ensuring dialogic learning is at the heart of both our teaching and staff CPD enables feedback to lurk around every corner. Deming urged leaders not to rely on mass inspection, but to be confident to develop systems; and in particular, to nurture a rich enquiry and evidence-based ethos that promotes continual improvement. This means having the confidence to deploy the very best people, trusting them and investing in them to constantly promote professional capital. Peter Senge among others argued that culture eats strategy for breakfast. Nurturing an outstanding ethos for learning therefore continues to be the most important principle of the leader.”

Leaders' most important principle continues to be nurturing an outstanding ethos for learning.

Steve's story highlights so many of the key points SSAT advocates for leadership: principles, vision, thinking big starting small, innovation, developing talent, showing enthusiasm for leading, and humility.

THE EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER

For John Camp, executive headteacher of The Compass Partnership of Schools in Greenwich, seven principles underpin the approach to leadership: