

# Shining a light on leadership

A new look at recruiting leaders in schools

Viewpoint | February | 2008



*Two police officers were patrolling a residential street late one evening. They came upon a man on his knees, under a streetlight, searching the pavement. Upon their query, the man informed them that he was searching for his lost house keys. "Are you sure you lost them here?" they asked. "Oh no, I lost them over there in the dark," the man replied, "but I'm only going to be able to see under the streetlight." Recruitment is too often a case of searching where the light is brightest, rather than where the valuables are likely to be found.*

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Recruitment has an important role in developing a school's leadership capacity. It contributes in two ways. The first, obviously, is selecting the right people for current management vacancies, though it is also important to ensure that leaders are not only promoted from within but that a healthy proportion of external hires season the mix. The second is selecting people with future leadership potential, right down to the NQT level, so that the school can build its own pipeline of leaders.

Both strategies are hamstrung by the inadequacy of traditional recruitment processes for spotting leadership talent, let alone potential.

There is a mismatch between the characteristics which are easy to spot during interview and those which are essential to effective leadership. Performance at work is like an iceberg, most of what counts can be found below the waterline. Traditional interviews are effective at investigating what can be measured and quantified, such as skills, experience and qualifications. Skills count but effectiveness as a leader comes from deeper: the right self image; attitudes, behaviours and characteristics such as credibility, influencing skills, resilience, long term thinking and the values and motivation to make a difference to the group. Not only are some of these difficult to spot, they are also difficult to develop later on. By contrast, skills and experience can be acquired but if someone is not energised by making an impact on others, or possessed of the courage to challenge performance, it is a long and arduous journey to change this. Daniel Goleman reports in his book on *Working with Emotional Intelligence* that EI competencies are twice as likely to predict success in leadership and professional occupations as technical skills and IQ combined.

In many ways, job interviews are looking in the wrong place. This problem is compounded by interviewee experience. A typical applicant for senior leadership

in school will be attending several interviews at once, will have been through many during their career and they may even be experienced at conducting them for others. They know what questions will be asked and what answers are expected. Contrary to common perceptions, very few people lie outright on a CV or in an interview but it is easy to reshape events in a positive light, or make a one-off experience seem like a way of life.

For the most part, we know what we *should* do. The question is whether we actually do it. Most candidates can explain how they would go about engaging stakeholders in developing a strategy but when they actually try it, do they follow what they know to be good practice? People are often too busy to do the right things and some of those things are unpleasant, difficult or scary. Another problem is that performance under tests is not always translated into performance at work. Put someone in front of a verbal and numerical reasoning test and they'll give it their best shot. But does that mean they consistently approach work problems and planning in an analytical, rigorous and methodical way?

What is to be done? The first step is to be clear about the deeper attributes that lead to successful leadership. There is much that is common between leadership positions; can anyone lead well without being able to create a strategy or vision? But there are also attributes that are distinctive for a particular school or role. A leader brought in to turn around a failing department will require different methods than one brought in to lead an already outstanding team. What are the six or eight behaviours we expect the holder of *this* role to show on a regular basis? Looking at someone who is already successful in the same job and circumstances can give valuable clues; what do they do that others don't? But be careful to look at the differences; what has changed about this job? Seeking a clone of the previous job holder could be a mistake.

With a clear, short list of the behaviours required and agreement upon them, recruiters need to develop a test that can be used in an interview situation. The ideal way of identifying behaviours in a candidate would be to observe them on the job. Sadly, this is not a readily available option but we can simulate some of the circumstances.

Assuming a reasonable long interview format (90 – 120 minutes), the trick is to get the candidate to re-create their work experiences in narrative form. It is essential that these stories are unprompted, open ended and to a 'fly on the wall' level of detail. If we ask someone to give us an example of how they helped a colleague to develop, we will get an example of how they helped a colleague to develop, regardless of whether this is characteristic of them. For example, if we ask someone to tell us about a time when they felt particularly successful at work and there is no mention in the tale of any engagement with colleagues or coaching, that is highly revealing. In these unprompted interviews, it is often what is not said that is most enlightening.

If we are getting unprompted narratives with sufficient detail to be clear exactly what is happening; who said what, who was present, what exactly was said, then we can generate vivid and reliable information on behaviours displayed. The chief problem with this sort of interview, known formally as the behavioural event interview, is the reluctance of candidates to talk about themselves in that level of detail. Culturally, it feels immodest. Interviewers need to coach candidates that this is what is expected. In particular, people need to be encouraged to use the 'I' word. Candidates generally prefer to talk about team efforts, "And then we planned the project," but this can hide a multitude of behaviours. What was their role in the planning? Were they leading the team or making the coffee? Permissible evidence in this sort of interview is usually begun with an "I" and consists of concrete events.

Such an interview is gruelling and time consuming for both parties but is worth the investment due to the rich data it provides. The unprompted and undirected anecdotes give a revealing insight into what goes on below the waterline. Interviewers sometimes worry about consistency between candidates, coming from a background where every candidate is asked identical questions, but as long as the same prompts and processes are used, this approach is fair and defensible.

This technique can be applied to both current and potential future leaders but extra care needs to be taken when recruiting for potential. It is important that schools look for leadership potential in all their recruits and take care to develop it from the very start of a career. It is often the early lessons and role models that have the most lasting impact. Yet

potential is very different to current ability. For one thing, it is more risky. There are many ways to derail a promising career, from over-ambition and arrogance to changing personal priorities. Equally, assessments of potential are more prone to stereotyping and can overlook less conventional candidates and those who mature into leaders later in life. More so than other levels of leadership, potential is found in values, attitudes and characteristics rather than skills and experience, because those skills are yet to be acquired.

Headteachers tell us that they tend to look for the following early warning signs of leadership:

- confidence and credibility
- the ability to see the big picture, to make connections and think of the whole school
- mastering the basics of their role quickly and looking for more
- getting involved (doesn't look the other way or walk past incidents)
- initiative and self motivation (the sort of people you can't *stop* from leading)
- intellectual curiosity and capacity (sees the common threads)
- resilience and empathy (to survive the pace of acceleration and learn from others).

Potential should be sought and nurtured wherever found but be warned, investing large amounts of time in someone 'destined' for a fast track to the top is highly risky. A far better approach is to focus on the 'next best move' for every member of staff. This involves being clear on the current capability of every member of staff and planning the next move that will stretch them to the maximum and provide skills they currently lack. Good timing and total honesty are the secrets of success in these moves.

Spotting the deeper characteristics that create outstanding leadership is at the heart of the recruitment process and this can be done by reversing the traditional, highly structured interview approach to focus on what candidates choose to say about themselves. Of course, these techniques should not be limited to the job interview, they can be used throughout a career to coach and develop individuals.

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