



The Nine Pillars of Great School Leadership

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The Nine Pillars of Great School Leadership

Pillar 1 – Moral, Ethical and Compassionate Leadership

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‘A definition of leadership is to create the conditions for people to thrive, individually and collectively and achieve significant goals’.

David Pendleton and Adrian Furnham
Leadership: All you Need to Know

‘Leadership is lifting a person’s vision to high spirits, the raising of a person’s performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations’.

Peter Drucker
Managing in a Time of Great Change

‘Leadership can be defined as the will to control events, the understanding to chart a course, and the power to get a job done co-operatively using the skills and abilities of people’.

Donald Krause

‘A leader is an individual who significantly affects the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of a significant number of individuals’.

Howard Gardner
Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Great leadership matters – from the frontline of the school to the Headteacher it is the most important advantage any school can have. That is why there is so much attention paid to it with a huge growth in the published literature and it is a rich area of on-going research. This pamphlet seeks to identify from the literature and action research the characteristics of great school leadership. It is part of a series which first identified the Nine Pillars of Great Schools (2016 and 2018) based on the literature and nine volumes of case studies from London's outstanding schools published between 2010 and 2019. Many of these case studies were based on aspects of great school leadership. It is recognised that the term 'great' is rather subjective and that OfSTED, for example, only goes as far as 'outstanding' in their description of the best schools and other commentators refer to 'high performing' or 'successful' leaders and schools. After much discussion and debate with a range of Headteachers a definition of greatness emerged as 'sustained excellence', 'exceptionality' and 'superior quality and character'. The importance of context also needs to be recognised. Great schools vary in age-range and phase, size, poverty and privilege, type and tradition, and rural and urban locations. In particular their social contexts and pupil intakes differ as well as the quality of their buildings and resources. However, despite these considerable differences it can be argued from the literature, research, and practical examples that great schools do share a number of key dimensions and characteristics, particularly excellence in leadership throughout the school, which are described in these nine pillars.

Over the last 20 years various themes and dimensions have emerged to describe the best school leadership which have also generated some rigorous debate between researchers and practitioners. For example, the balance

between transactional and transformational leadership, the critical importance of ethical leadership and vision and values, the personal behaviour and attitudes of leaders, leadership styles, the distribution of leadership within schools and the focus on the core business of teaching and learning. In recent years the concept of system leadership has assumed greater importance. There is currently an on-going debate concerning the need for a greater focus on 'domain specific knowledge' rather than on generic leadership skills and behaviours particularly in terms of leadership development. A glance at the titles of school leadership books and articles over recent years reveals some of these complexities in examining the qualities and dimensions of great school leadership. They range across 'Authentic Leadership', 'Passionate Leadership', 'Leading with Substance', 'Learning-Centred Leadership', 'Leadership and Sustainability', 'Distributed Leadership', 'Leading in a Culture of Change', 'Focused Leadership', 'Leverage Leadership', 'Servant Leadership', 'Leadership for Well-Being' and 'Nuanced Leadership'. There seems to be a growing consensus that the key aspects of contemporary school leadership are vision and values, creating alignment and motivation, embracing change, the empowerment of others and building commitment.

The Framework and characteristics that are described here in the Nine Pillars of Great School Leadership seeks to provide a tool for school leaders to reflect on their practice and performance. It may be that leaders would want to refine these pillars and characteristics to better reflect their own context and experience but hopefully this publication has captured the essential dimensions of great school leadership, to stimulate a rich debate not only amongst Headteachers and Senior Leaders but also middle leaders and all staff.

1 Moral, Ethical and Compassionate Leadership

‘Extending the vision of what is possible involves being historian and futurologist. Any leader wishing to do this is deeply aware of this double requirement: the present dominates so much of school life. And if sometimes that present seems overwhelming, the energy levels dip. So telling stories which remind people of past success and keeps predecessors and the school happy, are both things wise leaders do. But they are also forecasters of the weather and describers of future possibilities : they confidentially describe a path from the present to the future. They are good listeners and readers. They write ‘future’ pieces for their community. They ask ‘why not’ aloud and ‘why’ silently in their heads’.

Sir Tim Brighouse

How Successful Headteachers Survive and Thrive

- Leaders recognise that the route to great schooling lies in moral purpose: the determination, brought to reality, to ensure that all members of the school community behave in a way that is mindful of each other. A compelling and inclusive moral purpose drives the school forward based on equity, social justice and unshakeable principles to be shared and acted upon by everyone.
- There is a deeply embedded set of strongly held values. Leaders articulate and reinforce clear values through their daily interactions with staff and pupils and work with governors. They ensure that basic assumptions and beliefs are shared and that all children and young people receive the best possible education whatever the realities of race, poverty and other social barriers.
- The school’s culture and ethos result from the application of its vision and values and manifest themselves in customs, symbols, stories and language. They are successfully expressed through ways that leaders and members of the school community relate to each other and work together.
- Leaders recognise the schools cannot be considered great without due attention being paid to spiritual, moral, social and cultural education and deeper thinking about the purpose and development of values and skills that are at the heart of these aspects of education.
- There is a core belief amongst leaders that compassion is the key organising principle in education, promoting the highest, collective values with fidelity to every person’s cultural value. Leaders strive to develop a compassionate school community and curriculum that ensures everybody’s well-being. They demonstrate respect, generosity of spirit and understanding.
- Leaders are considerate and dutiful, demonstrating humility and self-control. They see themselves working in the service of others acting with courage in the best interest of the school community to deliver a broad, balanced, creative, and inclusive education, and to develop a set of ethical understandings.
- Leaders are selfless leading with empathy and humanity acting only in the interests of children and young people so that they may lead useful, happy, and fulfilling lives. They act with integrity and establish a climate of openness taking decisions in a transparent manner.
- Leaders are fully aware of the broader purpose of education and the importance of considering what they hope will become of their children and young people when they finally leave school. They strive to create a moral and ethical community in the hope that their students live up to altruistic ideas and values and care for each other and the planet.

‘Our schools are the social embryos of humanity – those institutions that are established to promote our highest collective values. They should be the embodiment of norms of reciprocity, active trust and democratic deliberation.....They need leadership that lifts us up and turns us around together in pursuit of a common cause that expresses and advances our humanity’..’

Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley - The Fourth Way

2 Inspirational and Transformational Leadership

‘The longest lever we have at our disposal is leadership: Leadership at all levels, leaders who leave behind a legacy of leaders that can go even further, leaders who step out to make wider contributions and a pipeline of leaders developing their dispositions and skills...it is impossible to get a system perspective if we only stay at home. We need cross-connected leadership experiences in order to transform the system so that progressive cultures flourish’.

Michael Fullan

Leadership and Sustainability - System Thinkers in Action

- Leaders recognise that incremental change isn't enough and aim for transformation with reference back to the current and known world and to future possibilities. They recognise that the time to explore transformational change is when things are apparently going well. They are fiercely committed to creating a better future with the people they lead.
- The school's leadership is visionary, inspiring and values based. Leaders extend the vision of what is possible and confidently describe a path from the present to the future – redirecting approaches, anticipating developments and inspiring changes through being bold, positive and ambitious.
- The vision of the school is clear, understood and shared by all, underpinned by the school's values, philosophy, and ethos. All members of the school community promote the vision of the school and the collective vision permeates the whole institution.
- Transformational and inspirational leadership is more than meeting existing needs or demands from followers. It focuses on the people involved and seeks to transform attitudes and beliefs, unleashing energy and motivation. It aims to develop mature, stimulating relationships that will secure the maximum commitment from the school community.
- Leaders create and manage culture. In particular, there is a culture of high expectations. Leaders lead with enthusiasm and encouragement, empowering people and giving them the opportunity to do their best. Positive language increases aspirational thinking. Everyone feels fulfilled in what they do and contributes to the fulfilment of others.
- Leaders lead by example – with trust, integrity, resilience, clarity and a heart-felt set of personal values which they demonstrate to others. They draw on their own scholarship experience and skills to influence those around them. They are highly visible and reinforced the school's vision every day, inspiring staff and pupils to excellence.
- Leaders find time and space for creativity and innovation throughout the school. They are restless in their desire both to improve and transform their school, looking outwards where appropriate to seize ideas which they can customise to their own content.
- The vision and aspirations of the school and its leaders are always optimistic and based upon a growth mindset philosophy. There is no ceiling on hope and no cap on ambition. Leaders create excitement, idealism and confidence.

‘The very essence of leadership is that you have to have a vision. It's got to be a vision that you articulate clearly and forcefully on every occasion. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet’.

Theodore Hesburgh

3 Strategic and Operational Leadership

- Leaders have one foot in the present and another in the future. They make clear strategic choices and once these get made they are adept at managing the necessary changes through passionate communication, clarity of goals, maintaining the focus and careful evaluation. They are adaptive leaders with the ability to mobilise action and to promote collaboration.
- Strategic leadership hinges on effectively capturing and directing attention. The school's strategy represents the desired pattern of organisational attention which everybody keeps in mind in their own way. Leaders know that directing attention to where it needs to go is a primal test of their leadership.
- Well-focused leaders can balance an inner focus on the direction, culture and performance of the school with an outer focus on the large realities that shape the changing learning environment, with time to reflect and see the bigger picture. They are good listeners and readers, sensing trends and emerging realities, ready to seize the opportunities for change.
- There is excellent operational and organisational leadership, enabling systems to work well. Leaders recognise the crucial importance of focusing on the right things and doing them right. They are highly effective planners, resourcers and organisers, paying attention to detail and getting results. They successfully align internal structures to overarching values and goals.
- Leaders pay great attention to the development of teams and team-working in order to deliver the overall strategy of the school and to provide clarity and consistency of practice on the front line. They establish a climate of openness and take decisions in a transparent manner.
- There is a continuous process of reflection and feedback amongst leaders at all levels that becomes implicit and in which all talk about their work and learning. The school as an organisation learns its way forward continuously striving to improve its processes and systems within the overall strategy for improvement.
- The quest for excellence becomes a habit for leaders and their purposeful practice. There is an embedded culture of thinking and doing, building momentum and maintaining high impact over a sustained period of time.
- Leaders recognise that there can be little progress without unity of purpose and action, harnessing the individual and group capacity to make improvements. People are energised to welcome change in a climate of trust. They understand what needs to be done and their role in helping to improve practice and take pride in the process.

'The focus for leadership in actively improving schools is the creation and expansion of improvement capacity. Such capacity change—culture, structure and knowledge—supports continuous organisational and professional renewal'.

David Hopkins - School Improvement for Real

'Outstanding leaders think and act systematically. In contrast to good leaders, the outstanding leaders see wholes move fluidly from element to element and join up their thinking and the organization's activity. Central to all this is a keen sense of purpose and their understanding of how different aspects of organizations internally connect. Purpose drives performance and the outstanding leaders both understand this and refuse to allow anything to stand in the way'.

John Pendleton and Adrian Furnham
Leadership: All you Need to Know

4 Learning Focused Leadership

- A relentless focus on high quality learning and teaching is at the heart of the school's endeavours – 'learning without limits' and 'success for all' are guiding principles for school leaders. Leaders demand ambitious standards for all pupils overcoming disadvantage and advancing equality.
- Leaders regularly and openly model their learning and articulate their own learning challenges and goals but also shape the conditions for all to successfully learn on a continuous basis. Leadership has a direct impact on the quality of teaching and learning.
- The school is a knowledge – creating institution where leaders embed a collaborative learning culture. Professional knowledge is continually examined and reviewed and new knowledge developed and shared. Leaders have a commitment to building professional capital by looking to research evidence, seeking out examples of brilliant practice in their own and other schools and disseminating it effectively.
- Leaders are enquiry-minded, geared to innovation and action research. They are in constant pursuit of ideas, evidence and knowledge, with a passion for curiosity. Leaders are highly reflective about their work and adept at mobilising the school's intellectual and creative capital to produce excellent educational outcomes.
- Leaders enable the school to be at the forefront of successful and innovative curriculum design providing the entirety of educational experience so that pupils can live fulfilling lives. Leaders ensure the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, the development of learning skills and the fostering of positive character traits.
- Learning and teaching are personalised throughout the curriculum through tailored programmes for a wide range of pupils with different needs, so that all are able to participate, progress and achieve.
- Leaders invest in a variety of learning technologies and resources which encourage and stimulate independent learning and are used highly effectively and imaginatively by staff and pupils.
- Leaders help the school function as a professional learning community where communities of practice are fostered and developed. They are able to review and adapt existing practices through regular conversations to develop exemplary pedagogy and to lead high quality professional development.

'One of the key principles of leadership is that leaders must strive to be model learners. They must continue to read and engage in discussions about all manner of subjects as well as the most recent theories of learning. As leaders they should question current practices and never feel that they have progressed beyond being a learner'.

T.J. Sergiovanni - Leadership: What's in it for Schools?

5 Student Centred Leadership

- Leaders make sure that pupils are involved in leading, managing and planning their own educational experience at all levels. Pupils are encouraged to carry out their own lines of enquiry and participate in focus groups investigating and reporting back on school issues.
- Leaders are heavily involved in ensuring the quality of teaching. They develop a shared theory of effective teaching in particular contexts. This forms the basis of a coherent teaching programmes focused on the best learning and wellbeing for children and young people.
- Leaders develop the capacity of teachers to teach what pupils need to learn whilst being open-minded about what that is and how to achieve it. They have expert knowledge of the types of professional development that are more likely to make an impact on the pupils of the participating teachers.
- Leaders ensure a safe, secure and well-ordered environment for both pupils and staff which includes school and class routines that prioritise exemplary behaviour and protect learning time.
- Leaders resource strategically and thereby extend teachers' capacity. Crucially, time and teaching materials are allocated to maximise student-centred learning.
- The student voice is strong throughout the school. Leaders empower and encourage students to suggest improvements to the school and ways to help them learn better and foster their well-being. They participate fully through School Councils and Student Leadership teams, surveys, feedback and evaluations. School leaders make sure that their voice counts.
- Pupils are recognised as citizens of the school in a real sense. They may, for example, contribute to school publications and communications, observe and evaluate learning, be represented on working parties and represent the school as ambassadors and guides.
- Leaders ensure a strong focus on pupil well-being and safeguarding. Peer counsellors, mediators and mentors are used to maintain and rebuild pupil relationships.

"The more leaders focus their relationships, their work and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning the greater their influence on student outcomes."

Vivianne Robinson - Student-Centred Leadership

6 Distributed and Invitational Leadership

‘For leaders to get results they need three kinds of focus. Inner focus attunes our intuitions, guiding values and better decisions. Other focus lets us navigate in the larger world. A leader turned out of his internal world will be rudderless; one blind to the world of others will be clueless; those indifferent to the larger systems within which they operate will be blindsided.. Leaders need the full range of inner, other and outer focus to excel - a weakness in any one of them can throw a leader off balance’.

Daniel Goleman

Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence

- Leaders practise invitational and distributed leadership in the belief that all have potential for growth and development and have different leadership qualities as well as expert knowledge.
- The first role of leadership is that it is shared, with the aim of building leadership capacity and ownership in making significant decisions. Invitational school leaders invite everybody to wear the mantle of leadership at different levels and be part of achieving the vision and the journey to success.
- Strategic development is inclusive through inviting a range of leaders at different times to participate in achieving a common view of what is required to sustain success.
- Invitational leaders welcome internal and external challenge stimulating professional dialogue. They encourage the staff to take on more responsibility and accountability for their own decisions as part of the collective accountability of the school.
- Leaders are confident and open enough to develop high levels of trust, based on positive relationships, leading to increased opportunities to draw upon specific knowledge and expertise, building collective capacity.
- Leaders empower through delegating high levels of authority. What has to be done is usually defined but how it is done is left to those who have the responsibility which might mean control over resources, methods and decision making.
- The best leaders grow future leaders. There is a clear policy and programme to develop leadership potential and talent through growing and nurturing leadership habits and learning with and from peers. This includes opportunities to take on new roles and experiences, work shadowing and mentoring.
- Invitational leaders recognise that many groups – staff, children and young people, parents and the community – have a stake in their schools and find ways to involve them in the development of the school’s collective vision and values.

‘Distributed leadership draws change from the everyday knowledge and capacities of staff rather than driving reforms through them. It is a crucial element in sustainable leadership. Distributed leadership is grounded in and advances a compelling moral purpose’.

Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley - The Fourth Way

7 Leadership Accountability for Performance

‘Once a commitment is made, the goal will seem larger, bolder, and more exciting... leaders need to fix on it like a laser beam. They need to see it intensively, even obsessively. They feel it. They hear it. They taste it. They smell it. It becomes part of them, their very identity, because it is something they are committed to make happen, come what may, whatever it takes’.

Stephen Denning
The Secret Language of Leadership

- Leaders develop a robust, rigorous and transparent self-evaluation process as part of intelligent accountability to ensure that their schools work effectively and efficiently towards the common good and the fullest development of their pupils. They welcome strong governance in holding them to account for the school’s performance.
- Leaders accept accountability as part of developing a performance culture, building in time for reviewing evidence and collective enquiry, constantly striving for betterment. They manage existing accountability systems proactively and confidently and are willing to do the hard things and make tough choices for the greater good. They hold all staff to account for their professional conduct and practice.
- Leaders at all levels practise a continuous process of reflection with their colleagues that becomes implicit in all their work and learning, developing an accountability mindset, and accepting responsibility seeking a proper balance between trust and accountability.
- There is regular and forensic analysis of performance data and evidence informed practice by leaders with exacting self-scrutiny and open discussion about strategies for improvement and the implementation of effective action plans.
- Self-evaluation is grounded in accurate and honest analysis and is used unflinchingly to compare performance against the most stretching of benchmarks.
- Leaders practise ‘appreciative enquiry’ by distinguishing the best of what is, fostering a dialogue for knowledge around what should be and creating a vision for what will be promoting questioning and creativity and a collective mentality for growth.
- Leaders regularly seek feedback, and take full account of the views of staff, pupils, governors, parents and the community as a whole in evaluating progress and performance accepting the challenge of continuous improvement.
- Leaders make good use of external, critical friends including education consultants and peer schools to provide a rigorous reality check.

‘The skill for a successful leader is to get the right balance between personal accountability and the accountability of others. Ultimately what the leader does sets the tone. Good leaders will take responsibility for results, are clear on how well they are doing and how others are doing’.

Andy Buck - What Makes a Great School?

‘Nuance leaders have a curiosity about what is possible, openness to other people, sensitivity to context and to loyalty to a better future. They see below the surface, enabling them to detect patterns and their consequences for the system. They connect people to their own and each other’s humanity. They don’t lead they teach. They change people’s emotions, not just their minds. They have an instinct for orchestration. They foster sinews of success. They are humble in the face of challenges, determined for the group to be successful, and proud to celebrate success. They end up developing incredibly accountable organizations because the accountability gets built into the culture. Above all, they are courageously and relentlessly committed to changing the system for the betterment of humanity’.

Michael Fullan

Nuance, Why Some Leaders Succeed and Others Fail

- Leaders develop well-being strategies and programmes as part of the overall culture of the school and its values, fully integrated into the life and work of the school. Staff and pupils’ well-being is the result of a stimulating and inclusive learning environment and meeting personal needs and expectations.
- Leaders monitor carefully indicators of well-being such as staff and pupil attendance, mental health, complaints and grievances, recruitment and retention and engagement and participation in school life. They are open and transparent in discussing well-being issues and seek feedback through surveys and working groups.
- Leaders recognise that school environments should be considered as an active part of children and young people’s sense of belonging, where they can be confident they will fit in and safe in their identity. Creating a sense of place, and emotional, rooted attachment to the learning environment is vital to improving learning and well-being for every member of the school community.
- Leaders build the best possible relationships, recognising that children, young people and adults all want to be known and seen for who they are. These relationships play out with peers, in social places, corridors and classrooms and are continually reinforced through encounters and expectations.
- Teachers, children and young people flourish in schools which foster their creativity, resilience and sense of agency. Leaders bring a sense of hope, a sense of possibilities, a belief in everybody and a recognition of the power of place and belonging.
- Leadership plays a key role in giving control and affording participation in decision making. Professional growth, control and autonomy and meaningful communication are important to well-being.
- Leaders demonstrate positive and optimistic personal behaviour recognising that they are a ‘barometer’ in their organisation. They continuously strive to build an ethos and climate which nourishes well-being where everybody can give of their best.
- Leaders recognise that having good mental and physical health is a priority for any learning community where professional learning creates positively valued outcomes. A happy, motivated staff is the best thing for pupils to thrive, always exhibiting behaviours which are supportive and creative.

‘Leading involves giving and the top leaders know that they can only give when they have something in the tank.... when they take care of themselves, it has an impact not only on themselves, but on the health of the places where they work. Most importantly, they model to their colleagues the importance of this’.

Mary Myatt - High Challenge, Low Threat

9 System Leadership

'As a middle leader in a school you probably have the potential to make most difference to the outcomes for pupils than any other group of staff. It is an oft Quoted cliché, but middle leaders really are the engine room of the school. It is your team that delivers at the front line: great teaching, strong support and guidance, and excellent curriculum; all delivered in a great climate for learning. These all add up to great outcomes for pupils'.

Andy Buck, Oli Tomlinson and James Toop
What Makes a Great Middle Leader?

- Outward looking, connected and forward thinking leadership is able to drive change at a local level, sustaining a sense of shared endeavour. System leaders inspire and influence others within and beyond schools to build the individual and collective capacity to push the boundaries of success. In so doing they broaden their scope of learning and impact.
- Collective moral purpose is a value shared and acted upon by all stakeholders in the system.
- Systemic leaders share a strong professional motivation to collaborate, leading to sustainable school improvement through observation, evaluation, reflection and joint practice development within and between schools. They help to build professional capital and empower leaders at all levels who can make change happen.
- Peer review, evaluation and challenge is practised at every leadership level within and between schools sharing and critiquing practice, fostering a sense of common direction and sustaining a climate for improvement.
- Leaders engender trust and create the capacity for collaboration to happen. There is a focus on developing collaborative partnerships and networks, sharing innovation, expertise and disseminating high leverage best practice with other schools. Leaders engage externally in order to buttress the work of building internal capacity.
- Social capital is well developed within and between schools, with positive relationships and high levels of trust facilitating a professional culture of teacher cooperation.
- Leaders lead the community and develop effective relationships with fellow professionals in other public services in order to promote a wide range of opportunities and community cohesion.
- Leaders look regionally, nationally and globally for research and innovation to learn from, and contribute to, the best educational practice for mutual improvement.

'System leadership is not leading just one or more schools, not even many schools, but leading the education system as a whole with an explicit moral purpose in mind, with the implications for actions'.

David Hargreaves

‘School leaders who thrive are the ones who value, motivate and empower others and can articulate how they achieve most.... they provide clear direction whilst trusting staff and distributing leadership with confidence across the school. They consult widely but are not afraid of making decisions, even hard ones, on their own.... they apply pressure and support in equal measure, firmly hold others to account, but also show staff they are valued and appreciated. They reward staff justly and fairly but do not condone underperformance. They are reflective and careful in their judgements and decisions but are not afraid to take risks, nor to acknowledge their humanity and fallibility. They are both practical and academic - emotionally, politically and spiritually intelligent... they are inspirational, with a clear vision and route of direction informed by a heart-felt set of personal values, which they communicate clearly to others. With this kind of leadership, energy can be released to return to the primacy of teaching and the joy of learning in schools?’.

Andrea Berkeley, ‘Keeping your head: the unspoken realities of Leadership’, in Sustaining Depth and Meaning in School Leadership

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