

Leading Academies

Brent Davies

with Hilary Macaulay

‘A genuine hunger and an expectation of success.’

‘Ratcheting up standards is the focus.’

‘The whole sense of social justice really appealed.’

‘I don’t expect any different for children in this academy than I do for my own children.’

‘Working at serious speed and getting the strategic and operational balance right.’

‘You have to believe you can make a difference...

...that change is possible.’

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This publication highlights the knowledge, skills and qualities needed in leading and managing academies. It also gives an account of the leadership journey of headteachers in the 21st century. The journey has enabled the academy principals to refine and develop their educational principles and philosophy based on a deep and passionate belief that every child should have the opportunity to succeed.

Most academy principals have had previous experience of headship and this has given them confidence to do what “is right” to create a successful school. Many have embraced the concept of being chief executives and this new role has provided both a stimulus and challenge for their professional development.

The academy principals are system redesigners. In *System Redesign – 1 The road to transformation in education*, Professor David Hargreaves writes:

‘In education, as in business and industry, to introduce a new practice you often have to displace or replace an older practice. Many established practices have been around for so long that they are unquestioned and unquestionable. Any attempt to disrupt them will be resisted, sometimes fiercely.’

The academy principals are risk-takers and they are very aware that they are in the public eye. Their challenge is to show rapid improvement and develop long term strategies for success at the same time. The academies have departed from the traditional practices of 20th century schools, for example using flexible time schedules and the merging of phases. Many of the principals, in partnership with sponsors, have designed (building and systems) their academy.

The knowledge and skills that they have gained must be passed to the next generation of principals. The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust is committed to the principle of ‘by schools, for schools’ and will utilise this expertise in the design and delivery of its leadership programmes.

There has never been a better time to be a school leader. This publication captures the key leadership issues at the start of this pioneering journey by these education entrepreneurs.



Sue Williamson
Director – Leadership and Innovation
Specialist Schools and Academies Trust

Leaders in academies operate in challenging and complex environments with considerable pressures and demands. The leadership role in academies is critical in transforming schools and schooling to enhance educational opportunities for students.

To ensure educational success in academies it is important that educational policy makers and leaders reflect on the nature and dimensions of leadership. The purpose of this reflection is to better understand the leadership demands of academies in order to support current leaders and to better prepare the leaders for the rapidly expanding academy sector. To this end SSAT commissioned Professor Brent Davies to undertake research into leadership in academies. This research has taken the form of a series of qualitative interviews with leaders of academies enabling them to analyse their own practice. The report is an account of the research, supported throughout by the ‘leadership voices’ of academy principals. Professor Davies is grateful for the ability to draw on the research of Hilary Macaulay undertaken for her PhD to support this research project.

Consideration of what is special about leading in academies, and what the major challenges are, frames this research project. Academies are obviously similar to other schools in that they teach children within the same age ranges and curriculum and assessment frameworks but they have some significant differences. It is these differences that the report highlights. This research, while using the accounts of academy principals, also recognises that different patterns of school governance and the role of sponsors play a significant role. In interpreting the data from the interviews the following nine elements emerged and have been used to structure this report.

Academy principals:

- Have an absolute focus on transformational leadership
- Are passionate leaders – driven by the centrality of social justice and moral purpose
- Meet the challenge of balancing the operational and strategic
- Manage the political dimension (local & national) of leading in academies
- Are entrepreneurial leaders
- Work in new forms of governance and leadership
- Create a sense of place
- Lead and manage autonomy in innovative ways
- Have the personal characteristics to stay the course

The construction of this taxonomy, of what effective leaders in academies do, is an attempt to provide a discussion of the nature and dimensions of best practice. This should provide a guide for existing leaders of academies to reflect on their practice and provide a template of leadership issues for the development of future leaders.

1 An absolute focus on transformational leadership

The raison d'être of the Academies Programme is to transform learning and educational opportunities for many thousands of young people who deserve nothing less.

Styles and approaches of transformational leadership were evident in all the academy principals interviewed. Much of the academic research on this transformational leadership has been summarised by Leithwood (2005). He articulates school wide factors such as setting directions, developing people and redesigning the organisation. He also identifies individual factors such as charisma, inspirational leadership, consideration for individuals and providing an intellectually stimulating workplace. These factors were reflected in the leadership practices of the academy principals. One significant factor in the interviews was that for many of the principals this was their second or third headship. They brought to the new post the experience of working in previously challenging schools which they had helped to turn around. A common response was that they had to use that previous experience of transforming a school over five years in order to transform a new academy over a much shorter period of time (often only one year or even less). This transformation focus is one in which learning, teaching and standards are the absolute priority. One principal articulated the need for a constant focus on raising standards:

'I've got some fantastic senior staff, very, very driven, very focused. We haven't kept our eye off the ball once; our eye is constantly on the ball of learning and teaching, raising standards.'

Transformation is a challenging process which was commented on by one principal:

'To transform this place was all about the management of change and moving people from either a state of conscious or unconscious incompetence to a position where they can be proud of what they do, have confidence in what they do. It is about raising expectations in the face of enormous challenge, sustained challenge that just does not seem to ever go away. Transforming things here is not a quick fix and so a lot of resilience on the part of everyone is required and that isn't something that will happen overnight and then you can just move onto the next thing. You have to keep people's spirit up and that is a huge drain on any leader but it has to be done – it's like you are the unofficial life blood of the organisation whilst it is being transformed.'

Transformation is not just about transforming teachers and students it is about transforming the hopes and expectations of parents and the community. One principal saw this as:

'... raising people's aspirations and their sights and saying "there is a world out there and your children are very bright, they can get into higher education and jobs in well paid occupations".'

'Our eye is constantly on the ball of learning and teaching.'

'It is about raising expectations in the face of enormous challenge.'

Key issue:

Ensure that the central focus of an academy leadership is to mobilise the school and community to promote rapid and sustainable improvement.

Most significantly, transformation is about organisational culture:

'You've got to do a lot of unlearning of people to get away from the bad habits that were leading to failure in the past. That takes a lot of time, a lot of talking and a lot of modelling. It has to be reflected in the way you do everything – in talking to parents, the way you talk to students in the corridors, how you are with the staff ... everyone needs to see how you want it to be done so they can feel secure in mirroring it. I can see many of the things we are changing here in words the staff say at meetings or when the children answer my questions. It's not like they are brainwashed, but they can see the point of it – the outcomes – and that it works for the better.'

However, those changes have to be sustainable. One academy principal expressed this as:

'You have to work at serious speed as an academy principal and, you know all these massive changes that academies are supposed to make overnight – or at least what the press seem to expect – miracles! We do have to transform things but I'm not prepared to make transformational changes that aren't sustainable, so if that means at some point I have to say, well what I've done in the first round is, you know, the quick fairly easy fixes that should have been in place a long time ago, but now the second phase is in more depth, much more sustainable for the school even after I have moved on, then that's what I'll do. I have to make sure that what we do now is sustainable and robust otherwise there is no real point to it for the students or staff and it needs to be properly developed further on that basis.'

Academies are established to deliver significant improvements in performance. This transformation is the central leadership driving force of all the principals interviewed in the research project. All principals recognised the importance of rapid change and improvement and realised that that was their foremost challenge, and that their own and their senior staff's positions depended on achieving those outcomes. However, it was clear that academy leaders did not see this as being achieved by a series of 'quick fixes' but by fundamental improvement in learning and organisational culture that was sustainable.

2 Passionate leadership – the centrality of social justice and moral purpose

An overwhelming factor raised explicitly by all principals was a personal belief that they wanted to improve the lives and life chances of children in less advantageous communities. They had a deep conviction that ‘they could make a difference’ and they had the self-confidence in their own ability to make that difference. This was born out of a sense of fairness and giving children an opportunity that they had been denied before. This was something that the principals were ‘passionate’ about from a deep felt sense of moral purpose and a desire for social justice. It is what we will refer to as ‘passionate leadership’. This value-based leadership was referred to by two principals:

‘I was philosophically sort of locked into the concept of academies ... the whole sense of social justice really appealed to me and I’d always chosen to work in schools which had these type of challenges, so I guess my predisposition is to work with these children, these communities to help make a difference.’

‘I saw it as the opportunity to make a real difference in working with children with challenging social and economically divided backgrounds.’

This belief both in social justice and that transformation could be achieved is seen by one principal as being critically important and motivating:

‘Having been a head in two other schools I have always had a commitment to what I guess you could call righting the wrongs of the past and so this academy gave me the opportunity to further develop the work I had done in turning around my previous two schools. This was really appealing, hugely energising for me to think it was possible and indeed really believe it was possible.’

A political perspective regarding selection was seen as another reason to lead an academy by one principal:

‘I’ve only ever worked in comprehensive state schools but I was becoming increasingly frustrated that I’d worked for years to try to get the system changed but I was increasingly aware that the system was not going to change, that it was not a level playing field. I was working with colleagues in a borough where they selected 45% of their students whilst I fought and fought to make it equal admissions. At the end of the day I thought, ‘well if the system isn’t going to change then I’ll have to work within a different system and try to get equality for those students who deserve it’. So that’s when I kind of threw my hat in with the Academies Programme and its way of working.’

Key issue:

Make sure that your reason for leading an academy, based on a passion for social justice, is shared throughout the academy.

Creating opportunities for young people and challenging existing perspectives explains one principal’s passion for change:

‘The predecessor of the school had lost the focus of why it was in the community. It wasn’t in the community to be a babysitting service and to provide care; it was in the community to give these young people the best platform for their future life. It was about moving people into understanding and believing that we were going to be different and making sure they were confident that we could be different to make the difference and quickly.’

The deeply felt belief that existing patterns of provision had failed children and that the Academy Movement was an opportunity for those principals to make a difference to children’s lives was a driving force with all the principals. This was articulated by two of them:

‘One of the things I say to children is, “You know, I don’t believe life’s treated you fairly, you know you’ve got an unfair deal but I haven’t got a pill for it and if I actually excuse you from doing homework, looking smart and achieving all I’m doing is condemning you to have the rest of your life as unfair as well as the beginning of it” I don’t expect any differently for the children in this academy than I do for my own children.’

‘I want the children to have a fair chance in life and I want them to not be limited by their background and by their educational attainment to date. So that’s really all about aspirations; I want the youngsters to really stretch and reach and I want staff that are going to unlock that. I passionately believe that these young people are fundamentally no different than any other young people and should be able to do it.’

The research has shown, across all the interviews, a tremendous commitment by the leaders in academies to use their opportunities to make a significance difference to the life chances of children. They were morally driven to overcome social disadvantage and give the children in their care a first class education. This was not a utopian aspiration but grounded in a sense of purpose and hard work that would build a school that would achieve this for their students.

‘I don’t expect any different for children in this academy than I do for my own children.’

‘I want the children to have a fair chance in life.’

3 Balancing the operational and strategic dimensions of leadership

Establishing academies in areas of previous educational disadvantage and underperformance presents a challenge and expectation for improvement. This, combined with the enhanced political visibility, presents enormous pressure for rapid short-term improvement in results. This is an extreme pressure particularly felt by the academy principals. At one level this can be an oppressive pressure as witnessed by one comment:

‘In my first year as the academy principal, the system made me fear for my job and I genuinely mean that. I really did believe that it was like a football manager, that if we didn’t turn things around within those 12 months the gun was to my head.’

At another level there is a danger of looking to short term fixes and not building long term sustainability into the academy. Answering the question ‘Can you be strategic when the short term demands are so great?’ is critical for the long term success of academies. The balancing of operational leadership and strategic leadership is of fundamental importance. This was recognised by one principal:

‘Getting the strategic and operational balance right is crucial. I think that was partly the problem with the predecessor school... they were totally operational, they were so hands on that they couldn’t actually formulate a plan and that’s still something I’m having a problem with, with some of the staff from the old school. Some of them still don’t understand that actually long term planning will make us a better place than just being out in the corridor reacting. I have a separate strategic and a separate operational meeting now to really hammer home the difference and the importance so the staff can see it.’

‘Getting the strategic and operational balance right is crucial.’

Key issue:

How to deliver rapid short term improvement and at the same time create sustainable strategic development.

The leadership dimension of focusing on the basic of school systems and operational frameworks to ensure consistent high quality education clearly has to be a focus for academy leaders. However, that focus has to be set in the context of building longer term sustainable capacity. Principals also commented that it is also motivating for staff if they can see that operational and short term initiatives which they are enacting in the current year are contributing to longer term goals and priorities. In many cases it was re-motivating the staff of the predecessor school. The ability to see current activities playing a part in the longer term vision for the academy is an important factor in establishing wider leadership understanding throughout the academy.

There is a concept of the ‘life cycle’ of a school. This is where previous poor or under-performance goes through states from improving, to satisfactory, to good, to outstanding. To move through the first stage of improving to satisfactory, there is a tendency to believe that a strong operational and organisational focus is needed. While this is correct it should not be seen in isolation from the later stages of good and outstanding. Davies (2006) uses the concept of ‘sequential’ and ‘parallel’ leaders. Sequential leaders undertake and complete the operational necessities of organisational development, then when they are in place and working, they move on to considering what strategic agendas need to be addressed. In brief they do the operational before the strategic. Parallel leaders do both concurrently. They recognise the operational imperatives and get on and address them but at the same time they link them to the longer term strategic objectives of the school. They use the strategic objectives as a template to develop and assess the operational activities. An academy principal recognised the life cycle stages of improvement as follows:

‘Well I think that’s where the strategic bit comes in because when you’re getting from unsatisfactory or inadequate to satisfactory, while so much is at this operations and systems level you have also to build strategic foundations. When you start moving from satisfactory to good and good to outstanding you’ve got to be so strategic and build on those foundations.’

The challenge of finding time to do both the strategic and operational was articulated by another principal:

‘I see myself being much more like the chief executive, that is the route we’re going down and I think once the school is established that will run really well, but at the moment it’s still doing a lot of the operational stuff. It’s almost like you do the operational stuff during the day and then you go home at weekends or holidays and do the strategic stuff, I have two jobs.’

The leadership challenge of concurrently working on the operational imperatives while building a secure and sustainable strategic future recurred in the research interviews as a leadership issue that was fundamental to sustainable improvement.

4 Managing the political (national, local & school) dimension of leading in academies

This paper will not rehearse the national political arguments regarding academies except to say that the political debate that accompanied their establishment has undoubtedly subjected academies and their principals to close scrutiny at the national and local political level. This heightened political visibility was expressed by one principal as:

‘You are always in the spotlight as an academy principal. I wasn’t anywhere near as exposed when I was a head before but it did make me aware of what I might have to deal with and how to shelter the school from it a bit. Maybe it’s because we are the first of the breed but basically you’re under the media spotlight all the time. If something goes wrong or has attention drawn to it you can be sure it’ll be in the press later in the week, and that’s the national more than the local press. So I think principals have a lot of political awareness about how their actions and the work of their academies never goes unnoticed and I think this pressure can rub off onto staff and the students too.’

This perspective was shared by a large number of principals in the research and typical of their responses was this one:

‘Even when there are some minor issues inside the academy which would never even be voiced in another school it comes to notice very quickly and you need to respond very quickly. This is something that I think all academy principals are very astute about and take very seriously indeed.’

Undoubtedly, the initial political issues surrounding academies had a considerable impact with leaders and their institutions as witnessed by this comment:

‘I don’t think I appreciated or anticipated the hostility that would come with being principal of an academy. When I started here some of my staff had a really hostile reception when they went to conferences or to local meetings and I had to look at how to train them to deal with that. It has all gone quiet lately because of the expansion of the programme nationally I think – people know it isn’t going to go away and these schools are making a huge improvement on the predecessor schools.’

However this increased political visibility is not always a bad thing:

‘What is quite interesting and unique about this job is that because it is such a political high profile you do get a chance to engage, meet, and get involved in things that as a head in another school you might not.’

Key issue:

Operating in an enhanced political climate calls for academy principals to display high quality political skills and abilities.

This political context is sometimes reflected within the school as witnessed by one principal:

‘I have one or two members of staff who stand up at party conferences and talk anti-academy, so they’re on a campaign, they want to see you fail and it’s all very well having those people in the press or elsewhere but having them in your building is quite tough because they do want to undermine.’

Throughout the research interviews the notion of both internal and external political dimensions went hand in hand with the fact that each principal was leading under the microscope and that their job was undertaken in a climate of very close public scrutiny. Most reported their gratitude at the publication of the data nationally about the progress academies had made. This had enabled principals to use information in the political context to strengthen the academy case and help inform decisions. Similarly, many academy principals have worked alongside local agencies, community groups and the press to inform those who might be construed as opponents or undecided. This political sensitivity and political ability was seen by one principal as:

‘You certainly need a highly developed political sensitivity, even more than you need for a maintained school and a real awareness of national trends.’

The role of certain parts of the press in their coverage of academies was also raised by many of the respondents. Most principals had established good relationships with the local press who chose to focus on the success of the students. However, a couple of the tabloid newspapers were mentioned as a cause of concern and damage. The need to draw on political skills to manage the impact on staff, students, parents and the immediate local community who were in direct association with the academy was cited as important.

‘You are always in the spotlight as an academy principal.’

‘You certainly need a highly developed political sensitivity.’

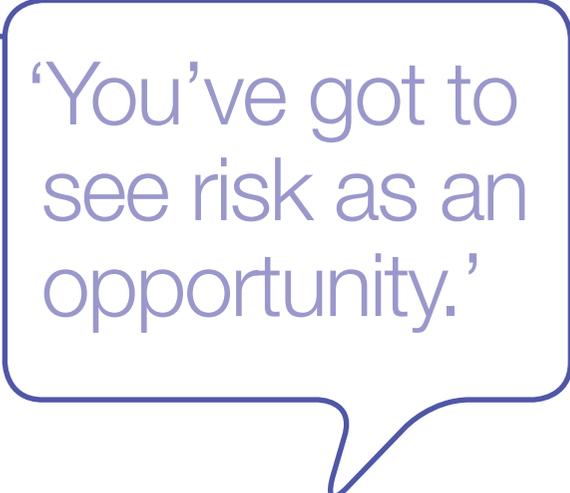
Guilbert Hentschke (2005) considers that entrepreneurial leaders in education distinguish themselves by a number of characteristics. These include financial management skills (including, significantly, raising capital), personal motivation, a 'can do attitude' in terms of a passionate commitment to action, a tolerance of risk, and a mind set of 'where others saw problems they saw opportunities'. How do these ideas play out in the research conversations with academy principals?

Certainly the financial autonomy of academies and their greater independences gives their leaders greater financial responsibility. As well as greater control over the initial school budget, leaders seek ways to generate additional funds through a variety of entrepreneurial activities. This often involves setting up trading or other types of companies which bring responsibilities and challenges as articulated by one principal:

'Take for example the fact that we have to set up as a company. I know the liability is only one pound but if people don't understand the importance and implications of what being a company director brings with it they could be disbarred from being directors of every other company. You know all of this is very serious and I think that principals need to make sure they understand all of that and their governors need to know too.'



'I have learnt to acquire an entrepreneurial attitude from the governors and our sponsor.'



'You've got to see risk as an opportunity.'

Key issue:

Academy principals need to develop their entrepreneurial skills as leaders and managers in the education sector.

This financial autonomy and flexibility does foster a 'can do mentality' as demonstrated by one principal:

'I have learnt to acquire an entrepreneurial attitude from the governors and our sponsor. You see we need more space, to extend our building. The sponsor's position is "Right, let's get down to doing the master plan, let's work out how we will do it, how we will finance it then we can present it". It's all about 'can dos' not "Oh my goodness we can't do that for another five years". I think the whole emphasis on rewarding performance of staff and students is also entrepreneurial in the way they do it and everyone likes it.'

This entrepreneurial ability is not confined to the financial dimension of running an academy as two principals articulated for example:

'The thing that still excites me is that I think we are pushing boundaries that some other secondary schools are not yet pushing and I think that's come from the confidence of the governing body because of the nature of those people who are entrepreneurs themselves, they support an entrepreneurial approach and they are risk takers.'

'I think if anyone is appointed to lead an academy it suggests that they want to do something different because you're not going to stick your head out and do a job like this unless you're prepared to push out beyond the boundaries and look at what else is out there in terms of how to do things.'

The characteristics of taking risks and experimenting with new ideas was highlighted by two principals:

'I've always wanted to be an entrepreneurial leader and to take risks and if something doesn't work change it.'

'I think to be an academy principal you've got to... you've got to be able to take risks, you've got to see risk as an opportunity and not as a threat or you've got to see it as both really but more of an opportunity than a threat, and you've got to be prepared to allow everybody you work with, including children, to take risks because if they don't take risks then they never fall flat on their face and they never fail and they never move forward.'

In the entrepreneurial realm, energy is invested in building strategic alliances to strengthen and grow the organisation and it is here that the involvement of sponsors in setting up academies distinguishes their position from being one of reliance on the status quo to one with the connections to do things differently and to have control over how it is done and why it is done.

In some respects academies can be seen as being hybrid organisations in which entrepreneurial imperatives can flourish. They combine characteristics of the private sector, such as being independently managed, promoted by independent sponsors and free to innovate; with public sector characteristics such as dependence on government funding and expectations to contribute to social goals by tackling educational inequalities. This combination of characteristics suggests, a new model of leadership is evolving. This model has to encompass entrepreneurial skills, innovation skills and risk-taking abilities.

6 Working in new forms of governance and leadership

Academies are set up as companies limited by guarantee with charitable status. In most cases, academy principals are the chief executives of the academies they lead and have fully devolved powers to run the schools, whilst the role of the sponsor(s) is typically to offer support and expertise in areas pertaining to their field of specialism. This provides a complexity of relationships to manage.

The nature of academies is therefore more akin to a chief executive of a company reporting to a board of directors. Governance is seen in a very strategic sense. Principals in the research highlighted the executive role of leadership, the governors' focus on outcomes and the need to develop distributed leadership within the overall leadership framework. Some of these insights are revealed below.

The significance of the autonomy and role of chief executive is represented by these comments:

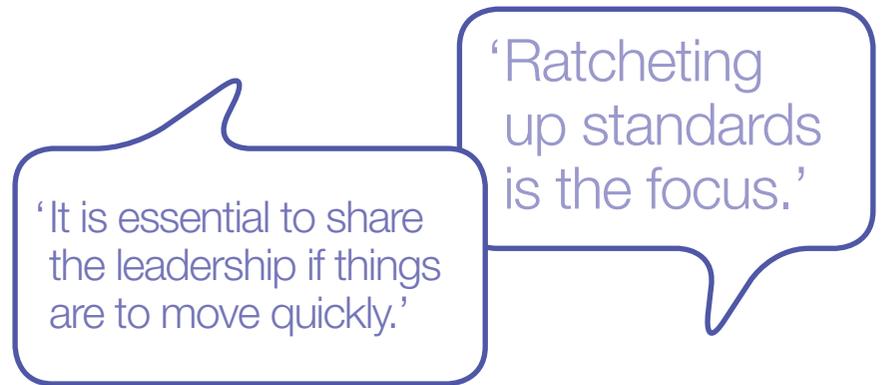
'The expectation is that we are a success and my sponsor has always made it clear that, as chief executive, I need to deliver these targets. He asks how I am going to deliver them and then gives me the pragmatic support whether it be linked to the finances of the academy, the structure, the staffing.'

It's totally chief executive and they keep reminding me of that, when I do yet another forty five page report for a governors' meeting, my chair keeps saying six pages please, six pages, key points, key decisions that we need to make that are strategic. The governors say 'you're the chief executive, you've given us the outline principles of what you want to achieve, how you achieve it, carry on, we don't need to have any further details.'

The role of governance is one of focus on outcomes and delegation to the principals of this focus manifests itself as follows:

'Ratcheting up standards is the focus of everything we do. It comes from the fact that I can't lose sight of us as a limited company and the responsibilities I have to the trustees of this academy. It means that you are constantly under pressure to do things bigger, better and faster and the outcomes have to be clearly measurable.'

'There is definitely much more focus in the meeting to be business-like and structured. What they want to know are the key issues, give us the exact details of what you plan to do about it, what are your expected outcomes, come back next time and tell us how things are running, how and who the key players were in helping get it running well. The focus is really sharp, no time wasting and basically the final bit is totally delegated to me anyway but I know I need to deliver and well.'



Key issue:

Refocus governance and leadership roles to encompass the nature and dimensions of academies.

'My chair starts every conversation with asking about how we're performing on this indicator this week, and every week we talk about an indicator. And it's very interesting that the whole basis of my work now is not dominated by governance issues. I well remember as a headteacher that it seemed that I was preparing papers for governors all the time because every week there was a committee, a meeting. We have two committees who meet three times in a year and then we have obviously the statutory governing bodies and that in terms of formal meeting is that.'

Taking on a more executive role also put a premium on developing leadership skills in others and delegating responsibility to them. This was articulated by one principal as:

'You are expected to work across a bigger agenda and get better quicker than people have done before and that means there is an awful lot to do in terms of leadership challenges, therefore it's essential to get a good senior leadership team and trust them and really distribute the leadership. And that's not just for the senior team; it needs to go all the way across the organisation. The biggest challenge is in distributing leadership and it's essential to have very close line management to make sure that works, otherwise the whole thing could go badly wrong.'

'It is essential to share the leadership if things are to move quickly. I look for people who have enough experience, enough vision, enough common sense to be able to make the judgements to help to move things on here, but who can also learn from being here with me. They also need to be team players in the widest sense because I can't ever be that close, and so they have to have the ears and eyes of all the staff and their distributed leadership teams to make those judgments correctly and get a positive result. I trust them explicitly.'

Clearly academies are output focused and the structure of governance and leadership reflects that emphasis. The involvement of business sponsors has highlighted the strategic role of governors and delegated significant responsibility to principals. Leading in this strategic relationship which is outcome driven is a major focus of principals in academies, as is the need to develop leadership within the school.

7 Creating a sense of place

It is often said that it is easy to be successful with a new start in new buildings, but that is a very partial view. Several academies have started in existing or temporary accommodation and have established a new organisational and learning culture before moving into new buildings. The reality is that a combination of the physical and organisational environment come together to create a 'sense of place' that re-engineers both the organisational culture and the physical structure of the school. All the principals, while recognising the importance of new physical surroundings, stressed the change in organisational culture as being more significant. A very telling account of this by one principal was:

'When you drive in the gate here, the building and the grounds tell you what the culture is and as soon as the parent drives in / walks in they know the culture is one of quietude, calm, discipline, well dressed, well spoken, hard work and that's where it starts, that's the ethos. So that everybody behaves themselves effectively in that calm, respectful of people to people and I mean everybody. That's students, staff, all employees, all parents, all visitors, everybody and if anybody steps out of line of that quietude that I wanted to create here, then they're gently reminded that they're in the academy and this is the academy requirement of them.'

This change in culture is also about linking the wider community and providing for them as shown by this comment:

'I feel as though we have mobilised a whole section of the community who were stuck indoor with the satellite TV before. There's just so much for them to do here from parenting classes, sports clubs, learning English and other languages and even cookery classes. It was a long time in coming but now we hand out as many application forms for student admissions to these people as we do membership of the fitness club here and our first choice applications for September have almost doubled. They all bring their friends to use the facilities and their friends want their children to go to school with each other so there are strong bonds too.'

'But what I think this building has done in terms of transforming learning is made a statement about how important learning is.'

'My sponsor brings to the academy an outward looking perspective.'

'It's lifted spirits!'

Key issue:

Re-engineer the organisational culture and the physical surroundings to 'create a sense of place' where learning can flourish.

This change in culture is also about empowering staff to take ownership of their school and take responsibility for its success as witnessed by this powerful response:

'I remember one of the heads of faculty saying at a meeting we had that 'when we move into the new academy building we've done all this preparation work together and it's our building, our academy and we decide how it's organised, you know, we the teaching staff', and they do lead their own areas, they run their subject floors, they have taken control of their areas and they mirror what we do throughout the academy, so it's consistent all the way throughout wherever you are. We built that up together which is great. There's a massive, huge team spirit.'

This change in culture is facilitated by the sponsors of the academy who can bring a number of assets and attributes. One principal describes how their sponsor brings an external view and powerful links and support as follows:

'My sponsor brings to the academy an outward looking perspective and a confident expectation that what he does can and should succeed. There is a genuine hunger and an expectation for success. This is what these kinds of people are used to in business which is why they are so successful themselves. They know you can't do it on your own so they look to get good people on the governing body to help and contribute so, you know, we've got significant people from the world of sport and the arts as well as people with serious business and project management experience and I learn from all of this and have become more entrepreneurial in my approach as a result.'

Of course new buildings are very important in changing the surrounding learning fabric of the school. The building can be the physical representation of the changing learning culture of the school as represented by these two observations:

'But what I think this building has done in terms of transforming learning is made a statement about how important learning is, secondly I'm absolutely certain it has done a lot about this concept of creating the partnership between adult and child because it is so open, adults and young people are working together, you know there's no such thing as hidden away staff areas and all this stuff, so I think that's been powerful. And I just think, yes it's lifted spirits.'

'On the plus side we have created a much more open learning environment, you know every room is open to the building. So as you walk around you see in every classroom, every office, every work room, conference room, everything has a glass panel that you look into, there's no corridors so there's no hiding away, nothing... everything's seen.'

Creating a 'sense of place' combines the buildings, the organisational culture and the external relationship coming together to put learning at the head of the agenda. The combination of these factors create the necessary conditions for transformation to take place.

Academy status provides the opportunity for high level leadership autonomy and also the independent status which academies provide. The freedom and flexibility to work outside traditional boundaries by using different approaches to curriculum, timetabling, recruitment, staffing and governance is a major opportunity.

Key observations from the July 2007 Price Waterhouse Coopers Academies Evaluation 4th Annual Report (p. 70) note the degree of leadership autonomy which is being utilised, including:

- Evidence of a more flexible use of support staff to strengthen learning teams
- Significant changes in curriculum options and pathways to provide more flexible options for students across the range of abilities
- Principals working in partnership with their sponsors to access resources which they report would not have been previously available

The report generally concludes that, in this respect, independence appears to have given principals far greater confidence and autonomy to explore new avenues of funding and also new partnerships within the wider community. This opportunity for innovative working was shown to be very significant by one principal:

‘I think that probably the biggest change has been in engaging partnerships in teaching and in the curriculum. As a sports college we have partnerships in sport, with a wide range of people and organisations coming in and developing programmes. We work with Edge Foundation in terms of developing vocational studies; we have seventy three business organisations that are actually influencing the curriculum.’

The funding issue can be crucial as reported by one principal:

‘We raise considerable additional income by using our facilities and setting up trading companies to sell our services. The autonomy to do this allows us to plough back resources into learning.’

The opportunity to develop a co-ordinated and coherent approach that integrates all aspects of the academy’s activities was commented on by one principal as follows:

‘I’m in a fortunate position of being principal and chief executive, which means that I personally have a lot of autonomy. My role is the complete running of every aspect of the academy and because we’re a 3–19 academy I’ve taken the community sports centre in-house, we’ve got the nursery, I brought the cleaning and building services in-house. It means you can actually quality assure everything, it means you can get very good value for money, it means you can be consistent in the message that you’re sending out and so everybody knows what they’re buying into, it’s a very common strand.’

‘The biggest change has been in engaging partnerships.’

‘I’ve developed skills that didn’t exist in me before.’

Key issue:

Maximising the potential of autonomy requires that principals enhance their ability to work in partnerships with external groups and develop their own decision-making skills.

This autonomy of course means that there is no fall back position, the individual institution has to ensure that it is making use of the opportunities presented but also in a wise and responsible way.

‘Obviously having responsibility for your budget is great, no problem with that, but you are on your own and that’s got its pros and cons... The predecessor school was massively in debt but it was bailed out.’

This increased autonomy means that principals have to develop their decision-making skills as articulated by one principal:

‘I’ve developed skills that didn’t exist in me before and I now have the confidence to make the decisions from the position of autonomy I have in this job. I was very cautious at first and, although that’s not always a bad thing, I think it showed my lack of confidence in my actions. Staff could see that and so I’ve got over that and now make the hard decisions but we move on quickly from it and have had some very positive outcomes, particularly with changing the way we run things like performance management and target setting. I’m accountable and so is everyone else and they see the transparency in the system and why we’ve done it and how we’ve improved as a result in a short time.’

Sponsors are one of the critical factors in the Academy Movement. This goes far beyond the initial raising of funds to the long-term relationship with the academy. The quality of advice and support as well as the accountability relationships through the governing body are critical for the success of the academy.

9 Having the personal characteristics to stay the course

While there are many personal characteristics that academy principals display, four that were very evident in the research interviews were: personal resilience, positive mindset, ability to manage conflict, and risk taking. One further characteristic that emerged was the struggle to achieve a work-life balance.

Academy principals report the pressures that come from hostility to the Academy Movement and the intense scrutiny of academies in the press. This, combined with the necessity of having to engage in very rapid change with significant consequences, require them to have considerable personal resilience. Thus resilience and strength of character and determination to deliver successful outcomes, amidst considerable pressures and challenges, seem to be prerequisites for leading a successful academy. As one leader put it:

‘Academy principals have got to have incredible self-confidence and belief in what they are doing and in their vision for what they want to see achieved. They have to have a lot of drive and a real sense of purpose about what they’re doing. I think that confidence has to extend to be able to do some of the things that are not pleasant to do and actually have the confidence that it’s the right thing. I learnt that in my first headship and it was much harder then but second time round I know what has to be done and why and therefore it is easier if that’s the right word. It is easier because I know that the final outcomes will be better for everyone.’

‘Well you haven’t got to ‘get down’. That’s the hard bit because things do affect you. When I’m talking about this to other groups of people I tend to say do not to let the emotional highs and lows get to you, so you don’t rejoice too much when you win a victory and you don’t get suicidal when you lose a battle, but you just keep this sort of middle calm course whatever happens and that’s a lot, lot easier to say than to do. I support my vice-principals about this because I think when you’re younger you do tend to get the emotional highs and lows and you do go home and have sleepless nights thinking “oh, that’s a failure”.’

This of course links to having a positive mindset and seeing opportunities and not just problems. Creating a ‘can do’ culture that tackles problems and seeks solutions was seen by many principals as one of the key ways of changing previous underperformance which resigned itself to accepting existing ways of doing things. Two of the principals articulated this as:

‘At the academy the glass is always half full, it’s never half empty and that’s the way you should approach things. But yes, people say that when I speak and things at conferences or whatever, I’m very passionate about my academy.’

‘You have to believe that you can make a difference, you have to believe that change is possible and some of the advisory people who’ve been working with us said when they came in last term that they’ve noticed a difference, they said the staff have stopped blaming the student... and I think you know if you start from the belief that every child has talents and skills and every child can achieve whatever, then you are an optimist and can succeed.’

Key issue:

Developing intra-personal skills is a vital factor in academy leadership.

Clearly, taking over a previously unsuccessful school and creating a new academy does involve the principal in challenging previous levels of underperformance and establishing new expectations. The significant expectation for rapid change and improvement also creates pressure to change quickly. In such circumstance there is often conflict. The ability to manage conflict was reflected on by these academy principals:

‘Do I find conflict easy? I have no problem deciding that somebody, by whatever means, has to leave us, that doesn’t pose me a problem at all and I won’t lose any sleep over that whatsoever. I might lose sleep over the little bit of how I’m going to deal with it but the decision is made and that’s what we’ve got to do and I have no problem going through with it.’

‘You’ve got to take the conflict, you’ve got to not get too personal or involved in the conflict and you’ve got to de-personalise it, realise it’s not directed at you but perhaps at you as the figurehead or whatever. You’ve got to try to empathise with people’s personal situations because they might be very different from yours.’

It is important to see risk-taking not as a reckless activity but one where new and innovative practices are tried out and monitored to see if they add significant benefit to the academy. With the opportunity of a new academy and a new start one principal saw this as an opportunity not to be missed in the following words:

‘You only get one chance to make the really big first impression. You can always go back to something more traditional but you’ll never get this chance again to just be so fundamentally radical.’

‘Personal resilience, a positive mindset & the ability to manage conflict.’

‘You’ve got to try to empathise with people’s personal situations because they might be very different from yours.’

10 Conclusion

The importance of decision-making being based on judgement and information before a risk is undertaken was highlighted by one principal:

‘I don’t do things unless I’ve got data. And you can get data very quickly, you can make risky decisions within 24 hours if you want to but I tend to sort of watch, listen, feel and then take a risk.’

The personal risk of taking on an academy was highlighted by two principals:

‘It is very high risk, it is very high risk and I’m being honest, I might not have done it if I’d been younger you know, but I’ve got to... approaching the end of my career and therefore, but I do think well now is the time to do it you know, I’ve practised, I’ve done a lot, I’ve rehearsed a lot, I now can do this and what’s the worst that can happen?’

‘Coming here yes, if it wasn’t going to succeed under my leadership I knew perfectly well that another leader would be brought in.’

The enormous pressures of starting a new academy was reflected in the long hours principals spent during the day and at weekends at the academy especially in the first two years of its existence. This early pressure on work-life balance was reported by two principals:

‘The hours that I worked in the first year were... well they would have been untenable if they’d have carried on like that.’

‘During the transition phase, with everything that was happening, it just seemed to be, 24/7. I really did spend a lot of time, probably too much time, in meeting community groups because what we were doing was having to convince local people that this was not the privatisation of state education, and I did 148 meetings in the first year.’

However, this early pressure does seem to shift:

‘I think it’s definitely changed, the first year of a school like this where nothing is in place,... it was just crazy I mean you didn’t get a single weekend, you worked right the way through the summer. But now I actually do get weekends. Then you’re actually better... you’re better for your staff you know because you’ve had a decent weekend.’

Protecting the work-life balance of staff was also seen as very important:

‘I’ll say, that it’s Friday, you’ve got lives, you’ve got families, get off home, and then I’ll go around the place and try and evict them. I mean how ridiculous! So I’m going around at sort of 4-4:30 telling them to go home, you know. “Yes it is important to finish that but go home.”’

This piece of qualitative research has used the leadership voices of academy principals to highlight key leadership issues for the successful development of academies. It is hoped that this framework will provide a valuable starting point for leadership development in academies.

The ability to use the experience of current principals to reframe practice and develop future leaders is part of the SSAT leadership agenda. In summary these leadership issues were to:

- Focus on transformational leadership
- Make sure that the reason for leading an academy, based on a passion for social justice, is shared throughout the academy
- Deliver rapid short term improvement and at the same time create sustainable strategic development
- Operate in an enhanced political climate calling for academy principals to display high quality political skills and abilities
- Develop entrepreneurial skills as leaders and managers in the sector
- Refocus governance and leadership roles to encompass the nature and dimensions of academies
- Re-engineer the organisational culture and the physical surroundings to ‘create a sense of place’ where learning can flourish
- Maximise the potential of autonomy requiring principals to enhance their ability to work in partnerships with external groups and develop their own decision-making skills
- Develop intra-personal skills as a vital factor in academy leadership
- Develop the personal skills to stay the course

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