



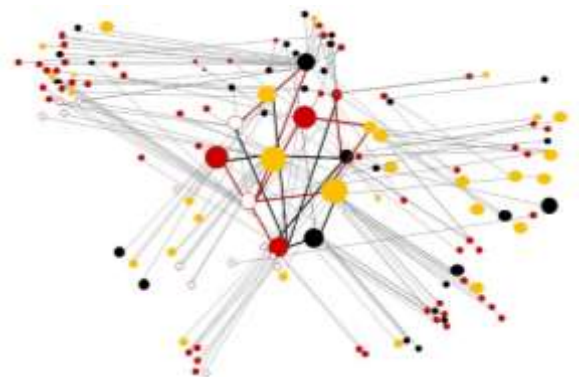
**Developing collaborative school leadership:
catalysts to support reflection and action**

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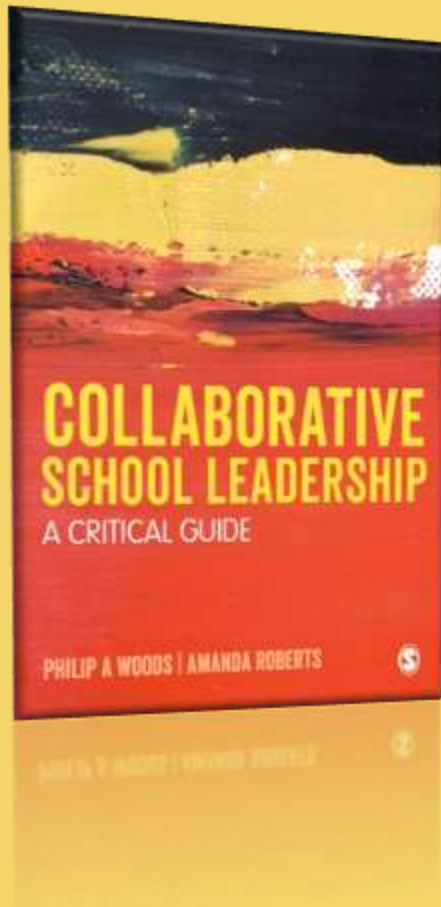
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Introduction



This booklet is designed to support policy makers and practitioners in school education who want to work with others to nurture the practice of collaborative leadership.

Strongly hierarchical structures and reliance on the idea of 'great' leaders persist in much school leadership writing and practice. Our book, *Collaborative School Leadership: A Critical Guide* offers an alternative vision, proposing collaborative leadership as fundamental to school improvement. It explores how enabling collaborative leadership helps to achieve the goals of a socially just education system, in which all are nurtured to fulfil their potential.

Drawing on this vision, this booklet offers ways of reflecting critically on how you are thinking about and 'doing' leadership now and how you might re-frame your thinking and 'do it differently' in future, in order to fulfil your school's vision. In this booklet we:

- introduce our view of collaborative leadership
- offer several collaboration catalysts to support reflective thinking about leadership
- explore how you might use these catalysts to develop your understanding and practice of collaborative leadership through deliberation, discussion and action planning

We hope you find this booklet a useful tool. See our website for further information and to register for updates:

<https://www.herts.ac.uk/study/schools-of-study/education/research/collaborative-leadership>

How this booklet is organised

Understanding more about collaborative leadership

1

This section explores what is meant by collaborative leadership and what impact your current leadership culture, structures and practice might have on the forward movement of your school.

Using catalysts to stimulate reflection

2

This section introduces a series of collaboration catalysts, designed to promote discussion and critical reflection on leadership culture, structures and practice within your school, and to support your understanding of your current situation and your articulation of future aspirations.

Moving from reflection to action

3

This section suggests ways in which the learning from previous reflective activities can support action planning for collaborative leadership development to support the forward movement of your school.

1 Understanding more about collaborative leadership

Developing an understanding of what we mean by collaborative leadership will help you to evaluate the impact your current leadership culture, structures and practice might have on the forward movement of your school. This section introduces the framework of ideas and concepts which underpin collaborative leadership.

The WHO of collaborative leadership

Collaborative school leadership is leadership which is enacted by everyone in the school and works for inclusive participation and holistic learning.

By saying that it is 'enacted by everyone in the school', we mean that the influences that create change or hold back change in a school come from the actions and relationships of everyone. This includes teachers, students and support staff as well as middle leaders and senior leaders. Leadership thus emerges from the continuous flow of interactions across the school and up and down the school's hierarchy, not simply from the actions of a single leader or a small leadership elite.

Positional and non-positional leadership

Of course, headteachers or principals, assistant headteachers, heads of department, etc. remain active contributors to leadership. They exercise *positional* leadership. However, people who don't have formal positions, such as teachers, other staff, parents and students, also contribute actively to leadership. They contribute *non-positional* leadership although they are often unaware that this is what they are doing.

They add to the leadership mix in the school by influencing colleagues, by making changes, by introducing innovative practice and so on. They can also demonstrate leadership by the ways in which they support, alter or resist change introduced by leaders in formal positions, and by how they interpret school policy. Non-positional leadership is not always seen as, or even called leadership; but it **is** leadership nonetheless.

Intentionality and emergence

This broader understanding of the nature of leadership encourages us to ask critical questions about how a school is organised and functions. For example: Who is seen and who is not seen as contributing to leadership? Who is supported in developing leadership and co-leading with others, and who is not supported in so doing? Whose ideas for action and change are valued and whose ideas are not, and what are the possible reasons for this?

Two linked ideas - intentionality and emergence – help to illuminate further the distributed nature of leadership.

Intentionality is the human spark, the ideas, motivations and creativity that lead people to initiate and guide action and to seek to influence others. Individual intentions are only part of the picture, however. Leadership also emerges from the interplay between people, relationships, and their social and institutional context.

The idea of **emergence** is informed by complexity theory. Individuals can plan and take responsibility for their own actions, but they cannot plan the actions of others in the same way. The outcomes of, say, a strategic plan arise from the interplay over time of the plan's aims, people's interpretations, people's actions and interactions with each other, and the school's resources and institutional structures for change. What comes out of this is more than the sum of individual intentions.

This leads us to see leadership as an outcome of group and organisational dynamics. What a school does, its direction of change, its atmosphere and the climate of relationships, the ideas and values that are influential in a school - all these are the outcomes of the everyday interactions between people and between them and the institutional structures of that school.

The WHAT of collaborative leadership

We suggest above that collaborative school leadership is leadership which is enacted by everyone in the school and works for inclusive participation and holistic learning. The commitment to inclusive participation and holistic learning arises from the value base that is the root of such leadership. A consideration of this value base raises two contrasting ideas about people and their potential. One puts an emphasis on people's dependence, the other on their capacity for active co-development.

The idea of dependence

Collaborative school leadership moves beyond an expectation of **dependence** which underpins many of the everyday assumptions influencing educational leadership practice. From this perspective, people are fundamentally dependent on being directed, regulated and told what to do. They need to be provided with instructions in order to know what is right and how to act. This assumes that living in the 'right way' means always following ideas authorised as correct by others.

In this way of thinking, professional educators, students and others are principally conceived as agents who serve the values, aims and priorities determined by those in positions of formal authority. Teachers are construed as uncreative technicians who deliver a curriculum designed at a higher level in the policy hierarchy.

The idea of co-development

In contrast, our view of collaborative school leadership is underpinned by the idea of **co-development**. This idea sees people as having a fundamental, innate capability to actively expand their knowledge and their understanding, both individually and collaboratively. It is rooted in values of social justice and democracy, giving everyone the chance to thrive. Flourishing as human beings means nurturing our own and others' freedom – our shared *relational* freedom – to learn and grow collaboratively.

Collaborative school leadership then is about moving beyond dependence towards co-development.

Collaborative and hierarchical leadership: contrasting dimensions

Hierarchical leadership often tends to lead to dependence, whereas collaborative leadership is more supportive of co-development.

To explore differences between collaborative and hierarchical leadership further, it is useful to consider four key dimensions of the school's social and organisational context and the leadership that emerges within the school: **learning, relationships, power** and **communication**. These are shown in Figure 1 below.

How these dimensions are forged, experienced, thought about and practised is different where leadership is collaborative, guided by the beliefs and values of co-development, as compared with a school where leadership is hierarchical and fosters dependence and narrow measures of performance.

There may be situations where a firm hierarchical approach is both necessary and appropriate. We suggest however that a culture of collaborative leadership fostering co-development should be the prevailing direction of travel. It is therefore important to understand which features of your current leadership culture, structures and practice may lead to dependence and which are more likely to lead to an approach to school improvement which is co-developed by all stakeholders.

	Learning	Relationships	Power	Communication
Collaborative	Holistic learning	Relational well-being	Power sharing	Transforming dialogue
Hierarchical	Instrumental learning	Functional relationships	Power concentration	Linear communication

Figure 1: Contrasting dimensions of collaborative and hierarchical leadership

The WHY of collaborative leadership

Why is it worth time and effort to develop collaborative school leadership? Based on our own research and on other studies, we conclude that, where there are supportive factors, collaborative school leadership can help schools to meet major challenges they face: to promote learning, to be innovative and to foster democratic citizenship.

Impact on learning

There is accumulating research evidence of the positive impact that tapping the potential of distributed leadership can have on **learning**, increasing the capacity for school improvement. That is, more people – teachers, students and others – at all levels in the school become actively engaged in improving learning and enhancing their knowledge, capabilities and skills. Opportunities for collaborative learning grow. Motivation increases. Both staff and students are more enthusiastic and committed to the school community and to learning – both their own, and that of others.

Impact on innovation

We live in a time where there is a high expectation on schools to innovate. Research suggests that working collaboratively, rather than individually, is beneficial for the effectiveness of **innovation**. Organisations are better at innovating where there are opportunities for people across the organisation to generate innovations and to participate in their development.

Impact on democratic citizenship

Many people see democracy as a fragile system that requires continual nurturing of values essential to a free and tolerant society. Developing as a democratic citizen is an essential component of growing and learning as a full person, and education has a significant role to play in this. To participate in collaborative leadership is to experience living in a way that puts into practice the values of **democratic citizenship**. It involves collaboration, participation, discussion and learning from others' viewpoints. At its best, it helps to enhance self-awareness, concern for others, communication skills, critical thinking and the capacity for reflection and reasoning.

The need for supportive factors

We explore now the supportive factors needed to effect collaborative leadership's positive impact.

The first factor is **strong co-ordination and planning**. The meaning of collaborative working and what individuals are expected to do needs to be clearly planned, communicated and discussed. Setting out the leadership principles the school is working to and what these might mean for changes in roles and structures, for example, gives everyone the opportunity to be engaged in the development of the school.

The second factor is a **cohesive culture**. In such a trusting culture, shared goals and values are developed and a sense of collective responsibility for student learning, a shared feeling of working together, is nurtured.

The third factor is maintaining a **shared focus on the school's purpose** and hence giving a consistent priority to learning in its broadest sense, that is, holistic learning.

The fourth factor is the existence or development of the **capacity for leadership**, that is, the capabilities needed to take part in leadership practice and to work with others as co-leaders. All members of the school community can exercise leadership. It cannot be assumed, however, that everyone understands or is experienced in what it means to lead collaboratively or is confident in such activity. Attention therefore needs to be given to widening opportunities for leadership development in the school. These include opportunities for everyone to learn about the nature of leadership through active leadership experience, reflection, study and collective discussion.

The final factor is **internal accountability**. A strong sense of internal accountability means that accountability is felt individually as well as being shared. This is not only about upward accountability to a higher post or level of authority but also includes sustaining a sense of professional accountability to obligations, values and codes of practice inherent in pedagogic practice and to one's peers.

The HOW of leadership

Fostering collaborative leadership is about reframing how we think about leadership – that is, seeing it as essentially a distributed process – and clarifying values so we are clear about the values in which our leadership practice is rooted. Agency and structure are both important in bringing such leadership to fruition.

The importance of agency

Individuals need to develop their leadership **agency**, that is, develop their communication and relational skills, their creativity and confidence, in order to pro-actively lead change.

Increasing leadership capacity is not just a case of individuals developing their own agential leadership, however. Growing leadership capacity is a shared activity of a learning community. This can involve staff and students co-leading innovation and reflecting collectively on the experience, staff collaboratively undertaking studies into leadership and school improvement and colleagues collectively creating a shared identity as co-leaders.

The importance of structures

It is equally important to create and nurture **structures** in which collaborative leadership can flourish. Three important, interlinking and reinforcing school structures help to create and sustain collaborative leadership:

A participatory culture - This is made up of the values, ideas and knowledge that are communicated and shared in a school to support collaborative practice.

Enabling institutional architecture - This is made up of institutional arrangements, roles and procedures that support collaborative development and autonomy.

Open social environment - This is made up of collegial, collaborative relationships, in the school, its departments and classrooms.

Such structures build an environment which draws the most and the best from people through engaging their energy and commitment.

2 Using collaboration catalysts to stimulate reflection

In Section 1 we explored what is meant by collaborative leadership and what impact your current leadership culture, structures and practice might have on the forward movement of your school.

This section introduces three collaboration catalysts designed to promote discussion and critical reflection on your school's leadership culture, structures and practice, and to support your understanding of the current situation and your articulation of future aspirations.

Collaboration catalyst 1

Values clarification

It is important to be clear about the value base which underpins leadership in your school. The following set of critical questions could be used to help individuals and groups consider their current values and those they aspire to.

Critical questions

- What ideas and ethical aims are most important to you?
- What ideas and ethical aims are most evident in your practice?
- Are there particular aspects of your working life which most express those aims?
- Are there particular aspects of your working life which least express those aims?
- What do you want to be free to do that you are not free to do?
- What would help you to be free?

Collaboration catalyst 2

The Leadership Framework

Collaborative leadership is not a feature a school either possesses or does not. Instead, it is a characteristic that can be present to a lesser or greater degree in some parts of school life and can be grown.

Where, how and to what extent collaborative leadership progresses in a school will depend on numerous factors that include the school's culture, circumstances, the challenges it faces and the strength of a shared intent in the school to nurture leadership based on principles and values that contrast with traditional hierarchical leadership.

To help identify the challenges and possibilities, it is important to understand which features of the school's current leadership culture, structures and practice may lead to dependence and which are more likely to lead to co-development.

We have designed a Leadership Framework, a catalyst for change, to support this analysis and subsequent decisions on actions and priorities. This framework is shown at Figure 2.

The Leadership Framework contrasts hierarchical leadership, characterised by dependence, with collaborative leadership, characterised by co-development. It uses the four dimensions discussed in Section 1 (Figure 1) to explore this dichotomy:

- Learning
- Relationships
- Power
- Communication

Hierarchical leadership characterised by dependence	Collaborative leadership characterised by co-development
<p>Instrumental learning The school values and seeks to foster student and professional learning defined in terms of success through standardised measures of performance and accumulation of competencies.</p>	<p>Holistic learning The school values and seeks to foster holistic growth in everyone (students and adults), nurturing the range of human capabilities (spiritual, cognitive, aesthetic, affective, ethical, physical), and developing critical thinking and learning collaboratively.</p>
<p>Functional relationships The school is characterised predominantly by relationships that are functional; there is very little sense of belonging or common spirit of shared endeavour; a culture of dependence on authority for direction and reinforcement dominates.</p>	<p>Relational well-being The school has a sense of belonging and community that fosters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - people feeling empowered - high self-esteem as a member of the school community - the capacity to think for oneself - a deep sense of connection to other people, the natural world and those things that feed the human spirit.
<p>Power concentration The school has a strict hierarchy and a directive, top-down practice of leadership; opportunities to have a say in decisions and to take initiatives are narrowly concentrated at the top of the hierarchy.</p>	<p>Power sharing Everyone has a say in school decisions that affect them and helps shape the aims, values and everyday life of the school; shared leadership enables everyone to exercise leadership, taking initiatives and expressing their identity within the parameters of agreed values and responsibilities.</p>
<p>Linear communication Transmission of ideas, information and instructions is predominantly linear, with little or no exploration of ideas or dialogue to enhance mutual understanding; communication is concentrated on telling people what to do and collecting data on performance.</p>	<p>Transforming dialogue Everyone is able to exchange and explore views with each other and engage in open debate to enhance mutual understanding; dialogue in the school is overwhelmingly characterised by mutual respect, openness to listening to others' viewpoints and the sharing of constructive critique.</p>

Figure 2: The Leadership Framework: dimensions of hierarchical and collaborative leadership

Dimensions of hierarchical leadership

The left column of the framework highlights the dimensions of traditional hierarchical leadership characterised by dependence. A strict hierarchy and directive, top-down leadership leads to people having little say in decisions or autonomy to take initiatives. There is little or no meaningful dialogue, with communication focused predominantly on instructing people what to do, then collecting data on performance.

Learning is instrumental and overwhelmingly defined in terms of success as measured by standardised tests and official data. Relationships are predominantly functional, with people valued for contributing to the narrow measures of success and the achievement of targets, rather than as members of the community with a sense of belonging and spirit of shared endeavour.

Dimensions of collaborative leadership

The right of the framework highlights the dimensions of collaborative leadership characterised by co-development. Such leadership allows power sharing and inclusive participation, giving teachers, support staff, students and others the voice and autonomy to initiate change and innovation. Transforming dialogue means people feel confident to share and explore views, debate issues within a context of mutual respect and increase shared knowledge and mutual understanding.

Holistic learning is favoured, with education guided by a broad vision of human growth. Finally, a focus on relational well-being fosters feelings of empowerment, belonging and high self-esteem in members of the school community.

The catalyst is a resource for discussion on where one's school, team, department, or network of schools is in relation to the aspirations of collaborative leadership. It can be used:

- to support a developing understanding of collaborative leadership and the school culture required to support this
- to share the range of views about leadership across the school community, and
- to decide priorities for action amongst the leadership issues, strengths and areas for development identified.

Critical questions

A commitment to co-development suggests critical questions concerning how participation in school development can be made as meaningful as possible for everyone.

You may find the questions below a helpful starting point for reflection.

Power sharing – What steps might be needed to make sure that leadership is inclusive in practice and that some do not feel excluded?

Transforming dialogue – Is the school run so that all are heard and participate in discussions with equal respect?

Holistic learning – Is the school's focus on rounded learning, rather than being dominated by narrow measures of professional development or student attainment?

Relational well-being – Does the school create a shared feeling of belonging, empowerment and high self-esteem, together with respect for independent, critical thinking?

Collaboration catalyst 3

Reflection and action cards

This catalyst consists of a set of 32 cards, grouped under the headings of Learning, Relationships, Power and Communication:

Cards 1-8	Learning
Cards 9-16	Relationships
Cards 17-24	Power
Cards 25-32	Communication

Each card focuses on one of the characteristics of a dimension of leadership associated with collaborative or hierarchical leadership, outlined in the Leadership Framework in Figure 2.

For example, the red card below shows one characteristic of the dimension of instrumental learning associated with hierarchical leadership, fostering dependence and narrow measures of success.



The yellow card below shows one characteristic of the dimension of power sharing associated with collaborative leadership fostering co-development.



The full set of cards is available in a separate document, [Collaboration catalyst 3: Reflection and action cards](#), downloadable from our website.

You can design your own card activities to suit your organisational structure and purpose. However, three activities are given as starters below. These can be used as a one-off, selected according to your purpose, or in sequence, to build up a depth of reflection. Each activity can be undertaken with the whole set of cards or with cards which relate to the particular leadership dimension – learning (cards 1-8), relationships (cards 9-16), power (cards 17-24), communication (cards 24-32) - which fits your organisational setting and priorities.

Activity 1

Purpose of the activity

What to do

Pick a card



- To begin to explore personal views of leadership
 - To allow all group members the opportunity to share their views with others
 - To begin to debate what might be the most important aspects for continued reflection
-
- Participants are invited to work in groups
 - In each group, the set of 32 cards is divided randomly amongst participants so that each person has a selection of comments ranging across the four dimensions: learning, relationships, power and communication
 - Each group member is invited to choose one card they wish to highlight. It could be that they disagree with the statement on the card or that they find it particularly relevant to their situation, or there may be some other reason for their choice. The criteria for highlighting the particular card is up to individual participants
 - Participants explain their choice to group members
 - Each group chooses one card which has resonated with the whole group to share in plenary session

Activity 2

Diamond nine



Purpose of the activity

- To support a developing understanding of collaborative leadership
- To begin to develop a sense of ranking or priority of leadership issues or strengths
- To share the range of views about leadership across the school community, department, team or other grouping

What to do

- Participants are invited to sit in groups
- Each group is given one set of cards
- Each participant is given a copy of the Diamond Nine diagram – see Figure 3 below
- Each group member is invited to look at the cards and identify those they wish to rank in terms of an agreed criterion. Examples of criteria are: strength of leadership practice in the school; most important areas for development in leadership practice in the school. Other criteria for ranking the statements on the card are possible. All groups might rank statements using the same criterion, or each group may be given or agree its own criterion. The important thing is that the basis for ranking serves an agreed educational and organisational purpose
- Each participant writes the statements from the cards in the appropriate places in their own Diamond Nine diagram – the top of the diagram representing the strongest or most important and the bottom of the diagram representing the weakest or least important. For example, if you are ranking by strength of current leadership practice, you would put the card that reflected the strongest current practice at the top of the diamond, the card you felt indicated the least strong aspect of practice at the bottom, and others, according to your ranking, between the two.
- Participants share and discuss their Diamond Nine diagrams

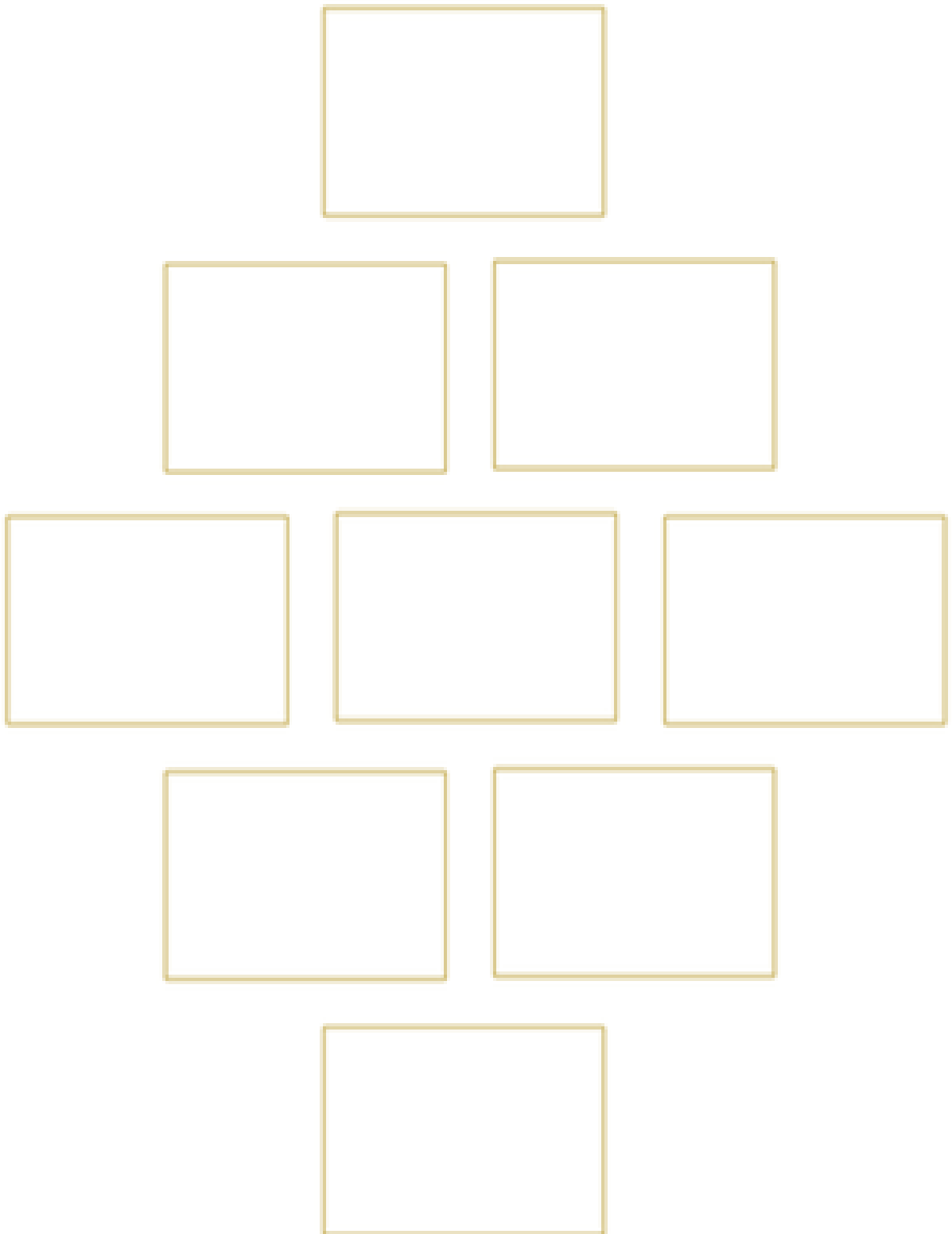


Figure 3: Diamond Nine diagram

Activity 3

Where are we now?



Purpose of the activity

- To develop a clear sense of the current characteristics of leadership policy and practice in the school
- To stimulate debate on the desired characteristics of leadership policy and practice within the school
- To inform an action planning process

What to do

- Participants are invited to sit in groups
- Each group is given one set of cards
 - Participants collaborate to divide the cards into 3 piles: The *maintain* pile: cards that represent current policy and practice in the school which needs to be maintained
 - The *change* pile: cards that represent current policy and practice in the school which needs to change
 - The *nurture* pile: cards that represent desired policy and practice in the school which needs to be nurtured and grown

This card sorting can be used to support the action planning detailed in section 3 below.

3 Moving from reflection to action

This booklet has been designed to support policy makers and practitioners in school education who want to work with others to nurture the practice of collaborative leadership. Critiquing the strongly hierarchical structures which persist in many areas of school policy and practice, it offers an alternative vision, based on a model of collaborative leadership.

It has offered catalysts for reflecting critically on how you are thinking about and 'doing' leadership now and how you might re-frame your thinking and 'do it differently' in future. This has involved evaluating current and desired leadership culture, structures and practice.

The debate and learning provoked through using the catalysts for reflection should now be synthesised into a plan for action to enhance collaborative school leadership and thus students' educational experience.

The action planning template (Figure 4 below) may be a useful tool to support you in this planning process.

Column 1 - allows you to note key policies and practices which you wish to consider further. In this column you could write in the most important statements from the cards for action, and for each one a policy or practice specific to the school associated with that statement. Policies and practice could be at school, team or individual level.

Column 2 - allows you to indicate whether these key policies need to be maintained, changed or nurtured.

Columns 3 and 4 – allow you to note conclusions drawn about each one – about action needed, and by whom and when.

Policy/Practice	Maintain (M) Change (C) Nurture (N)	Action required	Further details – who/when etc.

Figure 4: Action planning template

Further reading

Collaborative School Leadership: A Critical Guide, P. A. Woods & A. Roberts, SAGE, 2018. <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/collaborative-school-leadership/book253212>

Collaborative School Leadership in a Global Society: A critical perspective, P. A. Woods & A. Roberts, *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, published online first, February 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143218759088>

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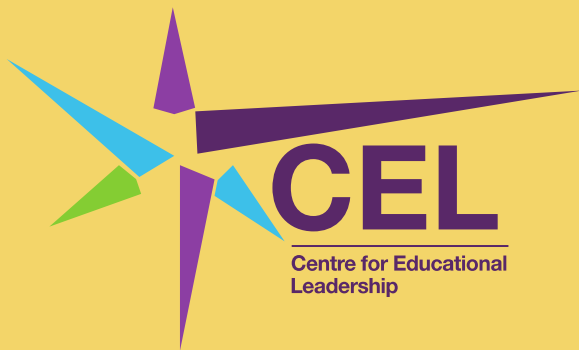
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The research has been reported in publications including *Collaborative School Leadership: A Critical Guide* (by Philip Woods and Amanda Roberts, SAGE, 2018).

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