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Guide to...



Essential middle leadership skills

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GUIDE TO...

Essential middle leadership skills

The broad range of skills required to be an effective middle leader in a school makes it one of the toughest jobs there is. We break down the key skills that you will need to lead your team successfully

Middle leadership is a vital tier of management in a school. Whether it is a head of department, head of year or leader of faculty, the senior leadership team will look to a middle leader to fulfil a variety of roles and responsibilities.

Certain personal and professional qualities make a good middle leader – resilience, self-awareness, critical-thinking and emotional intelligence are all vital. A middle leader needs to be able to manage their emotions and those of others, and to develop and sustain strong relationships with their team and beyond.

An ability to build trust, think conceptually and communicate effectively in matters around learning is also critical.

Negotiating skills

Any leadership role requires an ability to discuss, negotiate, persuade and sometimes coerce members of the team.

“I call these influencing skills and these form an important part of leadership,” explained Andy Buck, a former headteacher and now managing director of Leadership Matters and Dean of the Leadership Faculty at Teaching Leaders.

Mr Buck, who works closely with ASCL’s Professional Development on its leadership development programme, continued: “Middle leaders have to consider things in the round and take into account the personalities of the people they want to influence. For example, what is the best way to gain their attention and persuade them to take the view that you want them to take?”

It is also here that emotional intelligence comes in. Knowing your team, their strengths and weaknesses as professionals, as well as their

personal qualities is vital: “For example, you might want to bring a new syllabus to your department, and considering which syllabus is best is always a contentious issue. But you are convinced of the need to do this and your team is warm to the idea in varying degrees.

“It may be a defining moment for your team. As the head of department you may be the only one who thinks this is a good idea, so your job is to persuade and take those people with you.

“Logical analysis is where you present the team with reasons why this is the right thing to do. It could also mean getting excited or passionate about the issue, and hoping they will respond positively. Or you might sell it to them by offering additional CPD to make the transition easier.”

Sometimes you may need to influence the team by talking to the team members individually. Having a one-to-one conversation with a team member, and tailoring the discussion to them, can help the process of getting the whole team on board. This may lead to your team members talking to each other and coming round to the idea, but you have to give them the same message so they are clear on what your intentions are.

Daniel Goleman, renowned psychologist and expert in emotional intelligence, lists six effective styles that middle leaders should have at their disposal: coercive, visionary, affiliative, democratic, pace-setting, and coaching.

“An effective leader needs to have all of these in their box and to know when to use them,” Mr Buck said. “Sometimes the members of the department may be older and more experienced than you are, so you may need to be affiliative and use coaching rather than being coercive and authoritative.”

When negotiating with their team, a middle leader also needs to consider the context in which they are working. For example, is this a stable school or is that a stable department in an otherwise unstable school? “You have to make a judgement about the culture and climate of the school,” Mr Buck added.

Having difficult discussions

Part of the role of a middle leader is to build a good and effective team, to recognise their strengths through praise and giving positive feedback, as well as having difficult conversations when things go awry. There has to be a context to what is good and bad, and what your expectations are, so there is no room for doubt. There needs to be balance and certain situations need to be handled sensitively, otherwise the building of discretionary effort – also known as “going the extra mile” – can be diminished.

“A middle leader has to create a culture within the team which says, ‘this is how we do things in the team’,” Mr Buck said. “This sets the parameters of how the team behaves as a whole. You have to create that culture of how it feels to be in that team, and each individual needs to feel recognised, acknowledged, challenged and appreciated.

“So think about what the culture and climate is like, because those two things together create discretionary effort. An outstanding middle leader will have a team of people all putting in discretionary effort.”

A middle leader has to consider whether they are being decent, honest and fair, and showing integrity. He or she also has to be straight with their team.

“It can be awkward to have a difficult conversation with some colleagues, especially if you are the line manager for people who have more experience than you and have been at the school for longer, or who may be quite popular with colleagues, or are seen as maverick,” Mr Buck continued.

“It helps to have a shared set of expectations that everyone in the team is signed up to. So you can then reasonably say, ‘this is what we agreed and now you are letting the side down’.”

Mr Buck has created a mnemonic – NEFI ART – to help middle leaders:

- N – Name (the issue).
- E – Exemplify (the issue).

- F – Feeling (how this makes you feel).
- I – Importance (why this matters).
- A – Accept (any part you may have played in the situation occurring).
- R – Resolve (you want to find a way forward).
- T – Them (get their response).

One example might be a dispute over marking. You want to find out why a teacher’s year 9 books have remained unmarked for several weeks, despite having an agreement that marking will be done regularly.

“You could say that you feel these pupils deserve to have their books marked and that you are cross this hasn’t been done,” Mr Buck said. “Say you know the teacher has been off ill, or had some other difficulty, but even so they should have had long enough. Tell them you want to sort this out and that things have to change. Acknowledge that a way forward needs to be found, and then wait to see what they have to say. You can go back and use any of the components of NEFI ART until the matter is sorted out. I see NEFI ART as a middle leader’s friend.”

Morale, motivating your team, managing negativity

Climate and culture are really important when trying to maintain morale and motivation among your team and it is important to recognise that different people like being valued and praised in different ways. Some like public recognition while others will prefer a quiet word.

“Often we deal with negative issues in an email and praise people face-to-face, when really it should be the other way round,” Mr Buck said. “If you are not happy about something that has happened then it is better to have a conversation about it so you can discuss it and read their emotions in real time.

“Speaking also gives you time to pause to allow a discussion to take place, and not to throw the whole thing out there. Generally people don’t appreciate getting an email that tells them off and they may also think that it is a cowardly way to proceed. It is better to say something difficult face-to-face and to be nice in writing, in a letter or card that your colleague can keep and look back on.”

When you have that difficult conversation it might be that someone responds, “I am so glad you raised

this because at this time such and such a thing happened, which totally threw me". It is clear from their response that this situation was better dealt with face-to-face than by firing off an email.

"When it comes to morale, think hard about what you are asking your team to do," Mr Buck added. "Never ask them to do something you wouldn't do yourself. Act as their champion. Think of things you can do to make their jobs more do-able."

Managing pressure and workload often involves courage and resilience. When asking your team to do something, consider how important and urgent it is. Some things might be important but not urgent. Help them to manage their time effectively to reduce pressure. If they look like they're struggling, ask if they need help. It will make them feel valued.

Negativity can also be damaging to your team. "Some people always see the negative or are easily switched off," Mr Buck said, "and you may need to say to them that their attitude and approach are not helpful, and that you noticed they had switched off or that their facial expression betrayed they were not happy with something.

"Ask them at the end of the meeting why they didn't appear happy and what the problem is. They might immediately feel better because someone has noticed they are not happy. This is another example of knowing individuals and their predispositions. Don't let the situation fester and try to get to the bottom of the issue, as it can affect the whole team."

Implementing change

When implementing change it is often important to identify who can help you to achieve this. It is always useful to have key influencers on board who believe in what you are trying to achieve. You may need to convince people that change is needed, and this is where your negotiating skills, mentioned earlier, come into play.

There are a number of considerations when trying to implement change, according to Mr Buck. "You need to have a vision of what you are trying to achieve, and to consider whether your team has the skills collectively to make this happen.

"Are there any incentives you need to suggest to make it easier for people to come on board? It is important that the members of your team can see how this might benefit them and affect them

Upcoming ASCL events for middle leaders

- How to Lead and Bring About Change as a Middle Leader: May 6, Nottingham.
- Aspiring to the Leadership Team: June 3, London.
- Middle Leadership: The role of the appraiser: June 10, Birmingham.

To book your place, visit www.ascl.org.uk/events

positively. You also need to have the time to allow the plan to happen. Great initiatives often falter if this is not in place. You need a plan for everyone to stick to, so the idea or initiative does not just fizzle out half-way through."

As a middle leader, you also need to build in a monitoring mechanism to measure the impact of the change. Make your team aware that sometimes things may get worse before they get better, and be supportive of those who are concerned about this. Some people may need to see the bigger picture, while others will be more interested in the practicalities of how it is going to work.



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Case study: Head of department

When Louise Kothari took over as head of science at Hornsey School for Girls in Haringey in September 2013, she felt she needed to make some changes.

Then aged 31, she fell right in the middle of the oldest and youngest staff in her department of 10 teachers and three technicians.

"My first challenge when I arrived was to build a team," she said. "At the time there were a lot of new staff, many of whom were younger than the experienced staff who were already there. So there were clear natural divisions."

Ms Kothari wanted to change the way key stage 3 was taught, which she thought lacked scientific concept and robustness.

"We looked at what was already being taught and rather than scrapping everything I asked staff to pick out what the good, effective bits were and what needed to change," she said. "I assigned staff to work in pairs, with one established teacher and a new one working together. In this way, they got to know each other and it blurred the distinction between the old and the new, and the young and the more experienced."

"I wanted them to forge relationships as colleagues, and to learn to value what each other brought to the team."

Ms Kothari started her teaching career with Teach First, before briefly running her own market intelligence company, specialising in renewable energies. So what skills did she bring to the department, and the school, as a middle leader?

"You have to have humility and accept we are all prone to mistakes," she said. "You need to be respectful, have empathy, and to be positive. Even when you're exhausted, still show that you are focused on the solutions and getting the job done."

Middle leaders should also behave in a way they would expect their team to behave: "Have high expectations of your staff and of yourself and always remember that every child is entitled to a good education. Never expect anyone to do something you would not do yourself."

Ms Kothari acknowledged that her arrival at the school may have made some staff quite fearful of

the prospect of change. "It was important for me to address this by having a clear vision of what I wanted and what my expectations were for the teaching of science. I spent a lot of time sharing that vision with colleagues. It was important that they all had a say in this and contributed to it," she said.

"I have really learned to understand the value of working collaboratively, and being open to people's ideas about what they think we need to do to change. In education, you learn as much from failure as from success."

"I also value and enjoy the diversity in the team – trying to bring the best out of people and spending time getting to know them and what motivates them. For example, some have a PhD and have worked outside of education, so I needed to find out how we could harness that experience."

Tanya Douglas, Hornsey's senior assistant headteacher, with responsibility for the curriculum, described what the school looked for in its middle leaders: "Middle leaders are an essential part of the 'engine' that keeps the school working smoothly. When we look to appoint someone to one of these roles, we consider how well they can lead, whether they have vision, and effective people skills, such as the ability to listen, give feedback, and provide modelling and coaching if needed. They also need to be experts in their subjects and the areas they lead, and to be data-literate."

"Their roles within the schools are particularly important now, at a time of curriculum change, because they need to be trusted, to take on board what needs to be done, and to carry their teams with them. They must also be outstanding classroom practitioners, be organised and have good time-management skills, because the role is so demanding."

What advice would Ms Kothari give to teachers considering a promotion or just starting out as middle leaders?

"Be yourself and be honest," she said. "Always bring what you are doing back to the moral purpose of education. But also remember about your own needs and professional development."

Case study: Cross-school roles

Dr Owen Mather has three middle leadership roles at Lawrence Sheriff School.

He is head of chemistry, head of year 10, and leader of teaching standards at the all-boys grammar school in Rugby, Warwickshire. As if that was not enough, he has also recently become an accredited Specialist Leader of Education with the National College for Teaching and Leadership.

His cross-school roles give him insights into the performance of pupils and staff and allow him to have an influence and input into key areas across the school.

"As head of chemistry, I lead two teachers and a technician, while as head of year 10 I interact with all staff, tutors and heads of house and the whole pastoral team," he said. "In my head of year role I am responsible for academic achievement and for ensuring pupils are reaching their potential. This requires a great deal of data analysis to see how pupils are progressing and whether staff are putting in place the appropriate interventions. As a selective school, we expect the boys to attain at a high level."

As leader of teaching standards, Dr Mather does for teachers what he would do for pupils in his head of year role – ensures that they are reaching their potential. "If a teacher is underperforming for some reason, it is my role to find out why and how we can help and support them," he said.

"Influencing is really important in my roles, and convincing people of the right course of action to take. I try to ensure they do not feel undermined or lacking in confidence. There is little difference between using this approach with staff or pupils.

"You have to lead by example, use guile and persuasion. It is important that people see my department in a positive light and that my team understands that hard work needs to happen now to pay-off later. Wondering what went wrong after the exam results come out is too late."

Dr Mather believes both staff and pupils have to take responsibility for their performance. "As a middle leader you need to have empathy but also to be firm when necessary and to show grit. The message I often give is 'yes, we have an issue and we can deal with it together, but ultimately it is your responsibility to resolve that problem'.

"Data analysis is absolutely crucial in this role because we need to understand where we are and where we need to go, and to understand where any problems lie. This provides people with the tools to do their jobs properly."

ASCL president Dr Peter Kent, who is headteacher at Lawrence Sheriff, said it was Dr Mather's skills in data analysis that secured him the role of head of year. "It made perfect sense to utilise these skills, as there was an obvious transferability from one role to the other," he explained.

"A school stands or falls on the quality of its leaders, and middle leaders are a part of that engine room that drives improvement across the whole school. Leadership is not about a small group of people at the top.

"If you get the middle leadership tier right and heading in the right direction then its influence reaches right through the school."

Dr Mather said he would advise anyone considering middle leadership to ensure they show empathy and provide a supportive environment for staff and pupils.

"Be the best role-model you can be and lead by example," he said. "People need to take responsibility for their own performance and improvement, but give them a supportive environment in which to do this.

"Be prepared to absorb the pressure of accountability, because results can vary from year to year. I treat everyone as equals in the chemistry department but I am the one who takes the flak and stands at the front.

"That is what my role is."

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