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Continuing Professional Development for Children's Services Managers

What Works?

May 2012



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1 Introduction

This paper looks at emerging evidence and good practice in the area of continuing professional development for managers of children's services, and takes an overview about how managers can be best supported in developing their skills and knowledge.

The paper focuses particularly on 'middle managers', by which we mean those managers whose role in children's services is to manage professionals' practice, and to translate strategic direction into operational practice. These people, variously known as 'service managers', 'team managers', 'centre managers', 'practice managers' and 'operational managers' play a key role in children's services, and their skills are crucial to the safe, effective and cost-effective delivery of high quality health, education and social care.

The paper considers the activities and skills required by middle managers, and the type of support needed to develop them. The terms leadership and management development are used interchangeably as for most managers, in most situations, these themes overlap and are offered in a single programme.

2 What is Middle Management?

There are a wide range of descriptions for the role of middle management. Hales perhaps describes the essential functions most neatly by outlining a varying blend of the following:

- Linking strategy and operations by transmitting and implementing policy and regulations, planning and co-ordinating a number of units, briefing and directing subordinate managers, allocating work and reporting on operational, financial and/or market performance.
- Deploying human, financial and physical resources through recruitment and selection, training and development, appraisal and motivation of managers reporting to them; negotiating and managing budgets and controlling expenditure; and managing inbound and outbound logistics.
- Liaising with other units within the organisation, to maintain workflow, co-ordinate activities, trade and provide services and information and

liaising with external parties such as suppliers, distributors/agents and customers/clients.¹

Hales' overview is echoed by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC)² who suggested that in children's services, in addition to understanding and managing the changing role of children's services teams, the role is likely to involve:

- Leading integrated teams and services through complexity.
- Promoting a vision and driving transformational change.
- Playing a corporate role.
- Managing tensions of collaboration, integration and partnership.
- Delivering high performance and high quality outcomes.
- Managing organisational or workforce change.

3 Middle Managers as Agents of Change

A complex and demanding task

All major commentators emphasise the complexity of the role that middle managers play. For example, Balogun talks about middle management as a "*complex and demanding task*" in which middle managers are:

- Undertaking personal change.
- Helping others through change.
- Keeping the business going through change.
- Constantly juggling priorities.
- Committing long hours.³

Similarly, Thomas and Dunkerley see middle managers as "*key agents in delivering the strategic goals of the organisation*" but in doing so consider that they are '*.. caught in the middle, being required to be both team players and executioners*'⁴ and McGurk argues that "*middle managers require a fine balance of management and leadership skills.*"⁵

¹ Hales CP (2007) Moving down the line? The shifting boundary between middle and first-line management. *Journal of General Management* 32(2) pp31-55

² CWDC (2009) Meeting the Challenge of Change: Handbook for the Peer Support Programme

³ Balogun J (2003) From Blaming the Middle to Harnessing its Potential: Creating Change Intermediaries. *British Journal of Management* 14(1) pp69-83.

⁴ Thomas R and Dunkerley D (1999) Careering Downwards? Middle Managers' Experiences in the Downsized Organisation. *British Journal of Management* 10(2) pp157-169.

⁵ McGurk P (2009) Developing "middle leaders" in the public services? The realities of management and leadership development for public managers. *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 22(6) pp464-47

The change enthusiasts of the 1980s and 1990s were not kind to middle managers, who they often described as occupying an obstructive and resistant position to change. However, more recent research suggests that the position of middle managers is more nuanced than previously understood. Many commentators now emphasise how middle managers use their position to:

- Gather, collate and synthesise information for senior managers.
- Sponsor projects that are likely to promote rather than diminish adaptability within their organisation.
- Champion innovation and opportunities to senior management.

As a result, as Balogun (2003) suggests, middle managers can be both the target and agents of change and that they can “*fulfil a complex ‘change intermediary’ position during implementation.*” Two activities are described as central to this role:

- ‘Performing the conversation’ refers to the way that middle managers in diverse circumstances are able to ‘craft’ and ‘diffuse’ the messages they wish to get across to others to influence the recipients in the way desired; they are able to use the right words, the appropriate metaphors and symbols.
- ‘Setting the scene’ refers to the capacity of middle managers to bring people together around a change project in order to make sense of it and build an alliance working towards the change, even if it is for different reasons.

This can have positive benefits for an organisation. For example, Carney found that stronger organisational cultures (e.g. those that promote delivery of high quality care in conjunction with an expressed commitment to professional standards) were found to predict strategic involvement of middle managers, and that this involvement in turn “*supported utilisation of superior operational knowledge than would occur if strategic involvement did not occur*”⁶.

Carney also found that higher levels of involvement also tend to associate with diminished levels of middle management resistance. In other words, middle managers can act to make a strategic contribution and organisations need to recognise and “*draw on the strategic potential of the middle.*”

However, this contribution is not inevitable, and needs to be nurtured – and this depends partly on how the role is structured and supported. So for example findings include:

⁶ Carney M (2006) Understanding organisational culture: the key to successful middle manager strategic involvement in health care delivery? *Journal of Nursing Management* 14(1) pp23–33

Draw on the strategic potential of the middle

- Middle managers in 'boundary spanning' positions (i.e. those positions that connect the inner organisation with its external environment) are better placed to appreciate strategic problems and to identify potential solutions to them.
- Middle management is not a single ubiquitous role. Upward influencing behaviours have been found to be less extensive at lower middle management levels.
- The flattening of organisational hierarchies toward more horizontal business structures increases the importance of the contribution that middle managers can make towards achieving competitive advantage.
- Middle managers are likely to have a greater effect on organisational performance where they are directly involved in determining objectives and solutions to these rather than being confined to the role of implementer.

So, middle managers are increasingly being recognised as occupying a mid-way position between strategic management and operations and are *"..now likely to be characterised as key strategic actors"*.

Middle managers are key strategic actors

This is particularly the case in children's services where middle managers often hold performance and quality management roles which place them at the forefront of the relationship between organisations and their users and stakeholders. For example:

- Social work managers responsible for safeguarding the wellbeing of abused children or for finding suitable substitute care for children removed from their families.
- Education managers responsible for introducing new curricula or ensuring that children will achieve successful exam results.
- Health service managers responsible for ensuring that children with health problems or disabilities receive appropriate therapeutic or palliative care.

So, overall, the picture that emerges is that the role of middle managers as key links within organisations is being better recognised and appreciated. In children's services as elsewhere middle managers are increasingly being seen as crucial to the development of strategy, the management of operations, the quality of organisational performance, and ultimately to the outcomes for children and young people.

4 Developing Managers – What Works?

Almost every organisation operating in the public or private sector, including children's services, has some form of management development programme for its middle managers. The content of these programmes vary hugely, as a recent report by the Chartered Management Institute showed⁷. It is also clear from evidence contained in the study that getting the approach to, and content of, leadership and management development investment right for the organisation will have a decisive impact on 'people' and 'organisational' performance measures. In particular, it is likely to influence the relationship between levels of employee engagement and better performance and the importance of the line manager in the achievement of business and people performance.

However, much of the evidence about the impact of leadership or management development programmes is (perhaps inevitably) rather anecdotal. For example, Hales (2007) in research concerned with the impact of organisational change on front line and middle management roles found claims (particularly about the scale of change) which "*constitute not so much a body of knowledge as a variegated 'discourse' heavy on generalisation, rhetoric and prescription*" and he cautions that in the absence of decent evidence we are not just likely to "*oversimplify the point of departure*" but also to "*under-specify the destination*".

Management development works in different ways in different situations

Nevertheless there do appear to be a number of more or less consistent messages and themes that have emerged within the literature over the past ten to fifteen years.

Burgoyne et al argue that management and leadership development "*works in different ways in different situations. The practical implication of this is that to get the benefit of management and leadership development requires the design of appropriate approaches for specific situations rather than the adoption of a universal model of best practice... In consequence a variety of different teaching methodologies are now being used in management and leadership education and development... Taking the literature as a whole, there is no evidence to show that any one method is the most successful. All indications are that multiple methods will produce the most effective management learning. No one method has the sole answer.*"⁸

4.1 What works for managers?

However, there does appear to be a clear cluster of activities which are found consistently to be useful as part of any one package of development.

⁷ CMI (2012) The Business Benefits of Management and Leadership Development.

⁸ Burgoyne J, Hirsh W and Williams S (2004) The Development of Management and Leadership Capability and its Contribution to Performance: The evidence, the prospects and the research need. RR560 University of Lancaster/DfES

For example, the Performance Information Unit⁹ identified a number of elements found within successful development programmes. These included provision for assessment, challenge and support for embedding the learning in the workplace. It also found that better evaluated programmes combine a range of learning and development approaches including:

- Assessment tools and procedures.
- Group development exercises.
- Stimulations and case studies.
- Action learning sets.
- Coaching and mentoring.

Similarly Hartley and Hinksman¹⁰ identified the following approaches, all of which could contribute directly to leadership development:

- 360 degree feedback.
- Mentoring.
- Coaching.
- Networking.
- Action learning.
- Job challenge.
- Secondments.
- Succession planning.
- Fast track cohorts.
- Organisation development.
- Partnership working.

4.2 What works for the public sector?

In terms of designing programmes for specific public sector managers, in a wide-ranging review of the evidence, Williams concluded that in terms of overall effectiveness for NHS leadership programmes¹¹:

- Executive coaching programmes (one-to-one coaching, 360 degree feedback, positive learning environment) may be less effective than longer programmes (residential sessions, action learning sets, projects, workshops, cohort meetings).

⁹ Performance Information Unit (2001) Strengthening leadership in the public sector. A research study by the PIU.

¹⁰ Hartley and Hinksman (2003) Leadership Development: A Systematic Review of the Literature. WIGPM, University of Warwick.

¹¹ Williams S (2004) Evidence of the contribution leadership development for professional groups makes in driving their organisations forward. Literature Review for the NHS Leadership Centre. Henley Management College

- Well-planned development programmes seem to be most effective, particularly where development events take care to ensure that development is embedded in the workplace and forms a coherent programme.
- Pick-and-mix programmes often lack coherence, are not integrated into the workplace, are not supported by senior leaders, and often take place in a culture that does not favour development.
- Programmes with an emphasis on feedback and learning support are the most effective, particularly when they take place within a carefully crafted learning event.
- Reflective learning events work better than non-reflective learning events.
- Operational assignments can be the key element in turning what has been learnt into behaviour and attitudes.
- Programmes aimed at *individuals* in health care are seldom effective in producing change.
- Change will only occur when individual approaches are combined with other approaches.
- Not only do *teams* need to change, but they need to work together for change.

In a different study Purcell notes that “*while regarded as an accessible and cost-effective option for delivering leadership and management training – public sector employees do not value e-learning highly (Schofield et al, 2008). Instead, they indicate a preference for a personal coaching method, presenting a challenge to the sector as it is more expensive to deliver than other methods, such as e-learning.*”¹²

The Chartered Management Institute¹³ found evidence of a mismatch between training and development opportunities being offered by organisations and those most valued by managers. So far as the latter is concerned, accredited learning, qualifications by professional bodies and coaching by external practitioners tended to be rated by managers as having the most impact on their management abilities.

Finally, it is worth considering emerging thinking about the future development needs of public sector managers. In a report commissioned by the National School of Government and the Public Service Leaders Alliance, Benington and Hartley¹⁴ explore what might need to happen to secure improvements in public sector leadership in the future. They suggest

¹² Purcell M (2009) Leadership development programme for current and aspirant directors of children's services. A scoping study report March 2009. Leeds Metropolitan University and National College for School Leadership.

¹³ CMI (2012) The Business Benefits of Management and Leadership Development.

¹⁴ Benington J and Hartley J (2009) “Whole systems go!” Improving leadership across the whole public service system. National School of Government & Sunningdale Institute

that it will require “...a radical re-design of provision for leadership and management development, in order to stimulate continuous self-improvement in performance across the whole public service system and visible and measurable outcomes for users, citizens and communities.”

They suggest that:

- More effective whole system leadership is required because citizens and communities are increasingly confronted by a whole series of complex cross-cutting problems for which there are no simple solutions. These complex challenges require at least a commitment to work across conventional boundaries and new patterns of leadership and action with an emphasis on network and coalition building.
- Leadership development programmes need to translate individual learning into organisational and inter-organisational action and improvement. It may be more effective to start with an organisational or inter-organisational network as the unit of analysis, and to aim to develop the whole leadership team as a working unit.
- Utilising and reflecting on knowledge ‘from the field’ should be seen as a vital component to better leadership, and it may be more effective to start with the practical challenges facing an organisation or network and then search for concepts which help the practitioners to make better sense of the complexity of the specific whole system in which they are working.
- Rather than leadership development programmes being facilitated away from the workplace with the application of learning taken back into the organisation, it may be more effective to start leadership development at the workplace or in the community.
- There is a crucial role for universities with experience of engaged research, development and teaching to promote and support critical analysis and reflection in making sense of the complex experiences of leadership in practice, promoting evidence-bases for development and independent accreditation and rigorous assessment of learning.

Management development is organisation development

4.3 What works for children's services managers?

Specifically regarding children's services managers, a key conclusion from Hartle et al review for the CWDC¹⁵ was a renewed emphasis on the value of blended learning programmes i.e. those that offer “a combination of formal and informal activities, whole group and individual sessions, workplace-based learning and coaching for individuals will have the biggest impact on the development of individual managers.” The report also provides a helpful summary of feedback from children's services managers about what better practice in leadership and management development would look like.

¹⁵ Hartle F, Snook P, Apsey H and Browton R. (2008) The Training and Development of Middle Managers in the Children's Workforce. Hay Group report to the Children's Workforce Development Council.

- **Commitment from senior leaders and development of a learning culture.** A clear direction and leadership to enable cultural change, allowing individuals and their line managers to invest time in identifying and meeting the development needs of middle managers. The impact of learning and development on service provision should be measured.
- **A cross agency approach to learning and development.** A cross-agency approach would also ideally be supplemented with same-systems working and a greater understanding of the relationships between agencies and roles, enabling individuals to interact as equals and start to overcome cultural differences between professions.
- **Appropriate and effective management and leadership training content.** Content should be focused on the complexities of managing within the children's workforce, rather than generic corporate management training, and should include accreditation. The skills and competencies required for integrated multi-agency working should be the core of the content.
- **Effective and efficient co-ordination of development opportunities.** Delivery mechanisms should include a variety of methods including coaching and informal networking.

4.4 What does not work?

What needs to be avoided in the design and deliver of management development opportunities for managers of children's services? Hartle et al (2008) identified a number of barriers to leadership development in their recent CWDC report. These included:

- No consistent pattern of provision of learning opportunities across the middle manager population exists (the range of opportunity, even in the same locality, is very different).
- Most of the training is available on an ad hoc basis rather than as part of a planned, structured programme.
- The identification of training opportunities is usually the result of individual initiative.
- Very little evaluation of training received is carried out.
- The absence of an underpinning structure that ties together the different learning opportunities, professional development and career pathways is an obstacle.
- Middle managers need greater clarity of the key leadership skills required at their level.
- Most middle managers have received little or no structured development of management/leadership skills.
- Most middle managers are engaged in integrated working, of various types, at different levels yet most of the respondents had not received any training to prepare them for integrated working, yet recognised that it requires different skills and a new mind set.

- Existing funding arrangements do not facilitate multi-agency leadership training activities.
- The major barrier to access of training opportunities is heavy workload / time commitments. This is compounded in those organisations which do not place a value on learning or growth.

One of the key conclusions of the report was that overall, while middle managers are accessing the activities most available to them (typically formal and informal networking, attending conferences), they may not be accessing the most appropriate training available. The report issues a two-fold challenge:

<p>A two-fold development challenge to the children’s workforce</p>	<p>Firstly, to the middle management culture that exists across much of the children’s workforce where taking time away from the core role, for the purposes of career/professional development, is viewed as a low priority.</p>
	<p>Secondly, to Children’s Services Directorates and children’s partnerships to look at new models for support and training of middle managers across the whole of the children’s workforce.</p>

Make the space for development of middle managers

5 Implications for Management Developers

The management of children’s services is complex. It operates within a complex political environment characterised by a high level of debate, accountability and scrutiny. Funders of public services are not necessarily or inevitably recipients of those services. Solutions to major problems do not usually reside within a single agency. Children’s services managers need to understand their external environments (i.e. the wider environment within which their own service is located) but also be capable of crossing and negotiating boundaries to secure collaborative and purposeful solutions. Middle managers are in the middle of this complexity and need development opportunities and support which will help them deal with this complexity, build their capacity to manage it effectively, and also help them develop their own skills for their future career.

This short paper has identified a number of key themes to guide the organisation, design and delivery of management development for middle managers in children’s services. Drawing them together we suggest the following key messages to inform local management development programmes and culture.

5.1 Development and the organisation

- Ensure the organisation has a clear and explicit approach to management development.

- Reflect on whether management development practice is consistent with organisational culture and strategy.
- Design management development activities as an integrated programme rather than a single or discrete event.
- Build in flexibility in programmes to allow for emergent and adaptive elements and organisational change.
- Develop a framework for evaluation that reflects the models of leadership and leadership development being used, and provides the opportunity for engagement between middle managers and strategic managers.
- Make a clear commitment to development as a legitimate activity, with sufficient time to undertake it properly.

5.2 Programme design

- Mixed programmes of activity with flexible learning styles are more likely to have impact.
- Design programmes which relate primarily to work-based situations and issues.
- Make sure programmes offer personal assessment and constructive feedback and evaluation to individuals.
- Design programmes which explore the role of teams and networks, not just individuals.
- Build programmes where possible which allow colleagues working across organisational boundaries to share learning and ideas.
- Make sure the programmes deal specifically with the complexities of the children's services management environment, and are not just concerned with generic management skills.

5.3 Programme delivery

- Build interventions with multiple experiences including some form of assessment tools, group development exercises, stimulations and case studies, action learning sets, coaching and mentoring.
- Build programmes using a combination of local knowledge and situation specific expertise and wider experience in the sector.
- Consider the use of external specialists, such as a University, to deliver programmes, perhaps jointly.
- Find ways to have programmes formally accredited to recognise the longer-term career development value of development for individuals.

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