Middle Leadership Matters

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Introduction

Middle leaders in Aotearoa New Zealand schools hold a pivotal role in leading the teaching and learning activities that determine the success of educational outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2012). Most middle leaders find their role rewarding, however, they experience the tension of being both teacher and leader. Although middle leaders have influential positions within schools, they are often not provided with specific middle leadership development, nor effective appraisal to undertake this complex role. Recent literature supports the need for middle leadership development and meaningful appraisal. In the absence of a government initiative, the onus falls on school leaders to develop and appraise their middle leaders, yet middle leaders believe it is not happening adequately (Bassett, 2016, Cardno & Robson, 2016). This white paper presents a case for an online course specifically designed for middle leaders. The online course offers a solution to the problem, and aims to explore the fundamental elements of middle leadership, from understanding the role itself, and leading teams, through to leading from the middle, and connecting communities of leaders across schools.

Understanding Middle Leadership

Middle leaders have a rewarding, yet challenging and demanding role. In Aotearoa New Zealand, middle leaders are referred to as: Team Leader, Syndicate Leader, Head of Department, Teacher in Charge, or Dean. As influential leaders within schools, they are expected to drive curriculum, change and innovation (Ministry of Education, 2012). A PPTA task force report in 2015 noted that the role of middle leadership has expanded well beyond what is manageable. Bassett (2016) found that middle leaders were expected to undertake a variety of tasks including: leading the curriculum, with a strong focus on improving student achievement; developing the staff in their departments; and a considerable number of administrative tasks, such as tracking and recording student achievement, moderation of assessment, budgeting, and compliance related tasks. The variety and scope of these tasks has created a number of challenges for middle leaders. Cardno and Robson (2016) highlight that middle leaders feel overwhelmed by the volume of tasks they are expected to complete, unsupported by senior leaders, and feel their job description is either vague or not relevant to their role. These findings are echoed in the recent PPTA survey (2016) on middle leadership in secondary schools which states “there is now a significant misfit between the time and remuneration available for the role and the demands it poses” (p.14). They also note a “huge tension between trying to be an excellent classroom teacher at the same time as doing a good job of curriculum middle leadership” (p. 8).

Classroom teachers often move into middle leadership in order to have influential positions within schools. However, they are often not provided with specific middle leadership development, nor effective, meaningful appraisal, in order to undertake this complex role. Leadership development is a specific form of professional development which focuses on building leadership capacity and capability (Cardno, 2012). Bush (2010) contends that being trained for the role of teacher is no longer adequate preparation for those moving into leadership positions. In Aotearoa New Zealand, there is currently no provision for the development of middle leaders from the government, and therefore, the responsibility falls to senior leadership. Many middle leaders feel under prepared for their leadership roles. In order to build leadership capability, it is vital to first understand the middle leaders’ strengths and areas to develop. Consequently, effective performance appraisal practice is critical.

Despite appraisal’s dual purpose of accountability and development, for improvement, middle leaders often perceive their appraisal experiences more as a tick box, compliance exercise. This may not bode well particularly as middle leaders should experience effective appraisal themselves in order to appraise their own team members effectively. To ensure appraisal of middle leaders is meaningful and balanced, Cardno and Robson (2016), assert that it “requires school level policy, process and practice of appraisal that specifically targets middle leaders” (p. 250). Both the teaching and leading aspects of a middle leader’s role need to be evaluated, and opportunities for productive conversations about practice and improvements. Robson (2012)
highlighted that these types of conversations are vital for professional and personal development. As appraisal of middle leaders is often delegated to deputy principals, it is important that there are regular opportunities for robust professional conversations to enable middle leaders to prioritise the leadership aspects of their role, and develop a relevant job description. Bendikson (2014) reminds us that time is finite and “how we use time is an indicator of our strategic thinking” (p. 2). Although middle leaders feel they are inadequately developed by senior leaders, they are expected to lead and develop their own team.

**Leading Teams**

In Aotearoa New Zealand, schools are predominantly structured around teams, whether they are syndicates, departments, curriculum teams, or senior leadership teams. Teams are a means of distributing leadership and are viewed as a way of collaboratively making decisions to utilise the team’s capability. It is argued that the combined effects of working in teams are greater than individual activity (Senge, 1990). When teams have a shared goal that each member is motivated to achieve, it can create a high level of harmony or synergy that can lead to highly efficient decision making, problem solving and learning. Martin and Bradbeer (2016) contend that synergetic teams “are open to learning, they continue to learn and to further their own learning for the betterment of self and the learners they serve. They are constantly growing and evolving their self-awareness through reflection, self-questioning, and a drive to self-improve” (p.51). Similarly, Preskill and Torres (1999) suggest that effective teams are characterised by being open and honest; managing conflict; high level of accountability; open to learning; and developed a high level of trust.

In order for teams to work effectively it is essential that leaders develop trusting relationships. Cardno (2012) states that “leaders who have built trusting relationships with colleagues are likely to be more productive in bringing about desired change” (p. 35). However, although “it is the team leader who has the power to establish norms, maximising harmony and collaboration to ensure that the team benefits” (Goleman, Boyzatzis & McKee, 2002, pg. 184), middle leaders may not have developed these skills. A key skill for developing relational trust is managing conflict. Developing a set of conversation skills to conduct difficult challenging productive conversations requires specific training (Bendikson, 2015, Cardno, 2012). Buck (2016) reiterates that “the power of the regular, developmental conversation is...at the heart of what really drives improvement and performance” (p.102). Osborne (2016) highlights that teams need to “shift mindsets and invent new ways of working” (p. 16) in order to surface underlying assumptions and develop a shared understanding and sense making. As a result, when teams learn collectively to be more efficient, this learning positively impacts across the organisation (Senge, 1990). Middle leaders’ position in the centre of the organisation enables them to play a key role in leading the learning for continuous improvement. Therefore, they need to be equipped with a set of principles to effectively lead from the middle.

**Leading from the Middle**

Organisations are complex, and as such, extremely challenging to lead and manage. Bush (2011) defines leadership as influencing others, whereas management is perceived as implementing and maintaining a school’s operational functions. Often in schools, “the concepts of management is eschewed in favour of leadership” (Bendikson, Robinson & Hattie, 2012, p. 7). However, Osborne (2014) suggests it is possible to combine the elements of leadership and management in a “workable system that leads to both innovation and sustainability” (p. 6). Bassett (2016) asserts middle leadership demands a set of leadership and management skills which require specialised knowledge and training. In turn, Cardno and Robson (2016) emphasise the need for middle leaders to be appraised on aspects of these leadership and management responsibilities, to ensure that they are linked to the expectations held of middle leaders beyond their teaching responsibilities. Drawing on the work of Bolman & Deal (2013), a set of principles are outlined to navigate the complex nature of leading from the middle. Using a multiframe approach, middle leaders are supported to improve their leadership practice by exploring multiple perspectives “to understand and influence what’s really going on” (p. 40). These principles are: shared vision, building relationships, implementing systems/structures and developing culture.

**Shared vision**

According to the Education Review Office (2016), leaders have a “crucial role to play in the development of a compelling collective vision” (p. 10). Developing a shared vision, values and set of beliefs which are both congruent and coherent are fundamental in any learning organisation. Understanding the ‘why’ is critical (Atkin, 1996), and importantly, the various stakeholders must be involved in the process, to ensure there is the greatest ownership and buy in (Buck, 2016). The vision identifies the ‘why’, and helps guide decision making, evaluation
and development, for continuous improvement. Furthermore, Schein (2010) asserts that whilst it is essential for leaders to clearly articulate and uphold the vision, they also need to demonstrate how this will be enacted. In other words, ensuring there is congruence between the aspirational vision, through to the daily practice.

Building relationships
Bolman and Deal (2013) assert that organisations need people and people need organisations. They claim “a good fit benefits both: individuals find meaningful and satisfying work, and organisations get the talent and energy they need to succeed” (p. 135). This is equally important for educational leaders, who must work with, and through others to achieve organisational goals (Cardno, 2012). Middle leaders, in particular, must walk the fine line between building collegial relationships while also being responsible for the quality of teaching staff. Although this can be one of the most difficult roles a leader can undertake due to diverse human needs, it can be the most valuable. If staff are valued and empowered to achieve organisational goals they will often exceed the expectations set for them.

Implementing systems/structures
The structure of an organisation is like the skeleton of a body, it provides the frame that supports all other initiatives. Bolman and Deal (2013) state that “structural form both enhances and constrains what an organisation can accomplish” (p. 47). Whether organisations are loosely structured or tightly controlled, they allocate work through specialised roles, functions or units which are bound together by organisational procedures. Rules and procedures ensure that a ‘standard’ level of quality is reached throughout the organisation. Middle leaders play a vital role in developing and maintaining the systems and structures which directly support student learning.

Developing culture
The culture of an organisation or a team can be extremely difficult for leaders to define. Culture is ‘the way things are done around here’, it consists of the language used; the symbols of power; the rituals; and of every interaction between colleagues. Although culture is difficult to identify, Schein (2010) states if leaders are not “conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them” (p. 22). Middle leaders are the drivers of the culture within their team. As a result, one of their key leadership tasks is to build a ‘learning culture’ in which effective educational values are aligned with teaching practice. As these values become embedded they become the ‘norm’ and are then passed on to new members to the team (Schein, 2010). Martin and Bradbeer (2016) highlight the teams that “initially invest time and energy in creating collaborative norms underpinning ‘how we do things around here’ flourish” (p. 51). As Senge (1990) asserts “the team’s accomplishments can set the tone and establish a standard for learning together for the larger organisation” (p. 236). Collectively, the importance of connecting across communities of leaders becomes even more critical.

Connecting across Communities of Leaders
In the absence of specific government programmes targeting middle leaders, an online course has been established to meet this demand. The advantage of an online course is that it provides ubiquity, connectedness, and flexibility, regardless of geographical location, or size of organisation. This addresses the challenge of a lack of time identified by middle leaders (Robson, 2012), as it enables leaders to participate anytime, anywhere, within their own context. According to the latest Education Review Office report (2017) on Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako, the priority for our education system is to achieve equity and excellence in learner outcomes. This requires effective leadership which “builds collective capacity to do and use evaluation and inquiry for sustained improvement” (p.11). One of the key outcomes of this course is to build a community of leaders, and utilise a specific model of middle leader inquiry to enable critical reflection which has the power to improve outcomes for all, collectively. Essentially, this requires a culture of professional inquiry, that focuses on improvement, which is embedded and aligned with middle leadership appraisal, and linked to specific professional development (Schleicher, 2016). Sinnema and Robinson (2007) assert an inquiry based, reflective appraisal approach leads toward positively impacting on teaching, leading and learning. By focusing on middle leaders’ appraisal and leadership development, the aim is to build middle leadership capability and capacity within schools, and across Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako. Enabling leaders to connect across communities offers them opportunities to curiously inquire into their own leadership practice, with a view to challenging their existing skillset, assumptions and capabilities. In the online course, facilitators offer the external expertise required to ensure that middle leaders matter.
Conclusion

Ultimately, middle leadership matters. In order for our middle leaders to feel valued and developed as leaders, meaningful appraisal experiences and middle leadership development opportunities need to be a priority. CORE Education, Tātai Aho Rau, offers an online 20 week Empower course, Middle Leadership Matters. In addition, this course is recognised as prior learning for postgraduate qualifications in Educational Leadership and Management at Unitec Institute of Technology.

References


