Collaborative practice insight one:
Culture

About this document

This one of a series of research-informed briefs which bring together learning from Education Development Trust's School Partnership Programme (SPP).

SPP is a partnership-based approach to school improvement that has worked collaboratively with over 1,300 schools. Through the programme, groups of schools build capacity and capability in effective school self-review, peer review and school-to-school support and improvement.

These research-informed briefs report what school partnerships have discovered about working together through peer review and how their experience compares with wider research findings.

This brief examines what practitioners have learned about creating the culture and relationships within, and between, schools to get the most from peer review.

For small schools scattered across rural Lincolnshire, collaboration isn't just desirable; for many school leaders it is an essential requirement.

As English counties go, Lincolnshire is vast. It stretches from Yorkshire in the north to Cambridgeshire in the south and has a largely open, agricultural landscape. Beyond the city of Lincoln itself, the county's population (and its schools) are scattered across market towns and small villages – some with deep pockets of social disadvantage.

It presents school leaders with serious challenges.

Helen Barker, a former primary headteacher in the northern end of the county, explains: 'It's not easy leading small rural schools. You're constantly challenged on pupil numbers, challenged on teacher recruitment and because of the geography, it's very easy to get isolated. You find you have very little capacity for school improvement within the four walls of your own school.'

The only way to survive and thrive, she says, is to collaborate effectively.

Working through the Kyra Teaching School Alliance of over 50 schools, Helen and her colleagues had developed a series of networks over a number of years.

'We had networks for teacher training, for leadership, for SEN – and many others. And, in turn, they had started to give rise to spontaneous interaction between schools,' she says. But they were looking for more.

When Helen and five of her colleagues saw a presentation about the SPP model of peer review, they immediately saw the potential to deepen their closest local school collaboration.

'Peer review offered us a mechanism to sustain, secure and formalise our school improvement with one another,' she says. 'The process offered us a way to benchmark and to respond to developmental needs.'

That was then.

Now, five years and multiple peer review cycles later, Helen is able to reflect on how the peer review process changed local school partnerships.

'We became more effective as leaders and more effective at school improvement,' says Helen. And then, after a pause, she adds: 'We became more effective as collaborators.'

Pressed to say what she means, Helen is thoughtful. 'We were strongly driven by the moral imperative to make sure that all schools become great, not just our own. We saw the process of peer review and school improvement as an investment in one another – not just an investment in ourselves.'

'We each recognised the power of working together. And that we could each gain as much from helping another school as we would receive in support. We all understood that we could only deliver certain improvements by working together because, individually, we simply did not have the resources.'

'Above all, we realised that having an outstanding school down the road was not going to harm us – it would make us all better.'

Helen describes how, as a group of headteachers, they invested in relationships. *'When we met as a group every half term, it was always off-site, away from school. We protected the first 45 minutes of every meeting to exchange news and views informally, while we ate lunch. Then we moved to a business session with a set agenda and prepared items.'*

'We had healthy conflicts and debates as a group. We were good at airing our thoughts to reach a consensus. It felt like an equal partnership – and we all invested in it to make it work.'

The group's successful peer review process was built on a foundation of strong professional relationships.

From talking shop to powerhouse

As demands on public services increase and resources tighten, effective collaborative relationships are essential for all organisations, regardless of size and geography, say researchers from the Hay Group consultancy.

They studied how organisations and leaders cooperate effectively, setting out to discover why some relationships between organisations are little more than talking shops which add limited value, while others have the power to transform the participating partners. The answer, they concluded, was 'decisive collaboration'.

'Decisive and collaboration are not words that often sit naturally together,' wrote the research team, 'yet demands for efficiency, choice, local accountability and solutions to ever more complex, cross-cutting agendas require effective, decisive collaborative working across permeable organisational boundaries.'

'Our contention is that organisations cannot afford to avoid collaboration but, also, that organisations cannot afford collaboration without purpose and efficiency.'
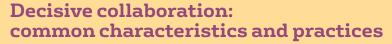
Decisive collaborations flourished in climates created by a shared sense of purpose and a focus on outcomes, suggested the researchers. Partners knew why they were collaborating. Senior leaders actively participated, with a high level of personal commitment. Complexity was simplified and clarity built collectively. Crucially, there was a climate of openness and trust and any hidden agendas were addressed and managed.

With its demand for focus, attention to process and emphasis on results, peer review might easily be described as a form of 'decisive collaboration'.

In a striking echo of the Hay research, Helen Barker describes how they set about creating a climate for collaborative peer review in Lincolnshire. *'We created a code of conduct between us at the beginning,'* she says. *'We talked openly about the permission to challenge, the permission to make one another feel uncomfortable – and also the permission to feel vulnerable. We refined our code of conduct as we went along.'*

Helen, too, underlines trust as the key: *'Where you haven't cultivated the trust needed for relationships, then peer review becomes more transactional – and less effective as a result.'*

Decisive collaboration: common characteristics and practices

Belief.
Each and every successful collaboration we examined had, at its heart, a shared sense of moral or ethical purpose. The purpose is local and aligned to professional and personal values. Successful partnerships are characterised by a hunger to make things better and a willingness to try new things.

Pragmatism.
Processes and structures should support collaborations to meet their outcomes, not mire them in bureaucracy. Strong project management, alignment with existing ways of working and a focus on the practicalities all support individuals to engage with partnership working. New partnerships should focus on quick wins, moving towards riskier and more difficult objectives only as trust and commitment grow.

Communication.
If they had their time again, nine out of ten collaborators said they would communicate more and communicate better! Strong communication underpins clarity, reducing conflict and building commitment. It is vital for partners to tailor communication to show wider stakeholders their part in the collaborative story.

Negotiation.
Partners bring different agendas, not to mention those which are hidden and not explicitly brought to the table at all. Exploration of different perspectives and development of a joint evidence base helps partners build an agenda that is genuinely shared, developing a common language and framework within which to operate. A strong chair, who is seen as neutral by all partners, is a key enabler, managing conflict and creating a positive collaborative climate.

Inclusion.
Partners may not all play the same role but it is important that their input is valued. The pretence of equality will cause disengagement, resentment and conflict if not backed up in reality. Clear ground rules, roles and accountability, a strong, inclusive chair and clear awareness of perceptions of power and status support the development of an inclusive environment.

Trust.
Strong trusting relationships oil the wheels of collaborative working, breaking down suspicion and facilitating understanding. Partners have no formal authority over one another so goodwill is an important factor in getting things done. Face to face contact, particularly in the early days of a partnership, is key to building strong relationships and reducing suspicion.

Decisive Collaboration (Hay Group, 2006)

Building relationships and trust

In Thanet, Executive Headteacher Wendy Stone is part of a group of four schools that have come together to collaborate through peer review.

Although they had not previously worked together as part of a formal partnership, all four headteachers knew one another. Their challenge was to deepen their existing relationships to establish the trust needed for peer review.

The group started with some advantages. *'Although we had not worked together formally, we shared a lot in common,'* says Wendy. *'One of the things that makes a partnership work is that you've all got to be working towards the same aim. You've got to be outward looking and prepared to do things which help local children, even if they are in another school. There is a sense of the greater good. We all had that.'*

It also helped that all the schools in the partnership were geographically close – within a 30-minute drive of each other.

As they set about building trust, Wendy and her colleagues concentrated on their shared goals. As well as common moral purpose, shared financial pressures pulled them together. *'It was falling more and more on us to find our own ways to source capacity for school improvement,'* says Wendy. *'We needed to find ways to do things for ourselves – and the great advantage of peer review is that it doesn't matter if you have very different areas of improvement; it's the process that matters.'*

At the start of the process, the headteachers made space for conversations to build common purpose and establish trust. *'We talked at length about the need to be open with data,'* says Wendy, *'and about holding our hands up about where we needed help.'*

Wendy and her colleagues set about building the trust which enabled each of them to expose their weaknesses without fear of repercussion.

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American author, Patrick Lencioni, calls this 'vulnerability-based trust'.

It is critical to successful peer review.

'(Vulnerability-based) trust is the confidence among team members that their peers' intentions are good, and that there is no reason to be protective or careful around the group. In essence, teammates must get comfortable being vulnerable with one another,' explains Lencioni.

Vulnerabilities may be personal weaknesses, skill deficiencies, interpersonal shortcomings, mistakes and the ability to ask others for help.

'It is only when team members are truly comfortable being exposed to one another that they begin to act without concern for protecting themselves. As a result, they can focus their energy and attention completely on the job in hand, rather than on being strategically disingenuous or political with one another.'

Lencioni argues that vulnerability-based trust is difficult to achieve because it runs counter to leaders' usual experience of career advancement. *'Most successful people learn to be competitive with their peers and protective of their reputations,'* he says. *'It is a challenge for them to turn off those instincts … but that is exactly what is required.'*

We wanted to get a deep understanding of each other's schools

No hidden agendas

In Barnet, North London, Robin Archibald is one of four primary headteachers in the WEBB Partnership who took on the challenge of creating 'vulnerability-based trust' when the group embarked on peer review with SPP in the autumn of 2017.

'As headteachers, we were clear about the importance of trust when we started out,' says Robin. *'We were committed to being open with each other about the strengths and weaknesses of our schools.'*

All four schools work in a similar context and have been collaborating increasingly closely for the last two years.

'We wanted to get a deep understanding of each other's schools. The peer review process is a structured way of spending time in each other's schools and at the same time do something productive and supportive,' says Robin.

'The process helped us to understand the strength of each school so we could work out how each could best contribute to the partnership. As schools, we're similar, but we have different outcomes, so we're trying to understand as a group which systems are the most effective, to share them more widely. For example, we've begun to align our monitoring systems based on the evidence we have found about what works best to support better outcomes. That has been one very clear outcome from the partnership.'

All four headteachers recognised that trust was the key. *'It was important from the word go,'* Robin stresses. *'Unless we were confident with one another we would have found it difficult to let others into our schools and discuss our strengths and weaknesses openly.'*

As a mark of their intent, the group had adopted structural approaches designed to foster trust; notably, they decided to become governors for each other's schools.

Robin explains: *'As a governor you have a greater degree of involvement and get to know a lot more. That has been a key factor for us for building trust within our group and for moving the partnership forward.'*

'Being a governor involves a professional level of trust. It's not just a personal issue of whether we happen to like each other or not. It creates the opportunity for governors to really probe detailed information about a school.'

This approach has embedded vulnerability-based trust into the structure of the peer review partnership. It also represents a significant (and reciprocal) investment in one another.

It's not just at the top level that the schools have employed structural solutions to nurture trust. As well as monthly headteacher meetings, the schools share termly INSET days to build relationships between staff at all levels, and spend one of those days each year developing the future of the partnership with all staff.

Joint sporting events between schools and a summer social event for staff create time for relationships to develop informally, too.

The partnership works and plays together.

The teams may enjoy working with each other, but their peer reviews have been no less rigorous; quite the contrary. Recent reviews have shone a light on specific issues in need of focused improvement. Leaders have not dodged tricky issues.

'I think we're showing staff that there are no hidden agendas,' says Robin, *'and that's helping to build strong relationships.'*

Faster, fitter, stronger

There is good evidence that the trusting relationships that Robin and his colleagues are building have the potential to make a lasting impact beyond their peer review process.

Organisations with high levels of trust have been shown to be more efficient, to improve more quickly and to learn more effectively.

Stephen Covey offers evidence that high trust organisations make decisions more quickly, spend less time checking and second-guessing, and consequently have lower costs. *'Once you understand the hard, measurable economics of trust,'* says Covey, *'it's like putting on a new pair of glasses. You begin to see the incredible difference (to efficiency) made by high-trust relationships.'* (See opposite for Covey's suggested trust-building behaviours.)

Meanwhile, in the education sector, American researchers, Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider found that trust accelerated school improvement.

They examined the role of social relationships in schools and their impact on student achievement. Their conclusion? That 'a broad base of trust across a school community lubricates much of a school's day-to-day functioning and is a critical resource as local leaders embark on ambitious improvement plans.'

Bryk and Schneider discovered that schools with a high degree of relational trust are far more likely to make the kinds of changes that help raise student achievement, than those where relations are poor.

Relational trust, they suggest, relies on four factors. First, successful schools demonstrated respect for their stakeholders. This played out in genuine conversation where individuals listened intently to one another. Second, school leadership teams showed genuine regard for the wellbeing of others and their personal circumstances. Third, they were admired for their competence – and their readiness to tackle incompetence. And, finally, they set high standards of personal and organisational integrity, so that actions matched stated values.

'Trust is based on mutual respect, honesty and humility,' wrote Bryk and Schneider.

Their research (based on a study of school reform in Chicago) suggests that, while not all schools with high levels of trust improve (that is, trust alone won't solve structural problems), schools with little or no relational trust have practically no chance of improving.

Finally, trusting relationships enhance the sharing and transfer of knowledge. Examining business relationships, Swiss researcher Georg Von Krogh and his colleagues wrote: *'In order to share personal knowledge, individuals must rely on others to listen and react to their ideas. Constructive and helpful relations enable people to share their insights and freely discuss their concerns. Good relations purge a knowledge-creation process of distrust, fear and dissatisfaction, and allow organisational members to feel safe enough to explore.'*

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Behaviours which build trust

In his book The speed of trust (2006), Stephen Covey sets out 13 behaviours which enable individuals to build trust.

1. Talk straight. This requires honesty, integrity and straightforwardness. To build trust, it means both telling the truth and leaving the right impression. Leaving the right impression means communicating clearly so that you cannot be misunderstood.

2. Demonstrate respect. There are two critical dimensions to this behaviour – first to behave in ways which show fundamental respect for people, and second, to behave in ways that demonstrate caring and concern.

3. Create transparency. This means being open and authentic. Transparent practitioners operate on the premise of 'what you see is what you get'. They don't have hidden agendas or hide information.

4. Right wrongs. Make things right when they're wrong. Acknowledge failures and make restitution where possible. Demonstrate personal humility and don't let pride get in the way of doing the right thing.

5. Show loyalty. Give credit freely and acknowledge the contributions of others. Speak about people as if they were present and represent others who aren't there to speak for themselves.

6. Deliver results. Establish a track record for getting the right things done. Don't overpromise and underdeliver.

7. Get better. Be a constant learner. Develop feedback systems and act on the feedback you receive. Don't assume today's knowledge and skills will be sufficient for tomorrow's challenges.

8. Confront reality. Address the tough stuff directly. Acknowledge the unsaid and lead out courageously in conversation. Don't skirt the real issues.

9. Clarify expectations. Disclose and reveal expectations – and validate them. Renegotiate them if needed. Don't assume that expectations are clear or shared.

10. Practice accountability. Hold yourself, as well as others, accountable. Take responsibility for results. Be clear on how you'll communicate how you're doing and how others are doing. Don't blame others when things go wrong.

11. Listen first. This means to genuinely seek to understand another person's thoughts, feelings and point of view – and to do it before you try to diagnose, influence or prescribe.

12. Keep commitments. Say what you're going to do and then do what you say you're going to do. Make commitments carefully so that you keep them.

13. Extend trust. Learn how to appropriately extend trust to others based on the situation, risk and credibility of the people involved ... but have a propensity to trust. Don't withhold trust because there is risk involved.

Avoiding pitfalls

If the evidence is clear about the power of trust-based collaboration, why do so many fledgling partnerships fall by the wayside?

Returning to Patrick Lencioni, he offers this analysis:
'In the course of my experience working with CEOs and their teams, two critical truths have become clear to me. First, genuine teamwork in most organisations remains as elusive as it has ever been. Second, organisations fail to achieve teamwork because they unknowingly fall prey to five natural but dangerous pitfalls.'

Lencioni describes these pitfalls as 'the five dysfunctions of a team'. They neatly summarise the challenges that school leaders in Lincolnshire, Thanet and Barnet have identified and addressed.

Unsurprisingly, Lencioni's first 'dysfunction' is absence of trust. That sets the tone for the second: fear of conflict. The resulting lack of challenge ensures the third dysfunction, a lack of commitment, and consequently the fourth: an avoidance of accountability. Finally, dysfunctional teams slide into an environment where the needs of individuals transcend the goals of the group and the fifth dysfunction: an inattention to results. (See inset box for descriptions.)

How have our peer review case studies managed to navigate these pitfalls?

The five dysfunctions of a team

1. The first dysfunction is an **absence of trust** among team members. Essentially, this stems from their unwillingness to be vulnerable within the group. Team members who are not genuinely open with one another about their mistakes and weaknesses make it impossible to build a foundation for trust.

2. This failure to build trust is damaging because it sets the tone for the second dysfunction: **fear of conflict**. Teams that lack trust are incapable of engaging in unfiltered and passionate debate of ideas. Instead, they resort to veiled discussions and guarded comments.

3. A lack of healthy conflict is a problem because it ensures the third dysfunction of a team: **lack of commitment**. Without having aired their opinions in the course of passionate and open debate, team members rarely, if ever, buy in and commit to decisions, though they may feign agreement during meetings.

4. Because of this lack of real commitment and buy-in, team members develop an **avoidance of accountability**, the fourth dysfunction. Without committing to a clear plan of action, even the most focused and driven people often hesitate to call their peers on actions and behaviours that seem counterproductive to the good of the team.

5. Failure to hold one another accountable creates an environment where the fifth dysfunction can thrive. **Inattention to results** occurs when team members put their individual needs (such as ego, career development or recognition), or even the needs of their divisions, above the collective goals of the team.

(Patrick Lencioni, 2002)

In Lincolnshire, Thanet and Barnet, school leaders have all described the importance of trust. They describe a willingness to admit weaknesses and to ask for help. They know what is important and they focus their time and effort accordingly.

In Lincolnshire, Helen Barker described a culture of 'healthy conflict' between partners. Their business-focused agenda puts critical topics on the table for discussion and they use the strength of the group to address common challenges.

In Thanet, Wendy Stone described a process of open discussion to secure everyone's commitment. They have established clarity around their priorities and direction.

In Barnet, the decision of headteachers to sit on each other's governing bodies has enhanced their professional accountability to one another as a partnership.

In every case, school leaders have been focused on collective results – improving outcomes for all children within their partnership, not just those in their own schools.

In Lincolnshire, Thanet and Barnet, leaders have established a set of expectations and behaviours which shape how they work together – the way they do things within their partnerships. They have created a culture which enables peer review to happen.

Creating a culture for professional learning and accountability

In his book, *Nuance*, Michael Fullan talks about leaders from around the world who have got beneath the surface and leveraged deep change in their organisations. By helping themselves and others to figure out how to make things work better at a deep level, such leaders change their organisation's culture in a profound way and break the cycle of superficial change.

Fullan's subjects include Marie-Claire Bretherton from the Kyra Teaching School Alliance in Lincolnshire – mentioned earlier.

Describing Bretherton's work in turning around the fortunes of a failing school, Fullan acknowledges that the challenges can be daunting, going on to identify three components of nuanced leadership which work together to form an integrated whole.

These components are: joint determination; adaptability; and a culture of accountability.

'Jointly determined change involves developing unity of purpose and action with those in the organisation, pursuing and staying the course through continuous interaction,' he says.

'Effective focus means that adaptability enables the organisation to adjust or pivot, to use a modern language equivalent, according to what is being learned.'

'Culture-based accountability establishes strong mutual commitment and responsibility through trust and interaction.'

So what are the factors that characterise culture-based accountability?

Fullan suggests six factors that characterise the kind of culture where trust and interaction secure mutual responsibility (see inset box). Although he emphasises the importance of joint determination, adaptability and culture acting together, all the factors highlighted in the inset box have implications for how groups of schools might work together to create a culture for peer review.

In the north of England, the 15 primary schools in the Focus Multi-Academy Trust set out to create such a culture as they adopted SPP peer review in 2016. The Trust's Chief Executive is Helen Rowland.

'We knew that if peer review was to mean something, we had to have honesty and trust in the process,' says Helen.

'We built our approach to peer review around our existing values: fair, care, share and dare,' she explains.

'"Fair" meant that we would do peer review fairly. We created ways of doing that. We sat down as a group of school leaders and created a protocol for how we would work. We dealt with any anxieties. Everything was transparent.'

'We took "care" in how we worked with colleagues. We agreed it was about mutual respect. When we thought about giving feedback, we thought about how we want to receive it ourselves.'

'"Share" was a commitment to share the information across schools. We agreed that we all need to learn.'

'And "dare" was about agreeing to do something different.'

Factors that are reflective of strong cultures

Use the group to change the group. Leaders participate as learners; the group that is working on change develops its capacity to learn and be responsible together.

Precision over prescription. Leaders encourage joint exploration of problems and issues and enable ideas to spring from individuals within the group, so that precise prescriptions can be jointly developed, not imposed. There is ready acceptance of ideas that are co-developed and owned. Precision comes through the process, which leads to results which then accumulate because commitment grows.

Feedback, collaboration, candour and honesty. Feedback is vital for actual improvement, not just change. People are encouraged, and must practise being candid with one another. Leaders practise questions, rather than answers. Autonomy and collaboration are not seen as mutually exclusive; the group respects individual autonomy, but works out joint solutions that will benefit all.

Trust and interact v Trust but verify. Trust is built from relationships. Leaders recognise the importance of interaction with one another to build, nurture and strengthen trust. They don't follow the untrusting approach of 'trust but verify'.

See the forest and the trees. Leaders focus on both the internal school work and the external collaboration. They see their role in a broader manner with external influence. They engage people both within and outside the school in two-way partnerships.

Accountability as culture. Interactions are transparent and aimed at measurable processes and outcomes. Most assessment/review is a function of interaction. There is mutual, organic accountability.

Nuance (Fullan, 2019)

Renew and refresh

Back in Lincolnshire, Helen Barker now has a bigger challenge. Moving on from headship, she is currently Director of the Kyra Teaching School Alliance (TSA).

From shaping her own partnership of six schools, she now has the challenge of supporting multiple partnerships unlock the potential of peer review.

'The job is never done,' she says. *'As existing headteachers move on and new leaders arrive, you have to constantly rebuild trust and re-energise peer review relationships.'*

Leaders need to constantly refresh and renew. Sometimes, as TSA Director, Helen has re-shuffled local partnerships to help re-invigorate them. It's all part of her new challenge of supporting peer review at scale.

'Peer review doesn't live on its own,' she says, *'you have to constantly re-visit your relationships. You have to really know one another. All the time.'*

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