

Collaboration – some lessons from schools



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Organisations have for some time realised the mutual benefit that can arise from collaborating with other organisations. Whilst such associations can be powerful and potentially transformational, they are also fraught with difficulty. As with any change initiative, the crucial part of collaboration is engaging hearts and minds. Yes – it's important to get systems and processes right, but without any clear vision, or a sense of purpose that is communicated throughout the organisations concerned, collaboration can turn out to be a damp squib.

The public sector has picked up on industry practice around collaboration, and in some cases, funding has been dependent on evidence of effective collaboration. Whilst completing an MBA last year, I was interested to research into how and why collaboration sometimes works but often fails. I chose to look at the education sector, and in particular, researched into a group of 15 secondary schools in the North West of England, using my background experience in this sector as a benchmark.

These 15 schools were recipients of the Leadership Incentive Grant – a generous government allowance for secondary schools in challenging areas, with the objective of transforming leadership. The money was dependent on the schools demonstrating collaboration – witnessed through collaborative plans and local authority assessment. However, these same schools were also in competition with each other, and I observed previously, that many groups of schools such as these were often collaborative only in name; there was little real collaboration going on.

So why were the 15 schools in the North West so different? Why did collaboration seem to be thriving in these schools? I interviewed a number of the heads, and observed some of the collaborative activity as it took place.

A number of factors characterised the collaboration:

- There was very effective leadership, with real ownership by the heads of the process, and two heads in particular appointed to lead the project – the clarity of roles was a critical factor.
- Communication was excellent throughout all the schools – with staff, students and other stakeholders fully aware of the initiative. In particular, heads were aware of the potential emotional impact on staff of some of the initiatives, and took great care in mitigating this impact.
- Heads took a mature view of competition: they realised that the schools were effectively in competition, but that they also had much they could learn from and share with each other, and did not hide from this.
- Most important of all, there was a clear sense of purpose. Heads knew why they were doing it, and what outcomes they wanted. The impetus behind this collaboration was that there had been significant racial tensions in the town, and the heads felt a sense of moral purpose to address this, in collaboration with their neighbouring schools. This burning moral purpose was the key driver: unlike in other collaborative groups I had seen, the grant money was an enabler, not the key reason for the collaboration.

We talk a lot about values-based leadership at The Work Foundation. I found it a privilege to see this in action, and was heartened by the real impact that I saw it have, not just on the organisations themselves, but with far wider reaching impact in the society that they served.