

Maverick

Breakthrough Leadership That Transforms Schools

An exploratory study by the Hay Group

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The breakthrough ...

“It took some people’s breath away, and upset some people, but it had to be done.”

- Alan Roach

There is a brand of leadership, active in schools today, which makes the establishment nervous.

It is also leadership that delivers the results the establishment wants – transformed standards in the most challenging circumstances.

Should we really encourage it?

Six Questions about Leadership

The stories of headteachers who have done the unthinkable, the impossible or the uncomfortable challenge both their peers and policy makers. Six themes have emerged from our report. We have called the sum of these themes 'Breakthrough Leadership' to distinguish it from the labels, positive and negative, often associated with this approach – labels like entrepreneur, innovator, troublemaker.

There *is* a consistent pattern of behaviour among the heads in our report. It *does* bring huge benefits. But it carries a cost.

Each of the six themes poses a challenge to the definition of successful leadership in education. They achieve the results we demand, but not necessarily in the way we would like.

❶ Crossing the Line

How far can you go before 'questioning assumptions' becomes breaking the rules? Is it ever right to cross this line?

❷ Taking Risks

Breakthrough leaders risk their careers and their reputations for their principles. Should they ask other people to risk theirs?

❸ Connected Thinking

Where do the good ideas come from? Breakthrough leaders are creative but not original - they seek out ideas that already work and make them fit their context.

❹ Making Enemies

If politics is the art of compromise, why is stubbornness so persuasive?

❺ The Business of Learning

Is enterprise a dirty word? People who care about education care about money, management and pleasing the sponsors.

❻ Sharing Leadership

When heads spend so much time looking outwards, who looks after the school?

Introduction

This report looks at how a small group of enterprising headteachers achieved breakthrough results.

At the start, we had a simple goal. All across the UK, in the widest possible range of circumstances, there are leaders who transform the standards of achievement in their schools. What are they doing? Who are they? Could we bottle their essence and tout it as a panacea for the standards agenda?

As we talked to these people, we discovered a truth more complex and, at times, disturbing. Yes, the achievements are dramatic – whether they are improving standards by a factor of ten or securing a million pound donation from Microsoft – but there is a price to be paid.

- Breakthrough Leadership is not safe. It does not make you universally popular. It places heavy demands on those nearest you.
- There are no standards for this sort of leadership. There is no job description. It is not a profession, it's a passion.
- There are risks to be taken and tough decisions to be made.
- This is a challenge that stretches the accountability and responsibility of school leadership into uncharted shapes.

Why on earth would you do it?

Because you can break through all the old constraints. Because every force that affects your pupils' lives is under your influence. You can change generations of deprivation, not just GCSE results.

These heads don't just transform schools. They transform communities. (Because they know that you can't change one without the other.)

But there is a crucial message – **we can't package them as a universal solution to the standards agenda.** Their goals, their inspiration and their strengths are diverse. Their very essence is 'doing it their way.' You cannot standardise individualism, but perhaps you can create a context within which it can flourish.

But for practitioners there's good news. These heads are not superheroes. They're not lucky. They're not cleverer than the rest of us. Their dreams are not more visionary. They just have the right habits. And if you have the passion, the habits of enterprise can be acquired.

So, if you want to do it your way, this report suggests some things to think about, some milestones on the path to breakthrough, the danger spots and the moral dilemmas.

Methodology: Strengths & Weaknesses

This is a **small, exploratory study**. Our aim is only to raise questions that are worthy of debate and further investigation. Nevertheless we approached the task with rigour.

The Hay Group are well known for large scale research into the competencies and characteristics of effective leaders and teachers – with sample sizes into the hundreds and thousands. We have not used that approach here. We wanted to refine our *existing* understanding of school leadership, so we worked with a small group of ten headteachers who had done something dramatic or impressive in their schools.

- We interviewed them at length about the critical incidents in their recent careers.
- We visited their schools.
- We reviewed data in the public domain about the performance of their schools (e.g. Ofsted Inspections and SATs results).
- We brought an expert team together (including external contributors) for two days of analysis and interpretation.

From this information, we attempted to extract common themes of thought, behaviour and context that would enable us to sketch a model of how these heads achieved their results.

As we debated the evidence before us, we came to the conclusion that there were two categories of leadership present. All the heads were chosen because they were perceived as outstanding leaders, but only five of them had achieved the scale of change that would justify the description of 'breakthrough'. Others had only been in post a short time, or led schools so successful that transformation was neither possible nor desirable.

Accordingly, five heads form the inner core of our study and provide the majority of the examples. The others are referred to for comparison or amplification as necessary.

Our approach has both strengths and weaknesses. We have achieved a level of *qualitative* data – of texture, detail and anecdote that statistical surveys do not provide. However, we cannot be sure that these findings are representative. This report is a collection of stories not a statistical study. A particular weakness of the report is the bias inherent in the sample:

- There is only one primary school among the ten;
- The central core of five breakthrough leaders contains no women.

The sample was informally constructed of nominees known to Hay, including some from the original Hay research into school leadership and heads working in partnership with HTI. We cannot say whether the bias reflects the sample chosen or a wider reality. Perhaps, for example, secondary school heads without teaching commitments have the resources that enable them to focus their time and attention differently.

We might also observe that three of the five schools were Grant Maintained – offering additional legal autonomy and more money. Further investigation is needed into these factors.

We were able to compare our study against two other bodies of evidence:

- **The Models of Excellence for Headteachers.** Created to underpin the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (LPSH), these models provide a dictionary of the characteristics of outstanding leaders and were founded on research with over 200 heads. You can access them at:
<http://www.ncsl.org.uk/index.cfm?pageid=211>
- **What Makes a Great Entrepreneur?** An investigation into successful entrepreneurs in the business world, examining those who had built successful companies from scratch.
See, for example, *'What Makes a Great Entrepreneur?'* by Chris Dyson in *Competence & Emotional Intelligence Quarterly*, vol 8, no 4, 2001

In the next section we provide a brief pen portrait of each of the breakthrough leaders that formed our inner core. This gives evidence of their major achievements and a brief summary, in their own words, of their take on life. In the rest of the report all quotes and references are anonymous, due to the sensitive nature of some events. The quotes used were all provided, in interview, by these five headteachers.

What do we mean by Breakthrough?

“When I arrived at this school no child could walk the length of the assembly hall to shake my hand and receive a prize. Now they all can. They couldn’t look you in the eye ... now children catch the atmosphere in their first day at school and hold their heads high and feel proud.”

- Moving a school from 4% of pupils achieving 5+ A*-C grades at GCSE to 42%, which puts the school in the top 5% nationally for schools in its category (i.e. 35% Free School Meals).
- A *‘Fresh Start Initiative’* that reduced the number of pupils with poor academic performance and attendance by 80% (from nearly a quarter of all pupils) in school where over 50% of pupils receive Free School Meals and the catchment area is ranked in the bottom ten in the UK for deprivation.
- Securing a grant from Microsoft and the local authority to create an *‘e-foundation’* and fund laptops for *every* teacher *and* pupil in the school *and* its feeder primaries.
- Pioneering a five-term year with a cohort of local schools, implemented in January 2000.
- Creating the country’s first Virtual Education Action Zone.
- Earning £1million in revenues per year from alternative sources and school-based business ventures.
- Challenging the law (and getting it changed) to allow your special school to achieve Grant Maintained status.
- Forging innovative relationships with HE institutions to offer postgraduate development for staff that attracts and retains the most talented specialists.
- Becoming the country’s first school-based CISCO Networking Academy.
- Enabling all teaching staff to work towards or extend postgraduate qualifications as a condition of joining. Adverts for posts at the school read “teach and learn at our school” and as many as 120 teachers apply for each post.
- Being rated the best in the country for ICT facilities, according to Ofsted, with “excellent leadership [and] a clear vision for the development of the school.”
- In a school where 30% of pupils claim Free School Meals and 33% have Special Educational Needs, Panda figures have gone up from an average of 3 Es to 3 Bs in four years.

1 Crossing the Line

How far can you go before 'questioning assumptions' becomes breaking the rules? Is it ever right to cross this line?

"I discovered that, while there are regulations about the length of the school day there's actually nothing about the school term."

The pleasure in this discovery, expressed by one of our heads, sums up our first distinguishing characteristic.

What is the biggest barrier to change? Yes, the politics are tough. Yes, everyone's busy and overburdened. Money is tight, too. But the chief obstacle is our assumption about what we can and cannot do:

- *"I couldn't sleep that night, the look just stayed with me. They'd followed me through a difficult time and I was suddenly saying 'I can't do it.' I got back out of bed and looked at the budget figures and thought 'okay'. That's where the Effectiveness Fund was born. I shaved 5-10% off budgets across the board."*
- *"When I told them my plan, all they could do was to laugh at my naivety."*
- *"I told my vice principal when I joined 'we will build a sports centre' and she said 'the day you do that I'll resign. I don't believe you could ever do that.'"*
- *"The words kept coming back to my mind, 'Better people have been in before you and not succeeded. How are you going to do that?' That's what the adviser said to me, 'What makes you so different?' That hasn't left my mind in all this time."*

The most powerful characteristic shared by all our headteachers was a willingness, in some instances a delight, in **challenging assumptions**. There was no aspect of the system, from culture to structure to regulation that they were not prepared to question and, if necessary, change.

The first area of attack was 'the way we do things round here.' Why do we have a three-term year? Why shouldn't a school be a regional training academy for a private company? Why can't a special school be Grant Maintained?

The second area of attack was on the boundaries of responsibility – their reach or domain. They questioned what it might be their *duty* to change and what it was *feasible* to change.

As we shall see later, these heads do not have blinding flashes of insight denied to the rest of us. Their peculiar genius lies in the murky territory between an idea and its execution. Part of this skill rests in marshalling resources, but the first step is to look again at the supposed barriers and ask which are real and which are of our own making.

In every breakthrough examined, someone else had thought of it first and the resources required were in reach of most schools in the country. So why were these heads often the first to actually do it?

While we saw many examples of procedure and precedent ignored, the most fruitful areas for challenge lay in the boundaries placed around the school and the roles of those inside it. The heads shared a realisation that, if they were to truly transform things, they could not limit their action to areas that society and their peers assumed were 'their responsibility'. Rather than complain about the attitudes of parents and the low motivation of pupils arriving at school, for example, these heads reached out and changed the community.

At times, particularly when heads are fighting against the deadweight of tradition, the rule-breaker mentality emerges as a highly attractive quality, at times it can be distinctly disturbing.

In the world of education, with a pervasive regime of standards, statutes and regulations, stretching this characteristic to its limits can bring heads into direct conflict with the authorities.

"The deputy director of education paid me a visit and told me that I must delete that school from the list ... and if I didn't they would not support the application and the application would fail ... So I included those children in the annexe to the bid, which satisfied the local authority's requirement to remove them from the list of schools. There is a personal risk in acting that way."

Was the line crossed at any point? Did our heads break the law? The evidence suggests not – that they steered a very careful course. They were willing to break unwritten rules and assumptions or to be decisive in areas of ambiguity.

Rather than break the law, one of our heads actually set out to change it, to enable his school to achieve a new legal status. His campaign to lobby civil servants and politicians was a model of its kind – even to the extent of faxing the Minister amendments to the bill as it was being debated in the House of Commons. As he relates:

"I obviously tried to persuade the civil servants first. Civil servants were resistant so, to help them over their resistance, I used political contacts. I got in touch with politicians to lean on them and say 'look, you're supposed to support entrepreneurialism, why are you allowing your civil servants to obstruct in what they're drafting for you?'"

Some rules are bureaucratic restrictions on the ability of schools to react appropriately to their unique circumstances. Others are imposed for reasons of health and safety, inclusion or equity. So, given a head's insight into the needs of their pupils, how far should we be prepared to let them go?

The saving grace, in these cases, is the motivation. Our heads were not behaving recklessly or negligently. The heads are driven by a deep personal conviction that what they are doing is morally right, that the ends justify the means. The activity in the application described above, for example, is motivated by the fact that *"I just couldn't bear to see a group of children left out who had as great a need as the children who were in. That wasn't acceptable to me."*

There is a new message in government circles about the need for 'informed professional judgement' – a recognition that, within a framework of standards, professionals can be trusted to make the right decisions independently. The message from this report is two edged. Yes, it works. However, you won't always like the decisions.

This creates a tension, which often exacts a toll on the individuals, themselves and their relationships with stakeholders. This is part of our next theme.

② Taking Risks

Breakthrough Leaders risk their careers and their reputations for their principles. Should they ask other people to risk theirs?

“If I don’t deliver, you don’t need to sack me, I’ll resign myself.”

The heads in our study share patterns of behaviour with others in society who achieve dramatic change. In the business world, this is known as entrepreneurial activity and is chiefly characterised by the willingness to take calculated risks in the pursuit of significant rewards.

The defining characteristic is not doing something ‘new’. That is necessary but not sufficient. The defining characteristic of the entrepreneur is ‘risk taking’.

In business this usually means investing one’s own financial capital – often one’s house. Our headteachers, on the other hand, are putting their *social* capital at risk – their careers, their security, their relationships and status.

Why do they take these risks? It does not seem to be from an inherent love of danger; the reverse is evident in some cases. Unfortunately it seems to be a necessary part of achieving their aims. Our heads are attacking cherished assumptions about appropriate behaviour and activity and this is threatening and controversial to people in a wide range of roles, from peers in headship to local authorities to stakeholders in the community.

A stark example was the message to one head when he sought greater independence from his local authority. He was told:

“You’ve got this kind of empire, with all these other authorities sending children and we’re not very happy about your degree of autonomy in the way you operate. We’re going to cut the school from 307 to 150 pupils.”

There is an interesting symmetry with traditional entrepreneurial behaviour in business. Business entrepreneurs risk their own money to challenge traditional assumptions about how money can be made. They seek an appropriately large financial return. Social entrepreneurs risk their own social goods (their status/security) to challenge traditional assumptions about how society can help its members. Both parties put their ‘money’ where their mouth is. (A person who challenges assumptions without taking on any personal risk is known as a ‘consultant’.)

This form of leadership is not for the faint-hearted. The heads in our sample were driven by conviction and displayed high levels of courage in the face of opposition (one head claimed to be “fireproof”). They drew flak and criticism upon themselves. So if we are thinking at a policy level about how we might encourage this sort of behaviour we have to address the issue that people in authority often respond very badly to the styles of these leaders.

Our institutions and institutional relationships may be among the greatest barriers to the sorts of breakthroughs we demand. Our heads kept going because they thought they were ‘fireproof’. How many good ideas, how much passion, is wasted because not all heads have that towering self confidence?

Debate about this issue could enhance the health and happiness of our enterprising headteachers, but we have also found a phenomenon which some might find more disturbing – many of these heads possess a ruthless streak. Yes, they accepted personal risk with courage, but they also demanded that other people accept risk, too, for the greater good.

We saw evidence of taking risks with colleagues' careers and relationships. We saw heads who risked colleagues' self esteem. We saw a head who risked the education of one pupil for the benefit of a class or year group. We might look on the assumption of personal risk with admiration and respect, but what about that imposed on others?

Again, it is worth emphasising that **there is no element of recklessness involved here**. They were willing, for example, to take a risk and remove an under performing manager, but were equally keen to put measures in place to protect that individual and the morale of the team:

"I'd managed to get someone who was not pulling her own weight out of the system and no longer holding it back but in a manner than enabled her to take her career forward, that hadn't wiped somebody out in terms of morale."

These are clearly calculated risks for significant objectives. In at least one case, the prospects and aspirations of an entire generation of a community were weighed against an individual's discomfort, leading the head to manoeuvre a teacher into the limelight when they sought anonymity. The decision doesn't seem so hard in this light but leaders more motivated to preserve friendships and harmony may not achieve this clarity. The words of one heads in our sample sum up the price to be paid:

"I will not compromise my principles for friendship because they are more important."

We are driven, ultimately, to examine the value of education itself. Our heads are able to ask others to take risks (or even to impose them on others) because they have a very broad view of their remit and responsibility. They are not in charge of examination machines and they are not merely professionals living by a set of national standards. They urgently believe that the welfare of entire communities rests within their responsibility. What is a single individual in the face of this commitment?

Our breakthrough leaders see the world around them in a very connected fashion. They are aware of forces at work in the community that affect the school and within the school that affect the community. They believe that, in order to fulfil their responsibilities, they have to look beyond the boundaries typically imposed upon them.

We all have dreams, but these people "dream in a connected fashion." So where do they get their ideas from? How do they spot a good idea?

③ Connected Thinking

Where do the good ideas come from? Breakthrough leaders are creative but not original - they seek out ideas that already work and make them fit their context.

One of the most common concerns expressed when people are exhorted to be 'more innovative' or 'enterprising' is about having the bright ideas. Coming up with radical new concepts or ways of doing things is understandably daunting.

But that's no excuse: our breakthrough headteachers did not conceive radical new concepts either.

In almost every instance they took established, even old-fashioned ideas and spun them into something new. When we think about the initiatives – new laptops, establishing EAZs, offering staff post-graduate training, building a new sports hall, even the five- or six-term year – we are not surprised by the idea but by its scope, scale or the audacity of putting it into practice at that time, in that place.

As far as the inspiration behind their innovation goes, our group of heads were intellectual magpies. Their talent lay in being open and receptive to new ideas, regardless of where they came from. There are frequent instances of importing thinking from the worlds of business and higher education or from initiatives in other countries.

These heads were quick to think of applying the ideas to their particular context and often the first to take practical steps to put them into practice.

There are two main drivers behind this behaviour.

The first is the habit of seeking information. Not only did our heads see their area of responsibility as extending beyond the boundaries of the school, their span of attention was equally wide. Our heads often used their networks to exert pressure and influence (as we shall see later) but they also used them as sources of information. Networking was not the only tactic employed, however: more imaginative techniques were also in evidence. These included seeking qualifications such as MBAs, appointing unusual governors, working with consultants, deliberately appointing members of the senior management team with different backgrounds and learning styles to create a *"role model with skills very different from mine, so that staff would have two role models of leadership complementing one another."*

The second driver was a mode of thinking, a way of seeing the world. These leaders identified patterns or saw the big picture that was not obvious to others – the connections, the way things worked together as a system.

This was helpful both in seeing where they could learn from other, similar systems and also for viewing their problems in terms of interconnected systems. The best example of this is an initiative to engage a local traveller community more closely with the school. The particular barrier to achievement in this school was parental aspirations. The head believed that a traveller community's perception of its status in society at large influenced its attitude towards education: schools being perceived as yet one more intrusive institution. He therefore judged that, in order to raise standards, he must change parental views of education and that, in order to do this in the traveller community, he could work with national and local media (through a series of awards) to influence their self esteem.

Another head in the sample used a simple, business-derived model of change to assess the impact and implications of moving his school to a five term year:

"The six old, boring questions of the management of change: Where are we now? Where do we want to be? How are we going to get there? What's stopping us from getting there? How will we know when we've got there? And, what happens if we do nothing?"

This ability to see the whole problem supports leaders in questioning common assumptions and taking the risks necessary to change them. It combines with their conviction that overcoming the problems they face is more important than careers or traditions.

4 Making Enemies

If politics is the art of compromise, why is stubbornness so persuasive?

We've seen how our breakthrough leaders tend to attract criticism and opposition. We've also seen that they *get things done* – they are in no sense lone outsiders, operating independently on the margins. They are at the heart of groups, initiatives and social enterprises. Frequently, their ambitions mean they need to forge significant coalitions and alliances.

So it will come as little surprise that our group was characterised by sophisticated influencing strategies. Indeed, in their pursuit of alliances, in their use of indirect influence, manipulation of the media (sometimes at a national level) and their understanding of psychology they would put a spin doctor to shame.

But there was also a characteristic more blunt and refreshing. Sheer bloody-mindedness. Indeed, it was surprising to see how frequently stubborn conviction and persistence eventually won the day. Theirs was a language of absolutes and ultimatums.

“As a headteacher you're presiding over things that are absolute principles. If I felt that children were being compromised, and I was overseeing that, I'd find it intolerable.”

“I was told that if I went ahead with seeking independence, that my career would be finished and that I would be in serious trouble.” The response? “Indignant, annoyed and determined to prove them wrong.”

The mixture of these approaches forms a potent combination for putting ideas into practice. It also enables our heads to inspire great loyalty within their schools. They do not cultivate enemies recklessly – it appears as another example of taking *calculated* risks. There are times when you can gain more through obstinacy than through compromise.

The breakthrough heads were *tactically* adept in their influencing – in the meeting or with the press, in working with sponsors and charitable trusts and in understanding peoples' responses to change. They were also *strategic* in their influencing – knowing which relationships were important, in thinking several steps ahead when laying out the ground for a suggestion or initiative.

A vivid example of strategic influencing occurs in one head's preparation for introducing the five-term year to colleagues in neighbouring schools:

“The first thing was to do some market segmentation ... There's those who sit on the fence and don't care what you do ... but more importantly there's the anarchists, who are the ones that are behind your back, smiling at you in the morning and stabbing you in the back in the afternoon.”

That was his emotive assessment of the forces at work; the next tactic was more analytical:

“I literally sat down at a white board, drawing up the cake, listing who were our different client groups: local employers, teachers, parents, local shopkeepers, feeder schools, colleagues with children in other schools ...”

The heads were capable of self effacement. They knew when to take a back seat, to let go of an initiative or to bring in an external expert to make their case. Above all, they were aware that their personal profile could backfire – that people might see their initiatives as aimed at personal glory. Although forceful and inspiring individuals, these heads were also able to take a step back and reflect on their own impact both inside the school and out.

Finally, sending the right message to the local community was also a key feature of our heads’ influence. You can visit one school, for example, and observe that all the woodwork facing the local housing estate – not any area used to receiving a warm reception from society’s institutions – is freshly painted. The rest remains undecorated.

The extent of the ambition of our sample group meant they could not achieve their goals alone – they had to be persuasive. This ambition also needed funding and executing. The next section examines the effective use of resources among our breakthrough heads.

⑤ The Business of Learning

Is enterprise a dirty word? People who care about education care about money, management and pleasing the sponsors.

“Entrepreneurialism for me is not just about business ideas. What matters is the school’s identity and the identity of potential benefactors. They want to be associated with a high quality operation.”

In our emerging picture of breakthrough leadership in schools, we can see many characteristics that these heads share with innovative practitioners in all walks of life. One area, in particular, that headteachers share with traditional entrepreneurs is their ability to pursue, marshal and manage resources (financial, material, human) in the execution of their ideas.

It is also important to note that few of the schools were especially favoured by resources such as affluent catchment areas. The school that raised a million pounds from Microsoft, for example, is situated on one of the poorest estates in the country.

The headteachers in our sample did not show a preoccupation with money or sponsorship – it was not an end in itself. They were, however, fully aware of the importance of this resource in achieving their goals and each was able to detail explicit plans and methods of raising money and other resources.

“I needed to see how the money had been spent. Which departments had the money? Was there a structure or was it ad hoc? Was it given out yearly or was there a four year plan?”

None of the headteachers relied solely upon traditional sources of finance. In some cases, the sources of external funding counted for as much as 25% of the school’s total budget. *We* can debate if it is desirable for heads to have to hunt down resources, but these heads did not waste time on debate or complaint.

“We augment the standard fund money from the local authority with a business arrangement with the university whereby 75% of the money that changes hands finds its way back here.”

There was a complex web of charitable trusts, limited companies, corporate sponsorship deals and training contracts. Two schools, in particular, were operated in very business-like terms, with revenue targets and traded services. As well as a means of achieving goals, this mode of operating was also a symbol of independence and a message to groups of children not motivated by academic measures of attainment.

The pursuit of additional support extends to physical resources, like buildings and playgrounds, and to the recruitment and retention of talented staff. None of these heads, interestingly, had definitively solved the retention problem – most put it at the top of their list of current challenges.

“We have a dedicated charitable trust and it’s dedicated to two things. One is the capital development of the school and the other is the training of staff ... If I walked you round the site I could point to a large part having been funded through privately raised capital ... We don’t take on any teacher at all unless they agree to specialist post graduate training and that is underwritten by the Trust.”

None of the themes or characteristics we saw in this study stands in isolation from the others. Our heads’ ability to fund their ideas owes a great deal to their influencing skills, to their conviction that they are morally right, and to their questioning of assumptions about where money comes from and what a school should ‘make do with’.

All the heads in this sample were successful entrepreneurs – they made a breakthrough. It would be an interesting exercise to examine failures – where breakthroughs are envisaged, risks are taken but change does not follow. Could both the influencing and resource strategies be at fault?

⑥ Sharing Leadership

When heads spend so much time looking outwards, who looks after the school?

The heads in our study devoted a significant proportion of their time, attention and energy to external issues. They were ambassadors for the school, they networked at conferences and think tanks, they worked in the community, they toured foreign schools, lobbied the government, ran Education Action Zones, chaperoned potential sponsors.

This all led to the natural question, 'what's happening in the school, while the head is away?' Many of these schools were in highly challenging circumstances; surely things weren't just ticking along nicely without any attention? Were important issues being neglected internally?

This also returns us to the debate about professionalism. We've seen earlier that these highly successful leaders implicitly reject traditional notions about professionalism, just at a time when others are seeking to raise the status of professionalism in education. They're used to swimming against the flow, but are they right to do so in this instance?

Professionalism contains many positive connotations of self-regulation, high standards and quality, codes of conduct, accountability. The trappings of professionalism include clearly defined responsibilities, defined standards of performance and behaviour, lines of authority and approval – in short just the sort of body of informal rules frequently challenged by our breakthrough leaders.

Could we contend that these leaders are anti-professional, or perhaps *beyond* professionalism, in terms of methods if not results? They hold themselves accountable for whatever appears to impact on their school, they do not respect authority or established forums, they regard agreed standards as limiting rather than stretching.

Quite clearly these people are doing things we would *not* ordinarily expect headteachers to do. We also suspect that they are not, personally, doing some of the tasks we *would* expect headteachers to do themselves – like the day-to-day operational management of their schools. Perhaps these tasks are not neglected but, rather, effectively delegated.

And, in this, we see an answer to the stress and frustration which normally confront headteachers and their teams. It is not possible to do everything that the role demands and stay sane or healthy. Even our breakthrough leaders (especially our breakthrough leaders!) know when to let go – when to share their burdens of leadership. While the head often stands out through charisma, or their public profile, these schools are more than just their personal success story.

It is no coincidence that each head's first actions were to clearly define the role of the senior management team, to ensure it had the right people in it and to delegate significant responsibility. Where possible, delegation was extended as time progressed. Many of the heads consciously reflected on their styles of leadership and adjusted their behaviour to match the growing capability of their teams. This was not always a painless process.

All of these schools had strong and effective governing bodies, often to the extent of being noted and commended by Ofsted. The heads took frequent action to inform, influence and debate with their governors. A strong chair was often the head's closest ally, as well as being a valued source of new ideas from outside education.

"I met the chair of governors – very charismatic, very strong-minded, business-like."

"A key turning point was a discussion with the chairman of governors, who said to me 'how do we go forward from here?'"

Lest this theme seems to conflict too much with earlier observations about their conviction and strong personalities, it is worth noting that these heads were not entirely 'hands off'.

While they delegated large amounts of responsibility and freedom to members of staff, they held them strictly accountable for standards of performance and, particularly, values. The heads went to considerable pains to establish a culture and set of values in school which closely matched their own. A failure to live up to these values was not tolerated, indeed it was the most serious transgression any colleague could commit.

This issue was confronted, in the most challenging of circumstances, when a respected deputy head hit a pupil soon after one of our heads had joined the school:

"I was fairly harsh on that ... I wasn't going to tolerate that and people had to get over it, in a sense. It is one of the most difficult things you can do – hold your values under pressure and not only pressure but the dictates of comradeship as well."

Our heads let a strong culture do the managing for them.

"Why does the headteacher of a school always believe they've got to be there all day every day, doing everything. Doing bus duty, doing break duty, keeping their nose to the grindstone just to prove to their workers they're doing something?"

"Some people left [after a disciplinary incident], but as those people left things changed. I felt more confident about giving people the opportunity."

They devoted time early in their headship to establishing the values that underpinned the culture and maintained it through public reward and punishing transgressions. Within that framework, the culture, not the head, was a pervasive force *inside* the school: informing discussion about what to do, what was acceptable, where to devote their time.

One final observation can anchor this characteristic within the debate around raising the **capacity for change** in schools. These heads are not young radicals or idealists. They are, to borrow a phrase from Gary Hamel, "grey haired revolutionaries," with an average length of service of eight years as headteachers.

Not only had they managed to sustain their own enthusiasm and energy over a long period of time, they had managed to do the same with their colleagues. At the extreme, one head in our group had led his school for fourteen years – it is doubtful if there was ever a period without major change in any of these fourteen years. How can they do this, when so many in education complain of the apathy and stress created by wave after wave of change?

Certainly, these heads enjoy the experience of change – it spurs new achievement and challenges assumptions in its own right. There was frequent evidence of a roving personality, looking for the next challenge: you've got to *"keep change changing, things get stale, things get outmoded."* They seemed to relish the obstacles, challenges and debates that change threw up. However, the notion of shared leadership must also play a vital role in the enormous capacity for change in their schools:

- Clearly defined roles and authority delegated to match capability (while being aware that both capability and, therefore, authority, change over time);
- Strong cultural values to guide behaviour rather than micro-management (micro-management is as draining on the recipient as on the manager).

The emphasis on reflective and adaptable leadership was particularly evident – knowing when people's growing needs and capabilities called for a new style. As in this assessment after three years of leadership:

"We had gone as far as we possibly could in that direction, a lot of things were coming from me ... things were fairly bad here when we started, okay, the results were dreadful, attendance was very dreadful and it took a fair amount of energy, a fair amount of action directed by me. But there was a price to pay for that as well because I think people had become too dependent on me."

There is a danger, and sometimes a desire, that these stories may appear as the victory of the individual against the forces of reaction and inertia. But, although the head is a vital source of energy for change, this is not a picture of individual achievement. Success has derived from building connections with individuals and groups. The head may create these connections and, in some sense, sustain them with their enthusiasm and vision, but they could not do the job by themselves.

Indeed, it may be the rare combination of an ability to share, connect and persuade joined with a very personal sense of purpose that makes these heads unusual.

What's Missing?

The preceding sections have detailed six themes common to the headteachers in our study. They include questioning assumptions, risk taking, borrowing ideas, conviction, persuasiveness, resourcefulness and the ability to share leadership.

It is also worth asking what we *didn't* find. And how our breakthrough heads compare to other headteachers in general and to innovators in other organisations.

Our Expectations

Strategic Planning:

These people were not grand strategic thinkers. There were no five year plans, business plans or analyses of major trends in education. The heads were guided by compelling principles rather than a strategy. They were forward looking and receptive to change but opportunistic in their approach. They sometimes spent periods looking for inspiration, until seizing on an idea and putting their full weight behind it.

They substituted decisiveness for strategy. It felt, at times, that they did not spend a long time evaluating an idea before committing to it. It may be that their measuring tools were so straightforward that decisions were easy – everything went up against the yardstick of their moral conviction. Once it measured up here, there were no further questions to ask.

A Focus on Learning or Children:

Perhaps it is too obvious and therefore taken for granted, but these heads rarely waxed lyrical about children or about education. They did not expound theories of learning or provide anecdotes about individual children's achievements. Their focus tended towards the collective, the social and the utilitarian. Goals were expressed in terms of changing year groups, communities or generations; in terms of improving self esteem and aspirations rather than exam results; and in terms of the greatest good for the greatest number rather than individual achievement.

There were strong exceptions to this picture, however, including a highly successful Fresh Start initiative aimed at getting the basics of attendance and academic achievement right. But even so, education in its narrow academic sense (percentage of passes in exams) almost always took a backseat to social change. Interestingly enough, the percentage results seemed to follow, too.

Monitoring & Data Collection:

None of our breakthrough heads highlighted systems for collecting and monitoring data on performance in school as key achievements. Did these work so well as to be unworthy of comment? Were they delegated to other members of staff? Were they irrelevant to the head's agenda?

Our heads didn't dive into the detail of performance measurement but did have a strong grip on a few key measures of relevance to their needs. They were rarely as interested in percentage improvements as they were in people's values and attitudes. They would tell you who was for or against a particular idea but not the level of value added in a particular class.

Meeting The Government's Agenda:

This will be a sore point for anyone who expects innovative heads to be flagships for the latest national initiative. They were most commonly characterised by an almost complete indifference to other agendas – they were more likely to comment on being freed from a restriction or requirement (like the national curriculum, for example) than of achieving a particular target.

The government is increasingly pursuing a strategy of setting headline, national targets for improvement, freeing up schools to pilot different ways of achieving them and then disseminating best practice. These findings make it unlikely that the most successful and innovative headteachers will co-operate fully in this process – making the *very* best practice hard to obtain.

Our breakthrough headteachers have their own goals for their schools and their communities, which seem so much more relevant, exciting and important than those posed from outside. These goals generate passion, enthusiasm and loyalty within the school because of the sense of personal ownership. National, *statistical* targets, by contrast, have little power to generate this motivation and engagement.

Comparison with Mainstream Headship

There are two parts of the Models of Excellence that heads attending the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers find most challenging:

- Holding People Accountable
- Coaching & Developing Staff

Our breakthrough headteachers are strong on both these fronts. They repeatedly confronted poor performance from the earliest days of their headships until they had established such strong values in their schools that the culture did most of the work for them. This often meant some uncomfortable moments – losing people, putting friendships on the line, challenging powerful cliques.

Examples of building staff capability are evident throughout their stories, from supporting specialist expertise to building strong leadership teams. In particular, these heads delegated large amounts of their traditional responsibilities, *when* they felt their senior managers were ready for the challenge. This was built on a process of reflection, self-assessment and then a conscious change in styles of leadership – a transition, where necessary, from the coercive, turn-around style to a more supportive, coaching approach. The heads helped their schools to grow and were then challenged to grow themselves, to encourage rather than cow the new confidence that emerged in staff.

In some respects, these abilities are complimentary – it must feel easier to confront poor performance if you are providing people a clear route to improve their performance.

Comparison with Entrepreneurs in the Commercial World

Throughout this report we have made comparisons between our breakthrough headteachers and the behaviours of entrepreneurial business leaders. Although their subject matters differ, there are clearly many similarities in style. Contrary to stereotypes, business entrepreneurs are not focused on money at the expense of vision – great companies are built on a desire to change the world, not to please venture capitalists. Money becomes a means of keeping score or measuring success.

It may be that there is a growing subset of entrepreneurial leaders in business, education and the public sector, focused on social change from the bottom up – whether through new products, local initiatives, or better education.

There are some notable differences between business and education:

- Business-based entrepreneurs appear to spend a lot of their waking lives at work – six or seven days a week, at up to eighteen hours a day. There was little evidence in this study of that level of *physical* presence among our heads.
- The timeframe is different – business entrepreneurs had a longer planning horizon and were less opportunistic than the heads. However, change was still about connecting ideas from unusual sources, about importing models, rather than completely new creations.
- The entrepreneurs in our previous study were *less* sophisticated influencers than our heads – their main trait was persistence.
- The entrepreneurs were less happy than heads about sharing power within their organisations. They tended to clearly position themselves as the sole leader.

So it seems that long hours are not limited to public servants, though one could argue that the entrepreneurs may see more of a financial reward (if they are lucky). However, headteachers could teach business one or two tricks about influencing strategies and shared leadership.

Conclusions:

Is there a Recipe for Success?

We have seen, in these pages, a type of leadership that appears to succeed in tackling many of the challenges facing education today. The assembled heads have transformed educational standards – by as much as a factor of ten in one case. They have also pioneered a wider view of achievement: fostering self esteem, higher aspirations and transforming learning in their surrounding communities. They have gone to work on the forces influencing children's achievement, wherever those forces originate, and make no complaints about factors outside their control.

It is also clear that, although each breakthrough was unique, there are common and complimentary themes that run through their stories. We have found a consistent *leadership strategy* for successful change. We have found a group of people with some crucial traits in common; with diverse goals but using common means (a dichotomy with important implications for policy, which currently tends to favour the reverse).

The heads in our sample have moved beyond headship in the traditional sense to become advocates, bringing new ideas into the school. They achieved this through a form of *co-leadership*. This is more than the currently popular notion of distributed leadership. As co-leaders they have taken on the radical edge of leadership – helping the school influence the external world and bringing external influences into school – and enabled their colleagues to take on curriculum and pedagogical leadership. There are lessons here, which could be replicated in other schools, for the structure of roles and senior teams.

These leaders innovate in action not ideas. Their convictions and connected thinking drive them to question assumptions and to take significant risks to achieve their goals. They are open to inspiration and seize decisively on ideas. They can imagine how ideas used in very different contexts could help them in their schools. Their talent lies in implementation: they are persuasive, inspirational and resourceful.

These leaders put principles above individuals. They can appear ruthless in pursuit of their goals because, to them, the stakes are far higher than friendship or security. They are calculating rather than reckless. But, ironically, the apparent calculation and ruthlessness derive from enduring, deeply felt principles of justice and opportunity.

They are neither overly respectful of, nor limited by, authority or tradition. They cannot be relied upon to implement someone else's agenda. They are willing to bend the rules. They are opportunistic rather than methodical.

So we have a dilemma. Do we want to encourage this sort of behaviour?

On the one hand, our heads have significantly improved the lives of thousands of children. They have even changed the lives of the children's parents. They have improved the schools that *surround* their own (not an action guaranteed to make you universally popular).

On the other hand, almost by definition, they are not a force that can be controlled or deployed at will.

So we have one message for the policy makers:

Breakthrough leadership is paradoxical. It delivers the 'right' *results* but doesn't use the conventional *methods*. These leaders are inspiring, but are they role models for the entire profession?

Think carefully about the balance between risk and reward in promoting this form of leadership. Where transformation is the only acceptable option – and there are many cases where it is – creating the right level of freedom for the right sort of people may be exactly the right tactic.

We have another message for headteachers themselves:

The findings in this report carry a vital message for leaders in school. There is no blueprint for the vision of these heads. We have five leaders and five separate opinions about what's important in school, ranging from vocational-technological inspiration to community outreach.

No one gave these heads their mission. They brought it with them, often formed as part of their earliest experiences and values. It would be surprising if they differed from other headteachers in this regard. The research behind the LPSH found that personal conviction is a common core of all successful educational leadership, whether breakthrough or 'steady state'.

So pursuing an idiosyncratic vision can itself be a recipe for success *if* it gives you the conviction to question assumptions and take risks. And it's hard to see what else could build such strong conviction.

If there is no single vision, there is a common set of techniques and approaches. These are neither exceptional nor unique. They are not unattainable for most leaders in school. They come to fruition precisely when we stop following other people's agendas and targets and start following the goals we think are important enough to stake our careers upon.

The Project Team

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Liz Hyde managed the project. Dorothy Nesbit led the team, which included:

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Note on the Hay Group

The Hay Group is a leading management consultancy with a strong educational practice. We are a global organisation (with offices in 32 countries) specialising in people issues at work.

We have researched and designed models of how people motivate their colleagues (or pupils) for a variety of organisations in the public and private sector. This involves us in leadership development work, performance management, organisational change, human resource strategy, reward and job design.

In education in the UK, our expertise stems from a number of projects:

Transforming Learning

A web-based development service for schools and teachers, Transforming Learning enables teachers to gather feedback from pupils on the climate for learning and use this data to plan their own development. Leaders can seek feedback from their colleagues on their team climate and use this data to plan school improvement.

Transforming Learning is a radical approach to school improvement – putting the tools and the information in the hands of teachers themselves. It focuses on behaviours, values and attitudes rather than skills, and applies rigorous measures to the core concept of 'Climate.'

Transforming Learning is in use in 800 schools in the UK.

See www.transforminglearning.co.uk/preview for more information

The Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers

Europe's largest management development programme. Eight thousand headteachers have been through this development course, based on researched models of excellence for leadership in schools. Over three quarters of participants rate it as the best training they have ever received. Follow up work demonstrates marked improvements in school climate as a result.

See www.ncsl.org.uk/index.cfm?pageid=17 for more information.

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The DfES asked us to investigate what makes a highly effective classroom teacher. As well as building models of excellence for teaching, we were also able to test the applicability of climate to the individual classroom. In a significant breakthrough, we were able to create a model of Classroom Climate that predicts the academic progress of pupils.

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