

How quality conversations can transform your school by Dave Harris

All heads lead hectic lives, but finding the time for regular, meaningful dialogue with your senior leaders is vital to overcoming obstacles and moving forward as a focused, unified team. Dave Harris considers how to create and maximise the time for discussion, even in the busiest of schools.

'Let's talk about it' is often the first line of support offered by the concerned teacher to a troubled pupil. We do this instinctively, because we know that talking things through is so often the key to helping unravel the complexities of a pupil's problem. It is therefore interesting to ponder why this solution is not so readily used for the adults in the school.

When issues of school leadership are involved, there can be a feeling that this is something that should just happen – that the professional body of leaders should each perform like a cog in a machine to smoothly produce the perfect answer. School leaders must first remember that they are not machines, nor should they ever try to be. Each individual's knowledge and skills are locked within their own experience and perspective, and unless they are forced to challenge their own viewpoint, they will always use that as the starting point for solving any leadership issue. There is a real danger that the isolated leader, rather than expanding their skill set, will narrow down to find links with things that they already believe. If unchallenged, a busy leader will witness a problem then attempt to link its answer to a previous situation, almost 'squashing' it to fit that template.

It is clear why this is the case; spare time is in short supply in the modern school. When talking to one school leader recently, they recounted the first 30 minutes of their morning's schedule:

07:30 Arrive in school
07:31 Told of leak in boys' toilets
07:35 Computer server needs rebooting
07:40 Two phone calls from ill members of staff
07:45 First pupils dropped off at school for breakfast
07:46 Conversation with supply company about getting suitable replacements
07:47 Member of staff wanting to confide a 'personal issue'
07:55 Secretary arrives and reports two urgent messages on the answer phone
08:00 An angry parent is demanding to be seen in reception

This leader then had a staff briefing to run at 08:20, an assembly at 08:50 and a lesson to teach at 09:15! The sad thing is that some of you reading this will probably be sighing deeply and claiming (in best Monty Python style), '*You're lucky. In my school...*'. This may hardly be the most fertile ground for discussion but, I would argue, clearly emphasises why it is needed.

How much dialogue goes on in your school?

Most schools recognise that leadership should not be a solitary activity and, for that reason, place regular leadership team meetings in their calendar. Are these the exciting and vibrant meeting of minds and ideas that they should be? Or are they something much less? A recent meeting in which I had the opportunity to sit started 15 minutes late, with two of the group not arriving until at least halfway through; there were three separate interruptions and only half of the agenda was completed. A great proportion of this valuable time was given over to issues which had arisen that day, with almost no actual discussion occurring.

How can that be? Maybe this is the point to think about what we mean by discussion.

'Dialogue is characterised by genuine reciprocity. It is a two-way process in which there is a shared and equal commitment to respect the dignity and integrity of each of the participants. The classic form of the Socratic dialogue

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is the posing of a question, the identification of a problem or the expression of a disagreement. The purpose of the dialogue is to achieve a mutually acceptable resolution by the testing of alternative hypotheses, the exclusion of inappropriate arguments and fallacious conclusions, and the generation of possible solutions.'¹

This is surely something that our leadership teams could benefit from? Leading a school is one of the most important roles in the country, but is becoming an increasingly isolated one. True dialogue challenges the remoteness of the role and spreads the responsibility. So how much professional dialogue happens already in your school?

A good starting point for your own leadership team would be to look at what currently happens in a typical term. Try this formula:

- A. How many hours of formal leadership meetings do you have a term?
- B. How many attend these meetings?
- C. What is the total number of 'leadership' hours spent in these meetings? (A x B)
- D. Analyse the term's minutes from these meetings, and annotate the items covered as Emergency/Firefighting (X), Management (M), Leadership (L).
- E. Roughly what fraction of meeting time is spent dealing with true leadership issues?
- F. How many hours a term are you spending considering true leadership issues? (E x C)
- G. What percentage of this time is given over to discussion (as opposed to presentation)?
- H. How many hours a term are you spending in real leadership dialogue? (G x F)

Are you happy with your result? Does the figure you have reached in H represent a suitable amount of time to be dedicating to the future progress of the school? In most cases, I fear the answer will be 'No'. This answer will quickly be followed by the question: *'Where on earth do I find any more time?'*

Finding the time for real leadership dialogue

The answer comes in two parts; firstly, look at how you can maximise the useful time in your existing meetings and secondly, how can you create extra opportunities for dialogue?

Maximising meeting time

1. Look at your start time. Is it realistic? If so, insist it is respected by all. Also stick to the finish time.
2. Have refreshments arranged and ready in the meeting room – so the hunt for clean mugs in the staffroom is not used as a further delaying technique.
3. Arrange extra 'non leadership team' support for the allotted leadership meeting time. Make it unacceptable for the meeting to be disturbed.
4. Set clear timings for each item on the agenda (do not try to 'squash in extra', you will end up doing nothing well).
5. Separate the timings for input and discussion – the discussion time should be at least three times the length of the input.
6. Stick to the timings you arrange, even if the item hasn't been completed. Decide how you are going to address that issue – sometimes the conversation can be effectively continued electronically or a subgroup can be formed to complete it. Occasionally, you can carry it over to the next meeting, but avoid this temptation when possible as it can easily cause 'Groundhog Day' meetings.
7. Remove 'time eaters' from your meeting – i.e. things that will use the time, often without any satisfactory outcome being reached. Moans and rants should have no part of your meeting. One useful technique I have seen is to have a quick round of inputs from every member of the group to 'dump' their issues at the door. Give each one minute (time this – teachers' minutes have the ability to stretch for eternity!) to say one thing that is most bothering them and importantly, what they are going to do to try and improve this. For example: *'I feel the behaviour of Year 3 is getting worse – I am going to sit down with Jane tomorrow to try and refine the rewards system.'* If someone tries to hijack the meeting for their own particular concern, the group should not allow this, but offer that the item be placed as a proper item on the next agenda for input and discussion.

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8. Finish the meeting on time and positively. Possibly allow a round of inputs from everyone where they say one positive thing they are going to do as a result of today's meeting. This can be 'have coffee with ...' or 'say thank you to ...'.

Creating extra opportunities

1. Identify a discussion theme for the week. Provide brief reading to provoke thinking and agree a mechanism for feedback.
2. Timetable discussion meetings between smaller groups of the leadership team within the teaching day. Identify a location and time slot that will be prioritised (not taken for any other role).
3. Form an online discussion group and start a couple of relevant topic strands.
4. Place a large magnetic whiteboard in the staffroom and encourage interaction by posing questions and statements. Maybe begin by expressing a couple of alternative views to a problem the school needs to solve. Keep visiting the board within the week, mention it in staff briefings and make a point of reading and responding to newly posted comments.
5. Ask pairs of staff to 'think around' particular specific areas. Make it clear they are the only ones responsible for exploring this. Arrange for them to have dedicated time to provide feedback to the larger group. People will be less resentful of time spent with purpose and that they have control of.
6. Issue questions or questionnaires to all the leadership team in advance of a meeting. Ensure the information is collated before the item is covered on the agenda. This will allow the group to quickly get to the heart of a topic. For example, 30 minutes going round the table gaining different viewpoints could be avoided by issuing a simple sliding scale – 'On a scale of one to ten, how much do you agree with this plan of action?' The topic can then be addressed with much greater clarity: *'Most of us seem to support this action, but we need to look at the clear concerns a couple of you have raised.'*
7. Replace meeting time currently wasted on conjecture with a few carefully researched facts. For example, if you are considering different ways to engage pupils at lunchtime, a questionnaire to a sample of pupils will give you a range of ideas to focus on. It is interesting to discover how rarely pupils are consulted about their own education.

Asking the right questions

Having created time for meaningful professional discussion, it is now important to make the most of it. As in most aspects of life, the quality of the questions will determine the quality of the responses you will receive. It is important to ensure that leaders have the opportunity to look at the problem from as wide a perspective as possible. Education has become fixated on discovering quick answers and instant solutions, sadly to the detriment of some of the quality. A good question will avoid leading the response down a particular path – there is no place in professional dialogue for rhetorical questions.

In our recent book, *Leadership Dialogues*, Professor John West-Burnham and I have identified eight general themes that we consider fertile grounds for professional dialogue. We have titled them:

- effective leadership
- thinking strategically
- leading innovation and change
- leading teaching and learning
- leading and managing resources
- leading people
- collaboration
- engaging with students, parents and community.

For each, we have identified a number of sub-topics and for each of these, a collection of questions and resources. To get you started, I have included a couple of possibilities below.

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Leadership vs. Management

The topic of leadership vs. management encourages leaders to investigate to what extent their school and its systems are focused on management, as opposed to leadership.

What is your opinion of the following quote?

'The evidence suggests that many school leaders are too involved in operational and delivery matters and that this has been, to some extent, at the expense of embracing their more strategic imperatives ... But these ties to the operational space also seem to be related, based on our interpretation of the evidence, to a mindset amongst some school leaders which is often more comfortable with an operational than a strategic role.'²

Discuss this with a colleague: is this a fair criticism of your own school? What is the balance in your own team between management, leadership and administration (with administration defined as work which could be done by an intelligent 16-year-old, i.e. routine procedures)? A quick analysis of the minutes from your previous term's leadership team meetings might be an interesting place to start. Note the occurrence of the words listed below and use this to investigate your school's position on the continuum between management and leadership.

Management	Leadership
Improvement	Transformation
Control	Trust
Tight	Loose
Conformity	Creativity
Systems	Relationships
Standards	Values
Instruct	Coach
Rules	Empower

What does this indicate about the balance in your own school's leadership? Have you spent more time focusing on management or on leadership? Are you holding school management meetings rather than school leadership team meetings? Use this analysis as the start of the discussion in your team, not as the end point. Are you happy with the conclusion you reach? If not, what is the team going to do to address it?

Perhaps move your focus onto the systems within your school. For example, how do your school policies, job descriptions and performance management criteria distinguish between leading and managing? Is this distinction understood and acted on by all leaders and managers?

Sometimes the 'battles' in the media and on Twitter could lead us to believe that educational problems have simplistic answers – that it is a case of finding the right answer, and that one 'side' has to be victorious. This, however, is rarely the case. In this example, a school clearly needs both leadership and management; a healthy balance between the two needs to be found. A school that only spent time 'leading' could find itself with serious lapses in its systems and routines, whereas a school not focusing sufficient effort on leadership may become so tied to 'the way things have always been done' that they do not develop to fit the needs of the modern learner. What is important is to have a dialogue about where you are on the continuum and to consider if this is the most productive place for your institution. There is not a perfect point that you can reach, 'tick a box' and go off and look at something else; instead, as a school matures, it will need to continually examine and shift this balance in order to meet the ever changing needs of society.

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United in ethos?

Another important question you might find useful to investigate is: who is setting the direction in your school and are you happy with this?

To begin this debate, cut out ten arrow shapes and on each, write down one of the groups who have an input into the school.

You will need to include:

- governors
- pupils
- staff
- leaders
- the head
- national government
- Ofsted
- parents
- sponsors/LA
- local community

Lay these on your meeting table, facing towards one end. Now discuss whether they are all currently pointing towards the same goal. Are they like a flight of arrows all heading to the same target? Or are some of them very clearly aiming elsewhere? If, for example, the group believe the 'parents' arrow is heading in a different direction to most of the other groups, is this something the team should just ignore, hoping it will improve? I would suggest not! Fundamental differences in ethos rarely fade over time; in fact, they tend to strengthen when not addressed.

Recently, in carrying out this task with a school principal, he obtained a moment of clarity as to why he was so unhappy and stressed in his role – his arrow was in a different direction to that of his sponsors and governors! It is often easier for school leaders to brush over issues highlighted by this task, saying 'That is just the way it is' or 'What else do you expect these days?'. However, a healthy leadership team will focus on what can be done to address the problem. In an age where everything connected to Finnish education is looked to for guidance, it is important to realise that much of this success can be attributed to the common approach to education across the country. The ethos is broadly aligned across all stakeholders, and there is a general agreement about what education is for. This is a debate desperately needed in many other areas of the world; a system with clarity of ethos is almost certainly a successful one.

You may not feel up to addressing the educational direction of the country, but a quality dialogue within your own school community is an important first step. As a leadership team, try to define a clear ethos statement that all the groups can identify with, place this on your table and see if all the arrows align. Once you have this, share it and broaden the discussion with all parts of your school – and decide how you are going to make it happen. This is the basis of a very effective school improvement plan! However, be warned: keep revisiting the task. This, like most leadership issues, needs constant monitoring.

Some general rules for effective dialogue

With so much potential variety in the topics for professional dialogue, how can you be sure that the time you dedicate to them will be most effective? It is always a good idea to establish some rules.

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Good leadership dialogue should:

- be open and supportive of questioning and challenge
- be respectful and inclusive
- build, extend and develop each contribution
- employ analytical and synthesising strategies and techniques
- use regular feedback to confirm mutual comfort with content and process
- focus on the problem, not the person
- assume and reinforce parity of esteem between participants
- promote mutual positive affirmation and reciprocity
- encourage the sharing of anxieties and doubts
- focus on evidence-based review and planning
- be accepting of silence, ambiguity and paradox
- appreciate and celebrate outcomes and processes.

Dialogue is most likely to be a developmental and learning process when these protocols are used to create an appropriate culture, which is then open to a range of stimuli – such as our book!

Whatever topic you choose, whenever you do it, feeling part of a dialogue is always preferable to simply 'following orders'. There is no one way – a simple answer applicable to all schools. Instead, there are many possibilities, which should be considered and discussed as a team. Happy dialogues!

Dave Harris has worked for over 20 years in school leadership, including 12 as a school principal across both primary and secondary phases. During this time, he developed a reputation for innovative thinking and practice. Since retiring from working in schools, he now puts his ideas into practice as managing director of Independent Thinking Ltd.

Leadership Dialogues: Conversations and activities for leadership teams by John West-Burnham and Dave Harris is published by Crown House Publishing, and priced at £24.99.

References

1. West-Burnham, J. and Harris, D. (2014). Leadership Dialogues: Conversations and activities for leadership teams. Bancyfelin, Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing.
2. PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP. (2007). Independent study into school leadership. Department for Education and Skills. London: HMSO.

Knowledge Trails

1. The art of effective teamwork – What makes a high-performing team? How should it be led? Geoff Moss and Elizabeth Floyer look at the defining features of successful work groups in schools.
library.teachingtimes.com/articles/the-art-of-effective-teamwork
2. Questions – the key to unlocking potential – The power of questions cannot be overstated, explain Nick Austin and Richard Churches in the third part of their series on the art of coaching.
library.teachingtimes.com/articles/coaching-teachers-potential