

Challenges Middle Leaders Face in Raising Achievement

The leadership and management transition



teaching**leaders**

In partnership with



Teach**First**



Dear Friends of Teaching Leaders

The last six months have been a pivotal and exciting period for the programme, particularly in terms of demonstrating impact.

As a means to broaden our impact, many of you have urged us to take a more active role in the policy arena, helping to 'surface up' the key issues faced by our middle leaders in raising achievement in complex urban schools. A 'policy up' approach provides an exciting platform from which to more deeply understand and address these issues.

This policy perspective piece is what we hope will be the first of many. We therefore wanted to start-off with a 'helicopter view' of the challenges middle leaders face in their schools, as they seek to raise achievement.

In conducting this study we have interviewed or surveyed over 120 middle leaders, heads and senior leaders, using both quantitative and qualitative analysis. We have surveyed high potential middle leaders on our programme, but believe the findings are universal across middle leadership more broadly.

The consistency of the findings surprised us. Two themes resonated strongly: the challenges in moving from an individual contributor to a leader and manager of others, and the challenge of managing time and resource effectively.

We hope this first perspective piece will inspire not just debate, but also action. Middle leaders really are the engine of achievement in a school. If we can help build and empower their capacity, we have a strong lever to realise the potential of children in our schools.

Thanks again for your support.

Best wishes,
Sharath Jeevan
CEO, Teaching Leaders

Executive Summary

Through our research we have found that the most successful middle leaders are ones who are able to make the leadership and management transition from being a great teacher within their classroom, to satisfying their achievement drive through the success of those they lead in their teams.

Whilst middle leaders are often identified by their performance in the classroom and potential to lead, the middle leadership role requires a different set of leadership and management skills to that of a classroom teacher.

We have identified three key skills which middle leaders find most challenging to develop which we will explore in more detail in this document:

* Stepping up to Leadership

Team-building presents a challenge for middle leaders. Due to the collegial nature of teaching, middle leaders often find moving to a position of authority over colleagues challenging. In addition to taking up authority, setting a vision and inspiring followership are key aspects of their leadership role.

* Managing Team Performance

Whilst middle leaders can establish productive working relationships with their teams with ease, they often struggle and lack confidence in holding others to account.

* Time Management

Middle leaders often find it difficult to balance workload, failing to delegate and prioritise responsibilities effectively.

From our interviews and discussions, we believe there are practical things that schools, policy makers, and of course middle leaders themselves, can do to address the situation and this paper will outline these in concrete recommendations.

A : Introduction

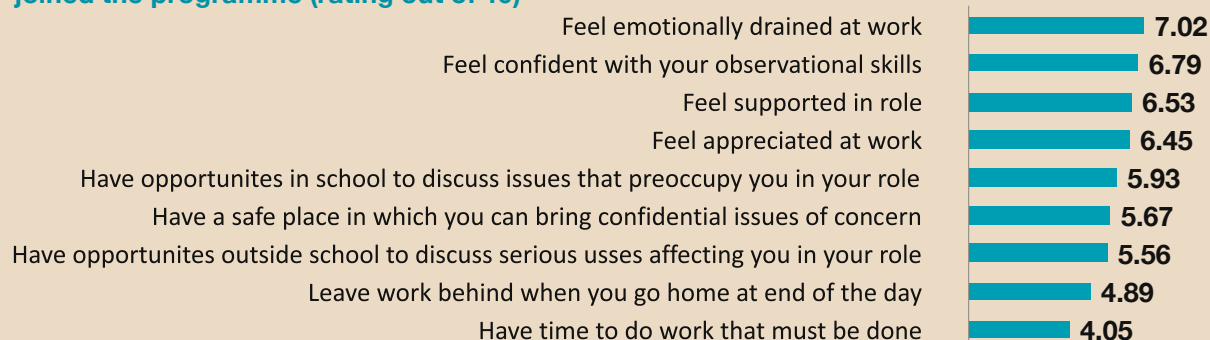
The Transition to Middle Leadership

Middle leaders are often identified on the basis of their performance in the classroom and their potential to lead. They excel in a range of key competencies; they have a strong achievement drive, are highly resilient and demonstrate strong interpersonal skills. Yet, the skills which make them strong teachers do not necessarily equip them to be outstanding middle leaders.

The first six months represent a very steep learning curve for new middle leaders. They need to juggle lots of conflicting priorities: they need to establish themselves in their leadership role with their team, peers, and senior leadership team, understand what is required of them with their new responsibilities, and manage an increased workload. This transition can be very emotionally demanding.

- * 75% of middle leaders stated finding time management a challenge/very big challenge in their first six months as a middle leader.
- * Participants stated that “feeling emotionally drained at work” and “having the time to do the work that must be done” were the two biggest challenges when joining the Teaching Leaders programme (see graph below).

Teaching Leaders data on how participants felt when they first joined the programme (rating out of 10)



New middle leaders have to set a vision for their teams, lead teaching and learning across their area, develop their teams, and establish systems to enable their team to succeed. **Success shifts from being based on what they personally achieve to being based on what they can achieve through their team.** The matrix below highlights the shift in the leadership and management skills required to complete this transition.

Figure 1: The transition of leadership and management skills for middle leadership

	Classroom Teacher	Middle Leader
Management Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing pupils • Managing own time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing performance of team • Delegation • Prioritisation/managing expectations • Managing up
Leadership Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leading pupils • Drive for improvement/sense of moral purpose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leading teachers • Drive for improvement of others • Taking up authority • Setting vision for area of responsibility • Inspiring followership

Becoming an outstanding middle leader requires them to learn, develop and improve these new skills, so they can effectively lead and manage their teams to raise pupil achievement. Through our research, we have identified three key skills which middle leaders find most challenging to develop and which we will focus on in the rest of this paper:

- * 1. Stepping Up to Leadership
- * 2. Managing Team Performance
- * 3. Time Management

B : Challenges

1. Stepping Up to Leadership

The Teaching Leaders Assessment Process screens candidates for leadership potential. Successful participants consistently demonstrate high levels of leadership capacity but, irrespective of capacity, stepping up to leadership remains a major challenge. Teaching Leaders participants record team leadership issues as their number one focus when implementing new initiatives.

The following three main challenges consistently emerge for middle leaders entering a leadership role for the first time, and are essential for establishing a positive working relationship:

* Taking up Authority

Due to the collegial nature of teaching, young middle leaders often find that moving in to a position of authority over colleagues is difficult. They often see themselves as a team representative or advocate - a 'first among equals', rather than assuming authority. This applies both upwards, being assertive with senior management, and downwards where it supports the middle leader's ability to manage performance.

Head of Politics, South London

"In my second year of teaching I was put in charge of setting up and leading a new department. I was responsible for four classroom teachers, all of whom had five years plus teaching experience. Given the experience gap, there was considerable resistance from my team and I found it very difficult to implement teaching and learning strategies for my department. Whatever we agreed in faculty meetings they didn't implement and had clever answers/excuses for why they didn't do what was agreed. I just felt I had no control over my team.

In order to establish myself with my staff, I set out SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-bound) targets for my team which were used to manage their performance in the classroom. There were rigorous monitoring and evaluation strategies including regular lesson observations and feedback sessions to review progress. What was extremely helpful was that in our weekly catch-ups with the team I used the SMART targets as the basis of our discussion which helped get rid of the 'excuse culture' in my team".

* Setting a Vision

Core to taking up authority and gaining the respect of team members is the ability to set a clear strategic vision for the team to follow. Both Teaching Leaders and Future Leaders rate this in the top three most important qualities required to raise achievement within their area of responsibility.

* Inspiring Followership

Finally, once they are established and have their vision, middle leaders need to inspire and motivate their team to buy-in to their vision. Inspiring followership requires high levels of emotional intelligence, the ability to gain trust from team members and the capacity to understand and empathise with the perspective of their team.

Head of History, North London

“As a new Head of an inexperienced faculty in a challenging North London school, I initially identified my staff’s lack of experience and confidence as well as some negative behaviour as the biggest barrier to the progress of the students in the faculty.

Following early monitoring and evaluation, it was identified that few Teaching and Learning strategies were being used and this was having a negative impact on student behaviour. A primary focus on active learning in the classroom was introduced along with a new behaviour system. To support my staff with this focus, I used meeting time to share a set of varied teaching strategies. Members of staff were offered support in using the new strategies in the classroom and given feedback in subsequent meetings. To further support the development of active learning, teachers were paired according to experience and style. Peer observations were carried out and feedback was given in relation to the ‘student experience’ of the lesson. This gave staff a better insight into their own practice as well as its affect on student behaviour”.

2. Managing Team Performance

Middle leaders in complex urban schools are often young and inexperienced. For example, the average length of time in teaching of the 2009 Teaching Leaders cohort is 4.5 years.

This involves two key challenges:

- * The ability to manage team members who have more experience
- * The realisation that they will be judged on the performance of their team and not just themselves

Key to managing this transition is managing the performance of their team. The Teaching Leaders Leadership Competency Framework highlights that middle leaders often struggle with and lack confidence in holding others to account.

While senior leaders are aware that middle leaders must be able to hold others to account, rating it as the third most important competency required for a middle leader, middle leaders do not see this, and rank it eighth out of twelve as the most important competency.

- * One of the areas middle leaders find most challenging is having difficult conversations with their staff. As highlighted in the Teaching Leaders Problem Solving Discussion Groups (PSDGs) team analyses (see graph below), our participants feel happy with the relationships they have with their team, but often do not feel confident in discussing difficult issues and decisions with their team.
- * A point often raised by middle leaders is that whilst teachers receive rigorous training during their first two years as a teacher, when they move up the ladder into a middle leadership role, they often feel that they do not have enough exposure and training in conducting their role, including have those difficult conversations.

Teaching Leaders data on how participants felt about their team when they joined the programme (rating out of 10)



3. Time Management

The resilience and drive for improvement shown by outstanding teachers means they need to learn to cope with heavy teaching loads and managing their own time. A whole new range of leadership and management responsibilities get added to their role on top of classroom teaching, including writing schemes of work, mentoring and developing staff, and dealing with disruptive pupils. These tasks can often differ in importance and priority and there are suddenly more tasks to complete than time available.

Teaching Leaders participants list time management as a serious concern in implementing new initiatives for their Improvement Initiative when they first start the programme. They fall into the classic trap of taking on all the work themselves as this is what has worked in the past. Consequently, they struggle to balance their teaching role with their new leadership and management responsibilities.

There are two key skills which middle leaders need to develop in order to manage their time, and their team's time, effectively:

* Prioritising Workload

Middle leaders need to focus on the core tasks which often involves making trade-offs.

As highlighted by a Head in a North London school:

"Becoming a middle leader, they often cannot spend the same amount of time they used to preparing for a class, otherwise their other responsibilities such as planning Teaching and Learning across their department will suffer and this has a much greater impact in terms of the number of children they can reach".

* Delegating Workload

Middle leaders' drive for improvement means they take on many tasks themselves and pay less attention to enabling success through others. To avoid the workload trap, they need to delegate relevant responsibilities to their staff in order to have the time to carry out the most important tasks as well as providing opportunities for their staff to develop.

C : Recommendations

1. Recommendations for Middle Leaders

* Stepping Up to Leadership

Taking Up Authority

- **If you obtain your middle leadership position internally, signal authority early as you may have to change some established relationships if you have been promoted over your peers.**
- **Do your homework on the context if you are taking up a new role in a new school and make your expectations clear from day one.**
- **You don't have to be everyone's friend, but you do need to earn their respect.**
- **Quietly articulate and assert your accountability role.**

Top Tips

- *In the first month of your role try to find some quality protected time with your team and each individual member, free from the usual departmental business. This will help you establish yourself and get to know them too.*
- *Never underestimate the importance of showing people that you value them as individuals so you can establish yourself.*
- *Set the boundaries and treat everyone fairly.*

Setting a Vision

- **Give time up front to develop a clear vision and strategic plan.**
- **Link vision to school objectives.**
- **Ensure that the vision is stretching but achievable.**

Top Tips

- *Share your vision – not only with your team but also with SLT, ensuring that it reflects the school vision.*
- *Utilise resources such as those produced by the National College for Schools and Children's Services to help you shape vision.*

Inspiring Followership

- **Involve your team in shaping your vision and strategic plan - they will feel included and empowered.**
- **Review the plan with your team on a regular basis.**
- **Celebrate success.**

Top Tips

- *If time and personal commitments permit, try to sometimes meet 'offsite' - choose a relaxed and informal venue such as a cake shop, park, etc.*
- *Going for a few drinks after work is always a cheap and cheerful way to celebrate success!*

* Managing Team Performance

Holding Others to Account

- **Set out SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-bound) targets for your team.**
- **Set up regular meetings to review targets.**

Top Tips

- *Involve team members personally in setting these targets so that they have ownership of them.*
- *Ensure that you have your team SMART targets in front of you at every meeting.*

Challenging Underperformance / Having Difficult Conversations

- **Separate the entitlement to professional development from the performance management process.**
- **Ensure that lesson observations are used throughout the school year and not just as a formal process of performance management.**
- **Create a culture that enables members of the team to be open and direct with each other.**

Top Tips

- *Have regular conversations about professional development needs, including your own, so that you create a climate of continuous improvement.*
- *Have a themed focus for peer reviews – and share outcomes openly and collectively.*
- *You will find it easier to tackle underperformance if you have already set expectations transparently among team members.*
- *If you do have to tackle serious underperformance, make sure that you follow school procedure and are fully supported by SLT.*

* Time Management

Delegation

- **When starting a new role, invest time in getting to know the skills/capabilities of your team.**
- **If you are nervous about delegating responsibility, start gradually and provide them with enough responsibility where you gain their confidence.**

Top Tips

- *Construct Individual Development Plans with your team. This is a great way to assess team members' strengths and development areas.*
- *Make sure everyone in your team, including junior staff, is given responsibility for something, however minor. This sets the tone for distributing leadership.*
- *Ask for team contributions and openly show that you value them.*

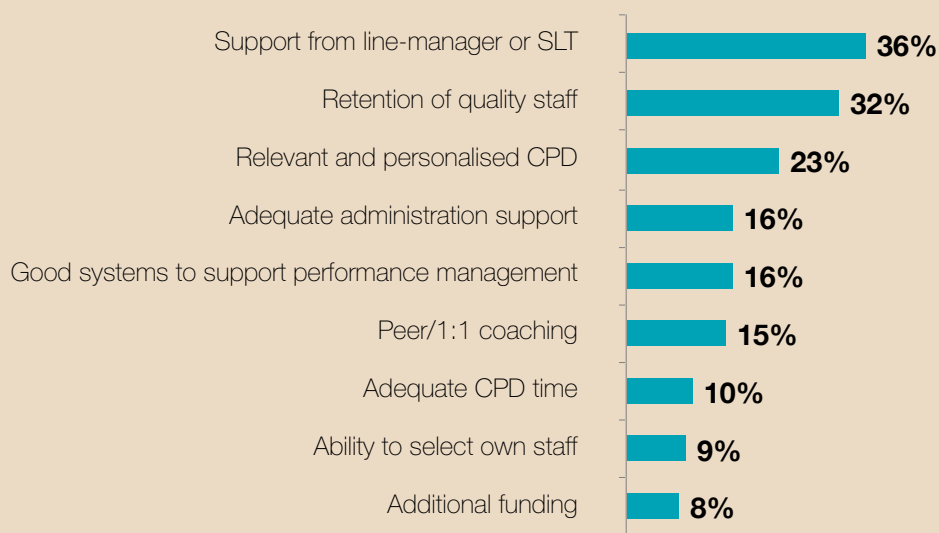
Prioritisation

- **Make realistic assessments about what you can deliver and communicate that clearly to stakeholders.**
- **Assess the trade-offs between different tasks and be selective where applicable.**

Top Tips

- *If you are feeling swamped with work, list out your entire to-do list and have a 1:1 with your line-manager. You may be surprised that your line-manager can help you prioritise and help manage expectations of different stakeholders.*

Percentage of respondents who rated the following factors within their top three most important support mechanisms required for middle leaders



2. Recommendations for Schools

* Put structures in place to strengthen the capacity of middle leaders

- **Have a comprehensive induction process for your new middle leaders.**
- **Hold regular training sessions conducted by SLT on different aspects of the middle leadership role.**

Top tips

- *Provide a school-specific induction process and an entitlement to targeted training for any new middle leaders. Middle leaders should be involved in any needs identification process.*

* Provide individual support for your middle leaders

- **Ensure middle leaders have weekly catch-ups with their line-manager where tasks and issues are discussed.**
- **Provide middle leaders with sufficient coaching and support to help with the emotional demands of the job.**
- **Ensure that every middle leader has an Individual Development Plan.**

Top tips

- *Provide middle leaders with help and flexibility in managing timetable.*
- *Ensure that each middle leader has a designated line-manager who has been trained in coaching techniques.*
- *Use competency frameworks to identify development areas.*

* Set the example

- **It is crucial that SLT/Heads lead by example and hold their middle leaders to account to ensure that they are carrying out their middle leadership responsibilities.**

Top tips

- *Openly demonstrate and illustrate how senior leaders and Heads themselves are held accountable.*

3. Recommendations for Policy Makers

* Addressing the missing middle CPD gap

- Middle leaders suffer from the 'missing middle' syndrome when it comes to CPD entitlement. Whilst NQTs and new Heads are provided with a minimum number of CPD hours/training, middle leaders do not have such an entitlement. As this paper has highlighted, the middle leader role marks a significant transition from being a classroom teacher, and requires learning a different set of leadership and management skills. It is crucial that middle leaders are supported through the management transition with the relevant CPD time.

* Providing personalised CPD on development areas

- Ensure that middle leaders are given the sufficient personal development support to assist them in their role. Areas of strengths and weaknesses could be identified using tools such as the Leadership Competency Framework which is used in our programme to identify the strengths and weaknesses of our participants' leadership and management skills.

* Peer to peer support

- It is important for middle leaders in schools with similar backgrounds to communicate ideas and different practices in conducting their role. Providing a network to allow this to take place between schools can have a significant impact.

Teaching Leaders Recent Developments

- * Our first Cohort of Teaching Leaders continues to achieve a grade higher for their pupils, across their departments or year groups;
 - 30% received enhanced responsibilities in their first year
 - 100% remained within complex urban schools.
- * We have received government funding to double the programme this year.
- * We have also gained strong cross-party support for our work, and even attention from President Obama's administration who are keen to support a similar programme in the US.



We would really welcome your feedback on this piece, and also on future topics or issues we might want to explore through our policy. Please email us your thoughts to policy@teachingleaders.org.uk, or speak to our Policy Manager, Mayhul Gondhea, on 0203 116 0837.

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