

second edition

MASTERING DEPUTY HEADSHIP

Acquiring the Skills for Future Leadership

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Mastering Deputy Headship

and are often viewed with suspicion by colleagues because they lack the usual clues about human interaction.

Most of us are neither so inscrutable nor so transparent. We need to learn to control our non-verbal communication so that we don't send messages that conflict with our words. If we produce frequent conflicts in our audience, then we lose the trust of those around us. The subtlety of body language is quite hard to master, but it operates at a subliminal level and is very important in our daily relations with people. A little time spent 'observing ourselves' (that is, making ourselves more conscious of the messages we are giving) can pay dividends in a management context.

A careful use of body language can be very useful in cementing a feeling of empathy between the deputy and the staff with whom he/she has to deal. The control of body language, combined with effective use of listening skills, can be powerful tools in managing our colleagues.

Understanding the communications network in the school

However well we relate to the people we manage, it is useful to have an understanding of the ways in which – in our specific institution – the communications network operates.

Take a very simple example from ordinary life. We sometimes hear people say something like this: 'I told Mavis (or Mervyn) in strict confidence. That way I knew everyone would find out in 24 hours without my having to tell them!'

The speaker understands that, in their circle of acquaintances, Mavis (or Mervyn) is the one who cannot keep a secret and who will operate the communications structure (probably by telephone or e-mail) to pass on the gossip.

The same basic principle holds true in institutions such as schools. Each school develops both formal and informal communications structures. The informal ones are led by the staffroom Mavises and Mervyns. The formal ones are teams, departments, committees, working parties; they use discussion, oral briefings, papers, minutes, reports or e-mail through which to communicate.

It is useful for a new deputy to begin to map out the various formal and informal communications structures that operate in the school. Often it is helpful to use diagrams to do this (but remember to keep your jottings at home, and well away from those who might access your papers or your computer).

As soon as you begin to do this you will discover that some of these diagrams are more useful than others – that some structures work better. A few examples will suffice. Thus in Figs 5.1 and 5.2 we have two circular communication structures. In Fig. 5.1, communication exists

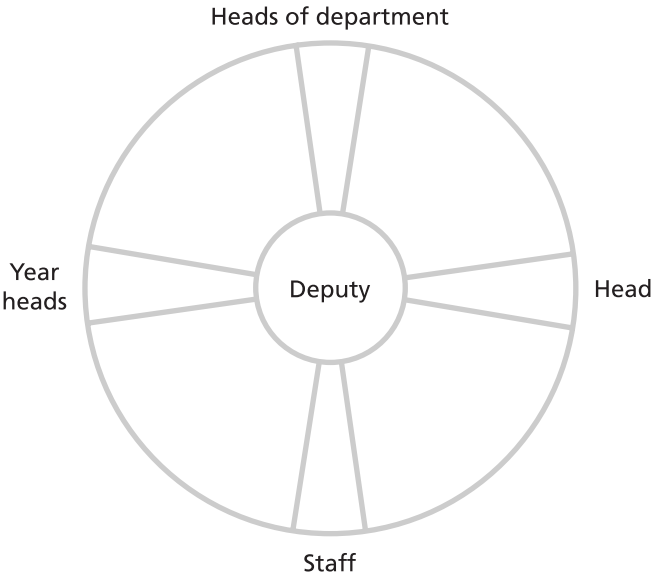


FIG. 5.1 The wheel of communications

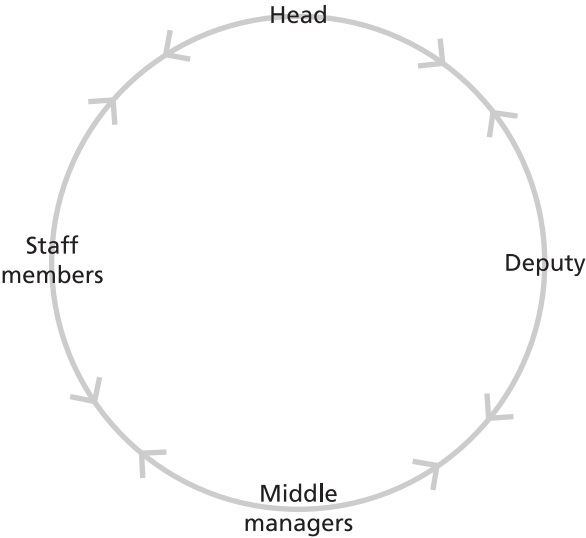


FIG. 5.2 The circle of communications

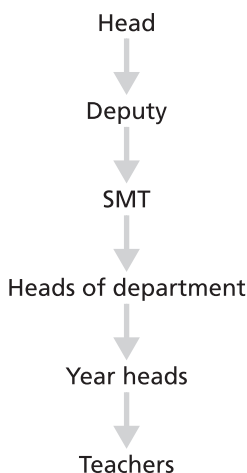


FIG. 5.3 The chain of communications

between the centre (you as the deputy, for example) and each member of staff; but there is no communication between individual staff members. In Fig. 5.2, all staff (including you as deputy) are able to communicate on equal terms. By contrast, in Fig. 5.3 we see a very closed or hierarchical pattern of communication: a literal chain of command.

When you have given this issue of communications structures some thought, try Task 13.

TASK 13

Analysing the value of different communications structures

What communications structures exist in your school?

In each case, identify what is effective and what is ineffective about that structure.

Now work out some more effective structures that you might help to put in place.

What makes your preferred structures better?

How could you begin to implement them?

_____ Conflict _____

However well we try to communicate with others, and however subtle the skills we apply to the business of communicating, conflict remains an inevitability for managers.

Not all conflict is bad: good-tempered conflict that generates sound debate and creative tension can be positively good.

Colleagues who appear mildly abrasive, who can always see the flaws in your suggestions and who think deeply can be mildly disturbing. But if they are also open to good ideas, able to mould their thinking to accommodate them and are prepared to be persuaded, then – properly handled – those colleagues can be outstanding assets. None of us has a total monopoly on either knowledge or wisdom, and people who improve and refine our ideas or spark us off to be (yet more) inventive are worth their weight in gold.

One of the best compliments we have heard paid to a deputy went like this:

When you came I thought you would be like the others. But you were never afraid to listen to my ideas. I was grateful for that, and though we didn't always end up on the same side, I knew you respected my opinions and I respected yours. I've even changed some of my opinions!

But the fundamental conflict for the deputy is well summed up by one of our secondary colleagues:

Teachers will always be looking to see how far you will go to support them. This support is in two basic directions. First, in the classroom or with parents when difficult situations arise. Second, with the head. But make no mistake about it. While you have to do the former to remain credible, as far as the management of the school goes, as a deputy you are no longer a member of staff, you are a manager. There can be no compromise about this.

For secondary deputies, and those in larger primary schools, who probably have a personal space or a shared senior management room into which to retreat, this may be fairly easy to handle. But for deputies in smaller primaries, who are still fundamentally teachers and who share the staffroom with other teaching colleagues and teaching assistants, matters can be a bit more abrasive and difficult to cope with.

One of the key points that we have been at pains to point out in this chapter is that it is not realistic to assume that everyone you manage

wants to be managed or is prepared to co-operate with your management decisions and actions. While in the last resort conflict has to be faced, one of the skills of the good manager is nevertheless the ability to avert it, avoid it, defuse it or use it to more productive ends. So it is on this more optimistic note that the chapter ends, by setting out in Table 5.3 some additional procedures to minimise conflict, whether this is between yourself and some members of staff or between two groups of third parties.

TABLE 5.3 Some procedures to minimise conflict and its effects

- listen to all the arguments
 - list all the arguments – and their pros and cons
 - learn to separate the rational from the emotional
 - separate the issues from the personalities
 - identify who will benefit from any given course of action
 - avoid self-interest
 - expose attempts by others to put self-interest before the good of the school
 - develop the skill of tactfulness
 - if appropriate, look for trade-offs
 - prevent personal attacks by one faction on another
 - seek to discover, and get others to articulate, their real motives for holding a specific view
 - try to avoid ‘militant’ language
 - don’t allow verbal attacks on opponents
 - make it clear that the end product of discussion cannot be just a ‘fudge’
 - draw out shared views and perceptions
 - emphasise areas of agreement
 - don’t delay decisions – delay makes a situation fester, so keep to the agreed timetable
 - concentrate on the goals rather than the means to achieve them
 - use a skilled external agent to reflect back to protagonists the consequences of their positions.
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Perhaps the best piece of advice of all, however, is one that features in Stephen Covey's seminal book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1992). This Covey calls 'think win/win'. He claims it has five elements:

- 1 Identifying the desired results: what has to be done and by when.
- 2 Specifying the parameters: the policies and procedures within which the results have to be accomplished.
- 3 Identifying the resources: human and material, to achieve the results.
- 4 Setting up accountability: saying what standards have to be achieved, and the timescales for achievement.
- 5 Specifying the consequences of not achieving the results.

Without being too simplistic, we can paraphrase this approach as fixing the goals and spelling out the reality that not achieving them will be worse for everyone.

None of the approaches suggested here will work on every occasion; some are easier to pursue than others; the list is not exhaustive. But often you will find that diplomacy will win the day and that your skills in situations involving conflict, or potential conflict, will grow and improve. While this chapter has dealt with verbal and non-verbal communication skills, many of the same principles apply equally to written communication. However, this is a topic that is also revisited in Chapter 9.

_____ Summary _____

Our intention is that, at the end of this chapter, you will have:

- reflected on issues of relationships with other staff
- looked critically at means of effective communication in the school
- improved specific communication skills (listening, non-verbal skills)
- considered some ways in which to deal with conflict situations among staff.