Bill Lowe

Middle Leadership
for 21st Century Schools

From Compliance to Commitment

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Preface

An inspiration for writing this book comes from Robert Greene talking on Tom Bilyeu's *Impact Theory* YouTube channel. Robert speaks of how he coaches and advises some of the most famous, powerful and influential people in the world. They invite him to help them.

He states that: "The number one problem they have is their inability to understand the people they are dealing with." Robert explains how they hire people who are experts in their field – technically brilliant – but who don't understand the basics of the people around them. He argues that the primary skill in life should be "understanding people" (quoted in Bilyeu, 2018).

21st century leadership in schools is in danger of overlooking this primary skill. There are many places where you can find the tools for leadership and management that will make you technically proficient. But there is a lot more to it than that.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to all the people I've worked with over the years. I thank them for the patience they have shown when I've asked them, again and again, for their comments on workplace issues.

I have always believed in the honesty of my colleagues and that there is no better source of information than the people doing the job. I have changed their names when quoting their words in this book. Although some were happy to be named, others were reluctant, and I understand this.

My sincere thanks go to the team at Crown House Publishing for their friendly and professional way of dealing with this publication. Writing this book has been a real learning experience and, in particular, I'd like to thank copy-editors Emma Tuck and Louise Penny for their guidance and patience.

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Introduction

Welcome to leadership

Middle leadership is one of the hardest roles in any workplace. In your early days, you realise that you are now not only responsible for the teaching that goes on in your classroom, but also for other people and the way they teach in their classrooms. Get it right and the positive impact you will have on a lot of young people's learning is difficult to calculate. Get it wrong and the damage done will be all too easy to see.

It soon becomes evident that your leadership role gives you wider influence and responsibility. Now your work is not only centred around your class but also around the colleagues who you lead. As John Maxwell (2013) puts it: "Successful people know what they're good at. Successful leaders know what other people are good at."

It is one of the toughest jobs because middle leadership is usually the first step on the leadership ladder. You will be doing many things for the first time and you will have a lot of eyes on you. Paul Irvine and Mark Brundrett (2016: 86) state, "Those taking on leadership roles in schools require a different skills set to that of the classroom teacher." At middle leader level, you will be adding to your skill set as the demands of your role increase. Learn the leadership fundamentals at this stage and they will hold up through the levels of authority you take on as you make your way up the career ladder. The strategies that you apply as a middle leader will be part of your work in more senior positions, so it makes sense to have a strong understanding from the outset. If you give yourself some solid foundations, the rest of your leadership career will be easier to build.

Why do it?

Billions of words have been written and spoken about leadership, but, in particular, those of Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter (2013) from Harvard University Business School stand out. "What are you working on today?" she was asked by a colleague one morning.

She replied that she was trying to: "Provide other people with the tools for making the world a better place, by giving them leadership skills."

I can't think of a better reason for going into leadership.

Why did I write this book?

I believe that if you are not shown the right way to teach a subject, you will teach it in the same way that you were taught it. As a student teacher, I had no instruction in how to teach art. So when I then had to teach the subject to a class of 8-year-olds, my lessons were very similar to the ones I experienced when I was that age. My concern is that if any of those 8-year-olds then went on to train as teachers in adulthood, and had no training in art teaching, they would teach art as I had taught it to them. In effect, the same teaching I'd had decades ago.

I see no difference with leadership. This is recognised by Paul Irvine and Mark Brundrett (2016), who suggest that a lot of teachers who take on middle leadership roles don't have the right training to start with and then lack a reasonable level of development support. If you do not have any guidance or understanding of what makes a good leader, then you will simply lead in the way that you have been led. This isn't to say that you haven't had great leaders, or lack the ability to emulate their practice to great effect, but what if the leadership you have had was not that effective? What if it was outdated? And what about having a strong understanding of the theories so that you can adapt them by stamping your own personality?

Simon Sinek (2016) talks about how a lot of current business leadership practice is based on the world as it was in the late 1980s and 1990s. It is now out of date, but people still persist. It is the same in some of our schools: a lot of leadership delivery does not fit the new way of doing things. We need to be aware that school structures have changed. Funding streams and accountability levels are unrecognisable in some instances – for example, the increase in delegated leadership across several schools. This might have been caused by budgetary influences or a politically motivated reorganisation of groupings of schools, but there are far fewer schools working in isolation than there were a decade ago. The growth of this "system leadership" model continues at quite a pace.

As we move deeper into the 21st century, I think that the *how* of leadership will become more of an area for development than the *what*. In the same way that Sinek argues that people are more important than money (treat the former well and the latter will follow), I see schools having to understand that people come first and test results second. Treat your colleagues well and lead them with compassion and empathy, and the exam results will follow.

In my travels, I've noticed the start of a swing away from particular strategies that have had a demonstrable impact on workload. Things that were deemed to be "best practice" last year are now seen as undesirable by some; but not everyone. This is why *how* we lead is so important. Strategies for how to lead can be applied to any model. The

message is clear: leadership at all levels needs to move forward to accommodate the how. It is my hope that this book will help to address this need.

The book will introduce you to a range of useful strategies and the thinking that underpins them. Well-established leadership and management ideas are identified, alongside powerful strategies that work in the modern education world. References are made to some influential leadership experts, but this book goes beyond that. Importantly, it uses your own experiences of being a leader and being led to illustrate key points so that the theories can be seen in practice.

My aim is to get past the "what" of leadership in order to look at the details of the "how". Most schools have a hierarchy: some are less tiered and less formal than others, but nonetheless, you'll still be part of an authority ranking system. It took me a while to come up with titles for people within this framework. I don't feel particularly comfortable with individuals who are too full of their own self-importance. This has always made it difficult for me to think of a term for those who are beneath me in the hierarchy. "Subordinates" sounds like you think of these people as lesser humans than you. "Followers" makes it sound like some kind of cult, or as if you like to be defined by the size of your Twitter audience. These people are colleagues who you have been empowered to lead, so we'll call them "led colleagues" or "colleagues who you lead".

An important aspect of the book is its consideration of leadership training. We need to think about the differences in approaches.

- **Transmission leadership training:** the provision of training around techniques and procedures that need to be mastered.
- **Development learning leadership training:** leadership development should identify and understand the tensions and difficulties that are encountered as everyday work is carried out.

In *Collaborative School Leadership,* Philip Woods and Amanda Roberts (2018) argue effectively that a development learning approach to leadership is important. This does not reject the traditional transmission approach but helps to build on it.

This idea is backed up by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL). On their website, they refer to the 70-20-10 rule of leadership training and development: 70% is learning on the job, but that needs to include some challenging projects, 20% is learning from other people and 10% is learning from training courses.[1] CCL believes that the 10% category will support, clarify and boost the remaining 90%. They are keen to point out

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1 See https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/70-20-10-rule/.

that experiential practice needs to be built into any leadership training course. That way, we help leaders to not just perform better in their role but to be better learners as well. They call it the "amplifier effect".

The act of reflecting on practice and experience is built into this book. I want you to consider how things have been for you as a leader and as someone who is being led by senior colleagues. Being "on the receiving end", as it were, is a powerful learning experience. There are chances for you to reflect on things that you have seen, been subjected to and experienced first-hand. These are the *current experience reflection* activities. These are in bullet lists or table form. It is important to give yourself time to think about how things look in your present job. You will also have opportunities to think about how you might have done things differently and how you will approach things in the future. These are the *honest reflection* boxes. You might want to use a notebook so you can copy and complete the tables and honest reflection questions as you go along. Indeed, I hope that you will fully exploit these activities by starting a reflection journal of your own, the basis of which can be the tasks that we'll work through in this book. Doing this will let you develop your thoughts in a structure that suits you. You will not be constrained by a rigid, tick-box layout. Use it as a working document to take with you on your voyage through leadership. Think about a digital approach which would allow you to include audio/video files of chats with colleagues and evidence of your achievements.

The book hasn't been written to a formula, so don't expect the same number of reflection activities in each chapter. They have been included where they occur naturally, not forced. Consider revisiting the activities at different points in the future. This will give you the opportunity to reflect on how your understanding of your role is developing. It can be very enlightening to look back at opinions and beliefs that you used to have and see if experience has changed you in any way. Keeping a journal works for a lot of us. When I look back at my first months of headship, I wonder how I managed to last more than a term!

To get the most from the reflective activities, endeavour to ask other people about their perspectives. For this you'll need a critical friend and a developing network of leaders who you can contact. This approach is becoming established in modern leadership training. Mihnea Moldoveanu and Das Narayandas (2019) suggest that traditional leadership development strategies are not addressing the issues that leaders and their organisations face. Amongst the reasons they put forward for this are:

■ Trainers not offering development in the soft skills required to be an effective leader.

■ It is hard to apply "classroom learning" to the real world.

The rapid development of digital communication means that you don't have to rely on face-to-face discussions. You can develop your own personal learning cloud (PLC) and learn from both colleagues who you lead and other leaders. As Moldoveanu and Narayandas illustrate, this vehicle for leadership development is personal, social and entirely contextual. Reid Hoffman et al. (2019) add weight to this by saying that we should "Learn from people, not classes". They see the PLC as a way of keeping pace with changes and trends in an affordable way that avoids disruption. You can use this book to start this learning strategy. Try sharing your experiences and thoughts, prompted by this book, with experienced peers and more senior leaders through communication platforms like Zoom, Skype or FaceTime. You can take this further by using PLC tools such as Rackspace and KloudLearn. Productivity apps like Ayoa can be used for this as well.

Another aim of this book is to encourage you to think about how you'd approach certain issues at a middle management level, and how you'd change your practice if approaching them at a more senior level. This will give you experience which will be helpful if you become a senior leader. Dealing with conflict is a good example of this. Along with giving you techniques and procedures, I hope to uncover the possible tensions and difficulties that you might encounter. Being aware of these should help you to think about how problems can be turned around into leadership successes.

Leadership training should be an entitlement, but in the UK alone there are several different models and routes, which can confuse matters. For example, whilst in England (with its now non-mandatory National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH)) things are becoming more fragmented, with a lot of different providers looking to recruit candidates onto their courses, in Scotland they have an Into Headship qualification that will be mandatory for new head teachers from 2020.[2] Northern Ireland appears to be following the Scottish model. In Wales, one of the National Academy for Educational Leadership's objectives for 2018–2021 is to 'contribute to the reform and refocussing of the NPQH programme'.[3]

What this book is not intended to do is to give detailed advice on things like how to run a budget, write a whole-school policy or plan a subject-specific scheme of work. These are about the what, not the how. There are excellent resources that you can use for advice, and I can't think of a school that hasn't got its own documents in place.

Whilst writing this book, I was often concerned about including advice that seems too basic and perhaps patronising. However, having spoken with several teachers who are new to middle leadership, it became apparent that a lot of them had not had any

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2 See https://www.scelscotland.org.uk/what-we-offer/into-headship/.
3 See http://nael.cymru/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/national-academy-for-educational-leadership-remit-letter-2018-2021.pdf.

leadership training. They were learning from day-to-day experience and making a lot of things up as they went along. They were low on confidence and, in some cases, this was exploited by colleagues. Therefore, if you think I'm occasionally stating the blindingly obvious, forgive me and appreciate that there will be some readers who will find it useful.

Those involved in leadership training agree that training should be ongoing. I hope that you use this book as a developmental tool at different stages of your leadership career.

What is middle leadership?

Schools can call the different positions in their hierarchies anything they like. Generally, you find senior leadership teams (SLTs) made up of deputy and assistant head teachers who report to the head teacher or principal. Anything below that is seen as middle leadership. This isn't like the definition and role of middle leaders in the corporate world, where middle leaders can be national sales managers or senior marketing executives. They might even be directors or vice-presidents. In some sectors, middle leaders can be very senior.

Basically, if you have someone else above and below you in the hierarchy, you are a middle leader. It is logical. In schools, the middle leadership layer tends to be comprised of subject leaders, heads of department and phase leaders. In some schools, key stage leaders can fall into this category, whilst in others they are part of the SLT. It is a very fluid picture.

Is it seen as an important role?

As a profession, we are good at being modest. "I'm only a class teacher" is something you'll hear a lot. It is the same with middle leaders. You are not "only a middle leader". You play an important role in the school. People with outside influence certainly know the vital part that middle leaders play.

I read in a 2018 Ofsted school inspection report that although the middle leaders in the school were being held to account by their senior leaders, they were not impacting on their own led colleagues. The school was judged as requiring improvement, suggesting that Ofsted, for one, recognise the significance of the position.

The challenges of middle leadership

As you work through this book, it is worth considering that the same types of challenge can affect the SLT layer all too often. Being aware of these issues now will help you to address them at a more senior level, as you will be prepared.

Middle leaders in 21st century schools have to be promoters and defenders of their subject or phase team. Examples of this could be fighting for your subject's timetable allocation, the rooms that your colleagues are given to teach in or your allocation of teaching assistants (TAs). In my experience, it is often the leaders of non-core subjects who have a fight on their hands with these issues. At the same time, the middle leader should be responsible for reporting their team members' concerns to senior leaders in a way that represents how the team feels.

People in this position have to lead colleagues to perform at a high level both in the classroom and outside of it. Monitoring team members' performance is a middle leader's responsibility and the outcomes of this also come into the remit. Who needs support and training? Who needs to be encouraged to take a leading role? What are the possible repercussions if we get it wrong? By asking these questions, a middle leader is looking for ways to develop the team. Improving your team's impact is a fundamental part of the job.

More often than not, middle leaders have to apply ways of working imposed by the SLT. We will see in later chapters how middle leaders can be caught between different factions, each with their own expectations. Middle leaders often have to deliver a message that might not be theirs, yet they will be in the firing line. They can be pushed and pulled in all directions.

You must be clear in your mind from the start: you will not be able to please everyone all the time. As newspaperman Herbert Bayard Swope reportedly observed: "I cannot give you the formula for success, but I can give you the formula for failure, which is: Try to please everybody."[4] Once you accept that, things will be easier. However, you must make sure that you know where your loyalties lie. This requires a good deal of self-awareness and the ability to stick to what you believe. We like to teach our students about resilience: you need to have it in large quantities.

Above all, buy into the learning development model – by which I mean, learn from your experiences and keep a record of what you do.

I wish you the very best of luck.

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4 Quoted at: https://spartacus-educational.com/USAswope.htm.

Leadership and Management: Some Definitions

People want to know what accounts for good leadership and how to become good leaders. Despite this strong interest in leadership, there are very few books that clearly describe the complexities of practicing leadership.

Peter Northouse (2015)

By the end of this chapter, you will have a clear idea of the general differences between leadership and management, as well as an appreciation of why you need to have both sets of skills. There are many books and training courses on leadership styles in existence. Here is not the place to spend too much time on these theories, but I hope this chapter will encourage you to find out more.

Some schools have SLTs whilst others have senior management teams (SMTs). Is there any difference? Probably not. In school, we are not as likely to have managers and leaders in two distinct groups, as they might be in the corporate world. Yes, we have business managers and timetable managers but, in general, middle leaders need to be both leader and manager at the same time. Think of leadership and management as two different sets of *skills*. Whether you are called a middle leader or a middle manager, you will need to have both leadership skills and management skills.

The differences between leadership and management

It is very common for individuals to be better at one skill set than the other. As we look at the characteristics of both, perhaps you will be able to identify yourself as having stronger elements in one area. Are you more of a leader or more of a manager? Perhaps you have a good balance of each.

In general terms:

- *Leadership* is about having an idea of what you want and how to get it. You know what you want to achieve and come up with new ideas about how to get there.

Good leaders are often innovators. You need people like this in order to move the school forward.

■ *Management* is about the processes, structures and procedures that are needed to make things happen.

Those of us who are more management-oriented tend to like a process that is stable and will produce quick results. Strong managers will put monitoring and evaluation time-tables in place with meetings and feedback sessions arranged at suitable intervals.

It is clear to see that if you are fortunate enough to have both sets of skills, you will be a very effective head of department or key stage.

Although this is only a brief introduction to the differences, how do you see yourself?

Current experience reflection activity	
	Examples of why
I am a more natural leader.	
I am a more natural manager.	

What do they look like?

It is important to have a clear understanding of whether you need to be in leadership mode or management mode for a particular task. From the outset, identify your strengths and weaknesses, and ask to have these added to your performance management develop-ment plan. A common criticism of new leaders is their lack of self-awareness. I recognise this. As a new head of department, I was keen to publish timetables and provide clear structures, rules and regulations relating to my subject area. All I was doing was man-aging what was already in place. There was no vision or plan for developing my area. In fact, no leadership. Avoid my early mistakes.

Leadership fundamentals

■ **Tell colleagues where they are heading:**
Identify the vision – decide what you want to achieve.

The position of middle leader is one of the most challenging in any workplace.

But knowing how to lead a team effectively will ensure that you, as a middle leader, have the greatest possible impact both on your team and on school improvement.

In *Middle Leadership for 21st Century Schools*, Bill Lowe expertly combines the latest educational leadership research with anecdotal reports about a range of real-life school experiences, giving you the insights to help you establish yourself and strengthen your influence in the role. He shares impactful advice on boosting productivity – both your own and your team's – and offers guidance on how to succeed through people-focused leadership, rather than by using data as a weapon.

Covering a range of issues – from dealing with conflict and difficult conversations to building and maintaining your professional image – this book reveals the "how" of leadership when applied to the day-to-day demands of the school setting.

Suitable for both established and aspiring middle leaders in primary and secondary schools.

Quite simply, *Middle Leadership for 21st Century Schools* is a vital resource for all who aspire to lead and for all who do lead.

Mark Chidler, PGCE Course Coordinator, Newman University, Birmingham

A very insightful and enlightening book – I highly recommend it to all aspiring and practising middle leaders in education.

Jenny Wilkinson, teacher and middle leader, Church of the Ascension Primary School

Occasionally, one reads a book that can make a profound difference to the success of an individual or organisation. *Middle Leadership for 21st Century Schools* is such a book.

Chris Griffiths, CEO, OpenGenius Ltd, innovation expert and bestselling co-author of *The Creative Thinking Handbook*

Middle Leadership for 21st Century Schools will be very useful for middle leaders looking to research leadership further, whilst the references to further reading will also be invaluable to the aspiring MA student of leadership.

Caroline Bentley-Davies, middle leadership expert and author of *How to Be an Amazing Middle Leader*

Bill Lowe started his working life as a secondary school history and PE teacher, before moving into a primary setting and progressing to headship. From there he went into higher education as a senior lecturer at Newman University, Birmingham, and now works as a leadership and learning consultant and writer – a role in which his 20 years of leadership experience are put to good use.