

Effective management and deployment of support staff

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Effective management of support staff depends on a set of basic systems being in place. Ruth Bradbury looks at how to build teams, define roles and establish effective performance management

In most schools, the role of the business manager includes responsibility for the management of a wide range of support staff. Since the advent of workforce remodelling, however, support staff teams have grown at a rapid rate, sometimes even equalling or exceeding teaching staff numbers. Accompanying the growth in numbers has come a significant increase in the range and variety of roles: whereas 10 years ago school support staff would probably have consisted of the office/admin function, the caretaker and a few technicians, the team could now include roles such as data managers, learning mentors, cover supervisors and network managers, to name but a few.

Unless it is planned and managed appropriately, this rapid increase in numbers and roles could easily result in a vague and chaotic structure (or lack of it) where reporting lines are blurred and where staff are not appropriately managed or supported. Schools can be notoriously complex anyway in this respect – after all, there aren't many organisations where you can line manage a person in one aspect of your role and be line managed by them in another. In addition, while teachers do, of course, belong to departmental teams, a lot of their day-to-day work takes place in isolation from other staff and they are used to being independent and self-managing to a large degree.

In comparison support staff, especially those recruited from outside of the education sector, may expect and require more guidance and support than headteachers and other senior leaders realise.

In this article, then, I will offer some suggestions and practical guidance for what I regard as the basic elements which need to be in place to ensure effective support staff management in a modern school. While this article inevitably focuses on my experience of secondary education, there is no doubt that many of its guiding principles could be scaled down and translated to be relevant in a primary setting.

Ensure an effective staffing and management structure

While departmental and pastoral structures for teaching staff are fully embedded into school life, the same cannot always be said for support staff. In the 'old' days, it was reasonable to expect the business manager to act as line manager for a relatively small group of staff. With the increase in and development of support staff roles, however, it is neither reasonable nor effective to expect that situation to continue.

As support staff roles within school develop, then, it is advisable to establish a team-based structure which divides support staff into coherent groups and allows for a middle management layer to oversee those groups. The job titles for this layer of staff will vary between schools, but it would make sense to clarify that there is a management element to the role – eg team leader or manager. The general underpinning principle would be that all members of support staff within the school would be within one of these teams, and that their main line manager would be the person who heads up that team, and who would themselves report to the business manager.

It is worth noting that 'secondary' line management input is often needed from deputy headteachers in relation to the support teams which overlap with their own areas of responsibilities on the teaching side. This is also likely to be the case with other teaching managers – eg heads of department/faculty for faculty support assistants, or heads of year in relation to pastoral managers. It is, of course, completely right that these school leaders should have a significant influence on the work done by these teams. Nevertheless, unless teaching staff are willing to take on full management responsibility for support staff (as is sometimes the case with special educational needs, for example), I would suggest that it is important that overall line management for them remains within a separate structure.

Define expectations of middle management

Establishing an effective structure is, of course, less than half the battle when considering the effective deployment of support staff. The key to whether or not the system is successful will lie in the performance and suitability of those staff who take on the middle management roles, and it is therefore vitally important that they are, firstly, clear on the purpose and nature of their roles, and – secondly – equipped to perform them. To allow this to happen, I would suggest the following.

Appoint the right people

The skills required for management can be very different from those required for day-to-day operational work, and you need to ensure that the people you place in management roles are equal to what will be required of them. Whether or not individuals possess these qualities is best determined through specific questions at the application or interview stage. There are many reasons for appointing internally where possible: it gives you the opportunities to develop your own staff; contributes to stability, and the financial implications are more favourable. Nevertheless, I would recommend that even if there is only one suitable internal candidate for the role, that you go through a formal recruitment process. I would also recommend that if a candidate is not suitable for the role then you are prepared not to appoint for the time being rather than have somebody in post who you do not believe will meet expectations.

Use job descriptions

The job descriptions for your middle managers are your opportunity to ensure that you spell out exactly what you require them to do and what makes the role a leadership one. Management-only roles are a luxury that the vast majority of schools can ill afford, certainly at this level, and any team leader will therefore almost certainly have a number of day-to-day operational duties. In addition to these, the job description should also specify particular management responsibilities.

Build a management team

As support staff responsibilities grow within schools, so their impact upon the smooth day-to-day running of the organisation grows with it. Many aspects of school life now involve the coordination of more than one of the support staff areas: examinations, for example, would involve both the premises and curriculum support teams, and events such as the annual open evening or equivalent are likely to involve members from all teams. In order for the support staff functions to run effectively in a school, then, it is important that the leaders of each team are themselves able to work together as a team under your leadership. It is, therefore, the role of the business/ resources manager to develop the group of middle leaders into a group who meet and communicate regularly. I would suggest meeting each week as a group with an agenda covering some or all of the following:

- **Team brief** – key information about the school, including operational updates (staffing changes; premises developments, etc) and any significant information on developments across the school, including learning and teaching – eg examination results; introduction of new rewards system; financial position, etc.
- **Team update** – five minutes for each team leader/manager to feed back to the group on their current workload, staffing and other key issues. This can be very useful in encouraging inter-team understanding and sparking off discussions about sharing resources.
- **Diary check** – a look at the school diary for the next few weeks to ensure that all events are coordinated appropriately between teams.
- **Discussion / development item(s)** – this is where you and your team get the chance to set the agenda for developing support staff services. While you may need to suggest agenda items initially, it is important that you encourage your team leaders to bring ideas and suggestions to the table. This will not only enrich the range and relevance of topics discussed, but will also encourage them to take ownership of the development process.

Training

Especially if your team leaders come from within the ranks of school support staff, it is unlikely that they will come to the job with all of the skills required for the management role required of them. One way to approach this would be to spend some time with each team leader to ascertain their priority areas for development, and then to come up with an individual development plan which combines on-the-job training with study for formal qualifications if required.

Your local authority may well offer its own middle leadership training for school support staff. Alternatively, you may be interested in looking at the courses offered by the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) which are offered in many local FE colleges and which range from Level 2 to Level 7. They also offer training in coaching and mentoring which may help you (or other appropriate leaders within your school) to provide the most effective on-the-job support. More information about ILM courses and providers can be found [here](#).

Before signing up to any external training, however, I would recommend that you contact a skills broker from the **Learning and Skills Council's Train to Gain initiative**. They will visit you and help you assess training needs, and may be able to provide up to 50% funding for management or team leadership training.

Clarify roles and responsibilities of all staff

Once you have established clear line management structures, you and your team leaders will need to ensure that all staff within the structure are clear about their own roles and what is required of them. The chief tool in achieving this is the job description, which is a formal expression of the requirements of each role. To be most effective, job descriptions should:

- State, in no more than a sentence or two, the overall purpose of the role, making sure that the link is clear between the post and how it supports the core business of learning and teaching. For example, the purpose of the role of school caretaker could be *to maintain a safe, appropriate and welcoming learning environment for students and staff, and, for a cover supervisor, to support student learning by supervising classes in the event of teacher absence.*
- State the grade and hours of the role.
- Give details of the full-time equivalent annual salary and the pro-rata annual salary if it is a part-time or part-year post. It is important that this information is crystal clear as term-time only posts pay significantly less than the advertised full time equivalent salary.
- State the key relationships relating to the role – ie who will be their main line manager; who else may direct their work; who (if anyone) they will themselves be line managing, and who they may be required to work closely with.
- Outline the key tasks involved in the role, including time frames where appropriate.
- Include a 'catch all' statement allowing for additional tasks as required – eg *'any other appropriate duties as directed by school leadership'*.
- Be agreed with the post-holder, who should then sign a copy to be kept on their personnel file, and should also be provided with a copy for their own records.
- Be reviewed and updated regularly to ensure that they still accurately reflect the role.

In addition to these aspects, you may wish to consider including:

- Details of 'understudy' duties to be performed in the case of staff absence. This is particularly important when considering key roles such as attendance monitoring or covering main reception.
- A sentence relating to out-of-hours working, especially for roles – such as events management or pastoral support – where it is likely to be required. A sample wording could be *'from time to time, the postholder will be required to vary their working hours to fit in with the school calendar. This will be directed by school management and advance notice will be provided.'*

Due to the ongoing national pay and grading review, many local authorities have produced standard job descriptions designed to cover a range of roles within schools. While these may be appropriate for some standard roles (receptionists, teaching assistants, etc) it is likely that the majority will need some modification before they suit your school.

If job descriptions in your school have not been updated for some time, or if you are implementing a new staffing structure and anticipate changes to roles, then this can present an ideal opportunity for comprehensively reviewing the distribution of duties between staff. Because of the historically low levels of support staffing in schools and the seasonal nature of some aspects of the business (exams administration, for example, or events management), it is likely that there will be a number of staff in 'bitty' roles that have developed over the years and that, if analysed objectively, may not follow much logic or be the most effective use of staffing resources.

Provided that you have the time, the energy and the support of your headteacher, it could well be worth unpicking elements of many support staff roles and re-stitching them to follow a more logical pattern. If you decide to do this, then there are two main guiding principles to bear in mind:

- Firstly, wherever possible the various aspects of a role should complement one another in a coherent whole.

- Secondly, you should ensure that the duties performed by one individual are of a similar level of responsibility to one another wherever possible.

Of course, if you do decide to go down this route, then you should pay sufficient regard to the personnel issues that will inevitably arise as a consequence. Many staff dislike and distrust change, and this is more likely to be the case with staff who have been in post for a long time – and who are precisely the staff who are most likely to have developed the most illogical and incoherent roles over the years. This is not a reason not to review roles and responsibilities – the more support staffing develops and grows, and the more professional schools become in their approach, the more necessary and ultimately unavoidable this will become. Nevertheless, it is a reason to ensure that you treat staff with sensitivity, that you listen to – and where possible alleviate – their concerns, and that you may sometimes decide to run with the occasional anomaly rather than alienate a valued employee. Your middle management team will have a clear role here, and indeed in the reviewing and development of job descriptions within their teams.

Establish effective performance management

With appropriate structures and line management in place, and with team leaders on course to acquire the skills they need to do the job effectively, you will be in a position to review your support staff performance management system to ensure that it is up to date and that it best serves the purposes of the school. A comprehensive description of an effective performance management system would be a whole article in itself and I cannot do it justice here.

A final point which cannot be stressed enough in relation to performance management is that the process is intended as a developmental one, not for highlighting individual staff weaknesses. If you have particular significant performance issues with a member of staff then it is vital that you address it when it arises – waiting several weeks or months for a performance review means that a) the staff member concerned may continue to perform poorly and be unaware that they are doing so, which is not fair on them or the school, and b) that the performance management review process becomes an unpleasant and negative experience when it is intended as precisely the opposite.

Management systems are not the whole story

There is clearly far more to the successful management of support staff than simply implementing structures and processes, and I hope to offer more guidance on this subject in future articles. However, I believe that the structures and processes introduced above are the essential first building blocks for an effective and responsive school support staff equipped to serve the needs of your school and its students.

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