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Headteacher Performance Management: an investigation of the role of the External Adviser

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Abstract

The performance management scheme that has been operating in English schools since 2000 gives considerable responsibilities to the school's governing body. These include responsibility for the appraisal of the headteacher's overall performance as a school leader and manager. Governing bodies are assisted in this task by government appointed external advisers. Drawing on research, this article outlines the role of the external adviser in headteacher appraisal and what we know about how it is working in practice. Some of the key issues are explored and questions raised for further research. External Advisers were very clear that their primary role was as advisers and supporters to the governors but they also put considerable emphasis on the support that they provided for headteachers. They understood, however, that the ultimate responsibility for the performance management of the head lay with the governing body. They also saw themselves as counsellors, facilitators, mentors, honest brokers, coaches and governor trainers. The key to their role was the fact that they *were* outsiders, with no axe to grind and with no connection to either the LEA or to the national inspection agency (Ofsted).

Headteacher Performance Management: an investigation of the role of the External Adviser

Introduction

The role of the External Adviser (EA) in the performance management of headteachers is a relatively new phenomenon. In England since 2000 all state schools have been implementing a performance management (PM) scheme which gives considerable responsibilities to the school's governing body (DfEE, 2000). This includes responsibility for the appraisal of the headteacher's overall performance as a school leader and manager. Governing bodies are assisted in this task by government appointed External Advisers. The role of the External Adviser is to offer support for the governing body or more correctly, the two or three 'appointed' governors. The introduction of EAs was a radical departure from previous arrangements for headteacher appraisal. Governing bodies were to have a key role – indeed it could be argued this was an extension of their earlier role which was to agree targets or objectives with the head and to make pay decisions based on the successful setting (but not necessarily meeting) of these (Creese and Earley, 1999). Under the new PM scheme the government contracted the private sector to undertake the arrangements for its introduction. The training and accreditation of External Advisers was undertaken by the Council for British Teachers (CfBT), commencing in the summer of 2000, whilst the implementation and management of the scheme was to be the responsibility of Cambridge Education Associates (CEA). An External Adviser is 'an accredited expert who must advise and support the governing body on reviewing the head's performance. Every school is entitled to an adviser for the equivalent of a day during the review cycle' (DfES, 2003, p11).

The initial response of governors and headteachers to the new system was one of concern and uncertainty. For example, Kerry and Warbrick (2003) – a primary head and a chair of governors - set out very clearly their initial concerns about the process. They were not alone. The initial apprehensions on the part of governors stemmed sometimes from lack of experience, from not being closely involved in the work of the school or from a not unnatural concern about lay governors making an assessment of a *professional* educator. However, as we later report, *all* of the EAs interviewed stated that although there had been some suspicion and defensiveness in the first year of the system's operation, the overwhelming majority of heads and governors now responded very positively to the process because they recognised its value to themselves and to their schools. In many cases it had helped to empower the governors. As Jennings and Lomas (2003) found in their survey of headteachers in Kent (SE England), it had brought governors and heads closer together and enhanced mutual respect and understanding. They reported that 47 per cent of their sample of secondary headteachers felt that the role of the EA in setting headteachers' performance objectives was quite important.

Drawing on recent research, this article outlines the role of the External Adviser in the process of headteacher appraisal and what we know about how the process is working in practice. It looks at the benefits and challenges inherent in the role of the External Adviser to the school's governors. Some key issues are raised and the central question of whether it is leading to better led and managed schools is considered.

Who are the EAs?

> *An independent professional mentor with no axe to grind with whom the head could be completely honest.*

What then do we know about External Advisers – who are they, what do they do and how many school governing bodies do they advise each year? The statistical information in Table 1 has been provided by CEA[1].

Table 1: External Adviser Programme in England: 2000-2004

1. Number of accredited external advisers

Number of advisers trained and accredited for Round 1 (2000-2001)	**2,270**
Additional advisers trained and accredited for Round 2 (2001-2002)	**315**
Additional advisers trained and accredited for Round 3 (2002-2003)	**197**
Additional advisers trained and accredited for Round 4 (2003-2004)	**384**
TOTAL number of accredited external advisers as at January 2004	**3,166**

2. External advisers for round 4 (2003-04)

Number of advisers briefed for deployment in Round 4 (2003-2004)	**2,461**
…of whom:	
Male	**1502** *(61%)*
Female	**959** *(39%)*
Currently serving headteacher	**979** *(40%)*
Previous headship experience	**713** *(29%)*
Non-education background	*Not known*
Phase experience: NURSERY	**345** *(14%)*
Phase experience: PRIMARY	**1,989** *(81%)*
Phase experience: SECONDARY	**1,052** *(43%)*
Phase experience: SPECIAL	**398** *(16%)*

3. Visits undertaken in round 3 (2002-03)

Number of advisers active in Round 3 (2002-2003)	**2,100**
Number of visits conducted in Round 3 (2002-2003)	**21,481**
MEAN number of visits per adviser	**10.2**
MODE (i.e. most frequently occurring number of visits)	**4**
RANGE of visit numbers:	
MINIMUM number of visits per active adviser	**1**
MAXIMUM number of visits per active adviser	**95**
Breakdown of range: Number of advisers conducting…	
1-5 visits	**844**
6-10 visits	**589**
11-20 visits	**417**
21-30 visits	**149**
31-50 visits	**74**
51 visits or more	**27**

4. Repeat visits in rounds 1-3 (2000-03)

Of **22,912** schools currently believed to qualify for an external adviser visit:

Number of schools visited by the same adviser in R1, R2 AND R3	**12,613**
*Number of schools visited by the same adviser in R1 and R2	**3,185**
*Number of schools visited by the same adviser in R2 and R3	**3,735**
*Number of schools visited by the same adviser in R1 and R3	**438**
*TOTAL No. of schools visited by the same adviser in any two of R1-3	**7,358**

** excluding schools visited by the same adviser in all three rounds*

Therefore:

- **19,971** (87.2%) chose to have at least one repeat visit during the period

- **2,941** (12.8%) had no repeat visit during the period

Note:
The data presented here were extracted from CEA's database in January 2004.

The research

This article is based upon interviews carried out during 2003 with 18 External Advisers - 12 face-to-face and six on the telephone. Except in three cases, all the face-to-face interviews were taped but the telephone interviews were not. The names of the External Advisers were drawn from a list provided by Cambridge Education Associates. We asked for the names of advisers who had worked with a relatively large number of schools (25 or more per annum). A list of 90 EAs was provided and interviewees selected randomly from it. We intentionally sought to interview 'experienced' EAs as we wished to draw upon their wide range of experience of working in many schools. The sample is not therefore a random one and we do not know how representative our interviewees were of the 2000 or so EAs who were active in round 3 (see Table 1).

Of those EAs interviewed, there was an almost equal number of men and women and they came from a variety of backgrounds. All had considerable experience of education management in one field or another. Eight were ex-primary school heads, two ex-secondary school heads, one serving secondary head, one ex-special school head, and three management consultants (two of whom had a primary school background). One EA came from Further Education (FE), one was a teacher of handicapped children who had managed a NHS unit working with 50 Local Education Authorities (LEAs), one an ex-CEO, and another was an experienced governor with a background in human resource management consultancy. Two of the External Advisers in the sample had experience as LEA advisers and three as inspectors for the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

Main issues

From the interviews we have identified eight main issues for consideration.

a. Perceptions of the performance management process
It is striking that most of our small sample saw the performance management of the headteacher in a positive, developmental light. This perspective is summed up the following comment from an EA.

> *The role of the External Adviser is to give support to the governors in their role of managing the head's performance, in many cases re-assuring them that they can understand, come to grips with, and assess issues which it could be argued are professional and outside their competence. The EA helps the head and governors to establish a common language for discussing performance management. Over the past three years heads and governors have become more relaxed and confident about their relationship in this area.*

Overall, the performance management process was viewed as a help to governors, and a useful, outside view for headteachers. It is interesting to note that about one-half of the External Advisers in the sample were retired primary school heads. These advisers had

usually been a head for many years and had undertaken EA work, often together with threshold assessment, to maintain an interest in education and/or supplement their income. The typical EA in the interview sample worked with between 30 and 40 schools a year (though one of the EAs claimed to have worked with 200!), usually within a 30 mile radius of his/her home. (This can be compared with the national figures given in Table 1.) Most have worked with almost all of the schools for three years; and it is very rare for EAs not to have been invited back for the second and third round. External Advisers appear generally to be recommended to schools by word of mouth. The advisers who have been heads themselves may have greater credibility with the heads in post but at the same time, there is a danger that they may perhaps be too understanding and rather less challenging of the headteacher's performance. This is an issue worthy of further investigation as more heads are being encouraged to undertake such activity as part of being 'consultant leaders' and 'school improvement partners'.

The EAs in the sample generally perceived the performance management process as something that was of benefit to the school. As one noted 'performance management is a process that is working and valued'. The overall feel was of a group of people who entered into the whole process in a constructive manner, and relished their discussions, both with the headteachers and the governors:

> *I've really enjoyed the role and the whole process. I've never left a school where I've felt that I was just a token presence. I've always felt that I have been able to offer something, to make a contribution, make a difference. Some people think it's an easy job - well it ain't!*

Specifically, they described the added value of the system as it appeared to them:

> *The value of the system is that it has enabled governors to focus on the head's leadership skills and it has provided the opportunity for the head to have specific positive feedback in this area.*
>
> *There is nothing better for the 'chief executive' and the 'directors' than to have a robust and challenging discussion once a term (?). Governors feel informed and involved, the head feels understood and supported - and occasionally challenged.*

External Advisers generally were very clear that their primary role was as advisers and supporters to the governors, but they also put considerable emphasis on the support which they provided for headteachers. They understood that the ultimate responsibility for the performance management of the head lay with the governing body. The EA appears to perform a multiplicity of roles - as counsellors, facilitators, mentors, honest brokers, coaches, encouraging the head to discuss things that they wouldn't discuss with anyone else.

> *Fundamentally it is the provision of* independent *experience/expertise at a level at which the governors, sometimes heads, do not normally have access.*
>
> *The key to the role is facilitating, not telling them but opening their eyes without them realizing it.*

An interesting part of their role, as they viewed it, was to encourage the head to be slightly more adventurous in the objectives set. At the same time, some also saw themselves as governor trainers.

The EA can identify trends and patterns, focus on key process issues, provide perspective, encourage heads that are overly self-critical/overwhelmed and offer written advice/draft objectives and review statements, challenging where necessary - on policy, on practice, on ideology.

Sometimes the EA is holding the ring between the head and an over-interventionist chair of governors.

Though EAs wished to see a rigorous process in place, they did not want to be perceived as inspectors and there was some concern that they were now being asked to make judgments on the head's overall performance without sufficient evidence. They saw the key to their role the fact that they were outsiders, with no axe to grind and with no connection to either the LEA or to Ofsted.

The EA is only there in an advisory capacity. You can suggest, challenge, put forward evidence, point to documents, but at the end of the day if the governors really dig their heels in, there is nothing you can do. By law, it is the governors who are responsible for agreeing the objectives.

b. The response of governors and headteachers

The interviewees reported that although there were some initial suspicions and defensiveness in the first year of the system's operation, the overwhelming majority of heads and governors now (three years later) found the process very useful and developmental. Part of that may be due to the schools being able, over three years, to develop a good relationship with the one individual EA:

Generally the response of both heads and governors to the EA has been very positive. EAs were trained to expect the worst but this has not generally been the case. The exceptions have been where governors have been too heavy-handed or have not understood the process properly. There was a mismatch between the prescribed governor training and the process as understood by EAs.

Governors were very apprehensive at first for many different reasons - lack of experience, not being closely involved in the work of the school, apprehension about making an assessment of a professional educator. Where governors had been involved in the work of the school previously, they found it easier. Governors from business/industry can find it difficult to come to terms with the educational approach to performance management. Most governors are now much more confident that, if they are given the evidence, they can make a judgment.

However, this three-year relationship has recently changed. Alterations to the rules in 'round 4' (from autumn term 2003) do not allow EAs to re-visit the school (the school not the head) for a fourth time. The EAs we interviewed were divided on this issue but a clear majority would have like to have worked with their schools for longer than the permitted three years. Perhaps a change after five or six years might have been more appropriate. Their views about this new rule are discussed further in section g.

In terms of the process all being positive, there were some interesting, and distinct caveats:

Governors of secondary schools were more sophisticated, more objective and more aware of the performance management process through their experience in industry.

As a generalisation, governors are more comfortable with the support role than with the challenge role. Many governors feel uncertain about what is meant by the word 'challenge' - asking pertinent detailed questions, seeking explanations. They need a lot of help in setting objectives for the head.

The majority of governors are grateful to the EA for reading all the documentation and highlighting the issues. Governors find it very very difficult moving on from looking at two or three objectives to having a discussion about the overall performance of the head. Their judgments are fairly superficial. They find it difficult to go beyond 'He's a very nice head'. They should be asking what is the head doing, how is s/he moving the school forward?

c. The contribution of EAs to school improvement

It is not easy to tease out the impact of the system on school improvement and in particular the contribution of the EAs among so many other initiatives that have been introduced recently. If the performance management process is worthwhile, it must make a difference or have some kind of impact on the development of school leaders. That difference or impact is likely to be greatest where the head's leadership is less than satisfactory. Overall, between five and ten per cent of heads visited by the sample of EAs we interviewed were perceived as ineffective, though some EAs had no experience of meeting any ineffective headteachers. Sometimes the governors were aware of the weakness, sometimes not.

The first indicator of ineffectiveness was the poor or minimal information supplied to the EA. External Advisers rely heavily on the documentation they receive from schools. Another indicator was that the objectives suggested by the head were often low-level and/or easily achieved. Sometimes the EA had been able to work with the head and governors in order to effect improvement by setting challenging targets. In some cases the EA had given the governors the confidence to tackle the issue of the head's under-performance. However, where the relationship between the governing body and the head was too 'cosy' and/or the governors were unwilling to tackle the head's performance, the advisory role of the EA severely limited the impact which they could have. Where there was an ineffective head controlling a weak governing body, it was said to be almost impossible for the EA to make a difference because of the very short time that the EA spends with the governors (one school visit per year averaging 3-4 hours). Also if the headteacher felt pressured or overly challenged by the EA, it was said they persuaded the governors of the need to find a different one in the next round!

Thus, the impact of the EA can be seen in terms of acting as a change agent, particularly where there is perceived ineffective leadership and management at headship level. The perception of EAs as to their role of being change agents varied with some of them pointing to the very limited contact which they actually had with the schools.

Rather than being a change agent himself, the EA's role is to facilitate the governors bringing about desirable change.

You can help change, but fundamentally change is not going to come about as a result of a couple of very short meetings.

On the other hand:

In many ways - changing attitudes, identifying the quality of practice and, most importantly, finding a way to move it forward through appropriate objectives and frameworks.

In terms of evolution rather than revolution. Pushing, nudging hopefully in the right direction.

You are bringing in a totally new process - a process which means change. The EA brings insights and changes to the way in which the head and governors think.

Improvements reported by EAs included:

- An improved ability by heads and governors to handle and understand the data on pupil and school performance available to them.
- Enhanced relationships between the head and governors.
- Greater confidence on the part of governors and an increased awareness as to the performance of their school and the headteacher.
- An improvement in the handling of performance management throughout the school.
- An improvement in School Development Planning; (one EA reported that in the first year 70 per cent were non-existent or poor – but in the last round only two out of 35 were less than satisfactory).
- Acting as an 'honest broker' between the head and governors.

In summary, one EA stated:

Improving the overall performance of schools? On balance we have probably helped those governors who have been involved in the performance management of the headteacher to be focussed and at least hear quite focussed and challenging questions asked of their head, leading to greater accountability of the head. This is where the EA process has been carried out properly.

d. Governors' monitoring of the process

This undoubtedly is the weakest part of the process. Even when dates for interim meetings were set well in advance, the meetings often did not take place. The gathering of evidence by the governors was still weak in many cases. Heads were not always good at providing evidence.

When governors haven't carried out their monitoring function, there is slippage on targets. In the best cases, governors meet termly with the head to review progress and the meeting is minuted.

The process is rigorous enough in terms of what the EA does but not rigorous in terms of what the governors do - or rather fail to do. They fail to have interim meetings or to keep minutes.

EAs' views on the validity of governors' judgements on the performance of the headteacher varied.

> *The governors don't like making judgements on heads and their 'judgements' are opinions rather than being based upon evidence - they go on gut feeling.*

However, it was also suggested:

> *The clearer the objectives, the easier it is for them to make judgements. With objectives which have a numerical outcome, the head provides the necessary data - that's not a problem.*
>
> *Often governors do rely on the head's reports either specifically to the appointed governors or to the governing body. 'Wool-pulling' is difficult if there are good pupil progress objectives.*
>
> *Governors sometimes interview the deputy and other teachers.*

e. The link between performance management and pay

EAs felt that it was inevitable that the link between performance management and pay would become closer. Governors, they reported, often looked to the EA for a 'steer' on whether or not the head should be given a pay rise.

> *It is a fiction that the two things are at arm's length.*
>
> *Schools are moving inevitably towards linking teachers' pay to their performance; indeed they are already partly there e.g. ASTs. It would be a nonsense if performance management weren't linked to discussions about pay rises. There is, however, a risk that when pay is linked to the performance management process, the only outcome will be a discussion about pay. There has to be a robust performance management policy and process already in place.*
>
> *Pay and performance - a gap that should be bridged. Governors often rely very heavily on the EA, asking 'Should we give him/her one point or two?' EAs should receive the necessary training to enable them to deal with this issue.*

Interestingly, since round 4 (2004) EAs have been asked by CEA to comment on and advise the governing body, where possible, on the head's overall performance.

f. Could governing bodies manage without an EA?

A few governing bodies, especially those with governors who bring relevant experience from industry or commerce, might be able to 'go it alone' without an EA. However, who would decide which these governing bodies might be and what might be the situation in a few years time with a change in the membership of the governing body? Many governors recognised the value of the EA and would not wish to lose their input.

g. The three-year rule

As earlier noted, External Advisers were divided on this issue. A clear majority would have liked to have worked with their schools for longer than three years. They believed that the longer they worked in a school, the stronger the relationship and trust built up and the more they understood the school's context. This made it possible for them to raise issues which previously they might have felt unable to discuss. It might be argued, however, that where

the EA has been less than wholly effective, a change after three years might bring in another who was more challenging and rigorous. Heads and governors certainly appear to have wished to carry on for longer with the same EA. A change after five or six years might have been more appropriate.

The 'three-year' rule certainly provoked some vigorous responses, with differences emerging as to whether a developing relationship was helpful to the process, or in some way impeded its effectiveness:

> *The benefit of an on-going relationship is that you can continue the conversation - you are not having to go back to stage one in establishing the relationship.*
>
> *The present system is not the most effective way of turning weak heads into better ones. More aspects of the system e.g. setting criteria, providing evidence, should be compulsory and EAs, or the LEA, should have more power. EAs should be able to work with a school for five years - How 'warm and cosy' can you get after three two-hour meetings!?*
>
> *Heads and governors trust the EA with all kinds of confidential information - it takes a while for that to build up. The more you know a school, the more help you can be; every year you are more helpful because you understand the personalities and the issues better.*
>
> *It takes three years to develop a professional working relationship with the governors and the head and to get to know the issues affecting that particular school. I am put off by the thought of having to start all over again in new schools. Six years might be a more realistic time-span.*

However, as one EA remarked:

> *The change after three years is uncomfortable for the EA having to start again but the DfES is probably right; it can become harder to say something difficult because of the relationship which has built up.*

h. Other possible changes to the system
The EAs saw the post-visit report to CEA as an unnecessary piece of bureaucracy and were concerned at the amount of paperwork involved.

> *There should be more rigorous monitoring of EAs through observation of their meetings in schools rather than through their reports.*

Not paying the travel expenses of EAs appears to penalise those who travel over a wide area, e.g. to special schools, and those who live in rural areas. It may be tending to restrict some EAs to their own locality which might encourage 'cosiness'. In general the daily rate, although increased in 2003, is barely comparable with other similar advisory or consultancy work.

Conclusion

From the evidence gathered in this small-scale study it would appear that the headteacher performance management process has been highly beneficial for headteachers, governors and schools and certainly offers good value for money. One can point to very significant

improvements in schools over the three years in which the system has been in operation and the EAs have been able to make a very positive contribution to the process. Most significant has been the fact that they are seen as outsiders with no axe to grind. The weakest part of the process at present is quite clearly governors' monitoring and the inability to tackle ineffective heads where the governing body is also weak.

In summary it would appear that the process has:

- Provided a list of objectives for the head that are related to his/her development but, more importantly, to focussing on what the key actions are that will move the school forward.
- Helped heads by providing time to focus on their own self development.
- Helped governors who were reluctant to talk to the head professionally about what they see as professional issues.
- Provided an outsider who could take a fresh look at the school, perhaps confirming what the head and governors thought but taking it a stage further.

The degree of rigour and challenge that EAs bring with them may be related to the individual EA's background. As the government is keen to involve more and more practising (and recently retired) heads in the process, it must be asked whether peers or colleagues are necessarily best placed to provide the right degree of challenge. As one adviser suggested:

> *The quality of the process is very dependent on the quality of the people involved.*

Indeed the recent Ofsted analysis of the primary leadership programme found a number of primary strategy consultant leaders (PSCLs) who were unwilling to challenge schools about their expectations and low standards even when there was clear evidence available to them that this was the case. The report noted that: 'In effect, they colluded with the headteacher and leadership team rather than provide challenge' (2004, p.16). To be fair Ofsted also state that this applied only to 'a small number' of PSCLs but it does highlight the point about the special skills needed of consultant leaders and advisers.

External Advisers face an uncertain future, as the accountability mechanisms change again. Policy makers are now trialling new accountability mechanisms, including a "single conversation" between the headteacher and a "credible experienced practitioner" about the school's development priorities, targets and support needs (DfES, 2004). This could be viewed as a positive development by those who are currently External Advisers, as in their own eyes they are already holding valuable conversations. At the time of writing however it was not clear if these 'school improvement partners' would be drawn predominantly from the ranks of External Advisers or, indeed, how the PM process for heads would operate under these new proposals.

As a final note, this research has looked at the PM process from the Adviser's viewpoint. It seems relevant to finish with the thought that many EAs have found the work valuable for themselves as people. As noted by an EA who was also a Registered Inspector:

> *Professionally this has been one of the most valuable, rewarding and successful things I have done as a freelance. It was immensely more valuable to heads in terms of their own professional development than an Ofsted inspection.*

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[1] CEA have been very supportive of the research project into the role of External Advisers. Although they have not provided any funds for the research, they have assisted the research team by providing background information about the External Advisers on their database and the contact details of those who had conducted a significant number of school visits. The research findings reported in this article have been seen by CEA (and the DfES).