What are the most important characteristics of
outstanding educational leadership?

With the aim of improving leadership in schools and colleges, this research involved 70 experienced educational leaders, prompting them to reflect on characteristics of outstanding leadership. **Have we discovered that a clear strategic vision and the ability to inspire others are more important than goals, targets or even innovation?**

The research team collaborated with school and college leaders, governing bodies and university staff to develop this project entitled **Stakeholder perceptions of outstanding leadership in schools and colleges in England**. Some of the developmental work was funded by the British Educational Leadership Management and Administration Society (BELMAS). The ultimate goal is developing a process and framework for sustaining outstanding leadership in education and moving beyond the achievement of 'outstanding' Ofsted status.

A representative sample to gain a picture of leadership in different contexts

The research involved school and college leaders, governing bodies and university staff. The involvement of these different stakeholder groups has provided a range of perspectives and perceptions, which provide triangulation and strengthen the robustness of the findings.

Nigel Bright retired as headteacher in July and now works as a leadership consultant. He undertook the Q-sort as part of a seminar held at the University of Worcester.

"It's about recognising the qualities you have, and also the qualities you don't have. The danger is that, dealing with the practical part of the job, you don't have as much time to sit back and reflect on a deeper level. So there's real merit to spending time in deeper reflection."

What have we discovered so far?

When analysing the data from all respondents, we see the following are the highest and lowest rated leadership statements.

Highest rated

✓ Clear strategic vision communicated effectively to others.

✓ Ability to bring out the best in people and inspire others.

✓ Inspirational leader who leads by example.

Lowest rated

✗ Reconciling opposing viewpoints and summarising agreed points to leadership teams.

✗ Balancing financial constraints with aspirational educational ambitions.

✗ Developing entrepreneurial innovative approaches to improve education.

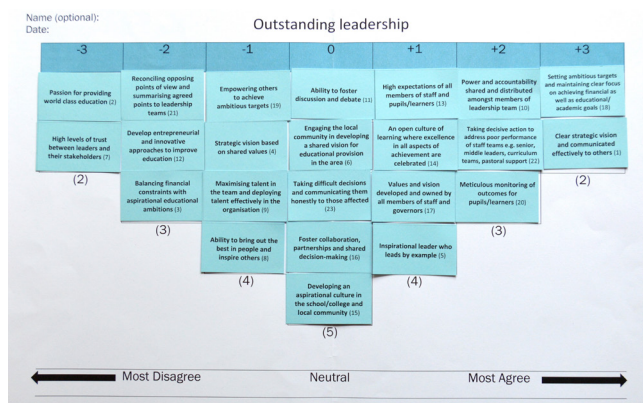## Using Q-methodology to bring out the considered viewpoints of respondents

Q-methodology is a research method which originates from psychology and is used to study people's subjective viewpoints. 'In Q-methodology, subjectivity refers to an individual's personal point of view on any matter of personal or social importance' (Brown, 1980; McKeown and Thomas, 1988).

In practice this involves respondents placing statements focusing on characteristics of outstanding leadership onto a q-sort grid. The process of deciding, individually or in groups, which statements they most agree or disagree with, prompts them to prioritise the characteristics to reach a considered viewpoint (see image below).

Once the data was collected, it was possible to use statistical analysis to identify patterns within the qualitative responses, giving a clearer picture of what participants deem outstanding leadership.

Edward Gregory is headteacher of Bishop Henderson Church of England Primary, in Taunton, Somerset. He said that, while all 23 statements on Professor Dhillon's list appeared obvious at first glance, on closer examination, they developed both nuance and complexity.

"It's a simple yet powerful tool that enables you to reflect on your own beliefs and practices."

Above: A completed Q-sort with statements placed.

Interested in reading more about this research?

This research has been presented at national and international conferences and featured in the educational press. See Worcester Research and Publications authored by Professor Dhillon. Publications listed at https://eprints.worc.ac.uk/view/author/Dhillon=3AJaswinder=3A=3A.html.

Findings for different groups

The table shows the highest and lowest rated values reported by leaders at different levels and roles within education.

	MOST AGREE	MOST DISAGREE
PRIMARY	High expectations of all members of staff and pupils	Ability to foster discussion and debate
	Taking decisive action to address poor performance of staff	Develop entrepreneurial innovative approaches to improve education
	Inspirational leader who leads by example	Engaging local community in a shared vision for education in the area
SECONDARY	High levels of trust between leaders and their stakeholders	Meticulous monitoring of outcomes for pupils/learners
	Ability to bring out the best in people and inspire others	Balancing financial constraints with aspirational educational ambitions
	Inspirational leader who leads by example	Setting ambitious targets and focus on financial educational goals
POST COMPULSORY	Empowering others to achieve ambitious targets	Develop entrepreneurial innovative approaches to improve education
	Ability to bring out the best in people and inspire others	Meticulous monitoring of outcomes for pupils and learners
	Maximising talent and deploying it effectively in the organisation	Engaging local community in a shared vision for education in the area
SENCO	Strategic vision based on shared values	Reconciling opposing points of view and summarising agreed points
	An open culture of learning where excellence achievement celebrated	Balancing financial constraints with aspirational educational ambitions
	Inspirational leader who leads by example	Ability to foster discussion and debate
GOVERNORS	Clear strategic vision communicated effectively to others	Engaging local community in a shared vision for education in the area
	Inspirational leader who leads by example	Ability to foster discussion and debate
	Taking decisive action to address poor performance of staff	Develop entrepreneurial innovative approaches to improve education

23 characteristics of outstanding leadership

- Clear strategic vision and communicated effectively to others
- Passion for providing world class education
- Balancing financial constraints with aspirational educational ambitions
- Strategic vision based on shared values
- Inspirational leader who leads by example
- Engaging the local community in developing a shared vision for local education
- High levels of trust between leaders and their stakeholders
- Ability to bring out the best in people and inspire others
- Maximising talent in the team and deploying talent effectively in the organisation
- Power and accountability shared and distributed amongst leadership team
- Ability to foster discussion and debate
- Develop entrepreneurial and innovative approaches to improve education

- High expectations of all members of staff and pupils/learners
- Open culture of learning where excellence in all aspects of achievement are celebrated
- Developing an aspirational culture in the school/college and local community
- Foster collaboration, partnerships and shared decision-making
- Values and vision developed and owned by all members of staff and governors
- Setting ambitious targets with clear focus on achieving financial, educational and academic goals
- Empowering others to achieve ambitious targets
- Meticulous monitoring of outcomes for pupils/learners
- Reconciling opposing viewpoints and summarising points to leadership teams
- Taking decisive action to address poor performance of staff teams
- Taking difficult decisions and communicating them honestly to those affected

Would you like to take part?

We are continuing this research both in the UK and internationally. If you would like to take part please email j.dhillon@worc.ac.uk.