



Confederation  
of School Trusts

# Systems of Meaning

Three Nested Leadership Narratives  
for School Trusts



# About CST - The voice of school trusts

CST is the national organisation and sector body for academy and multi-academy trusts – advocating for, connecting and supporting executive and governance leaders in School Trusts.

We are a charitable company, registered with the Charity Commission. Our charitable purpose, as set out in our Articles of Association, is “the advancement of education for public benefit”. We are governed by a board of trustees and are subject to the regulations of the Charity Commission and accountable to our members.

We are strictly apolitical. We work with the government of the day, political parties and politicians across the spectrum to advance education for public benefit.

## Mission, Vision and Values

CST’s mission is to build an excellent education system in England, with every school part of a strong and sustainable group in which every child is a powerful learner and adults learn and develop together as teachers and leaders.

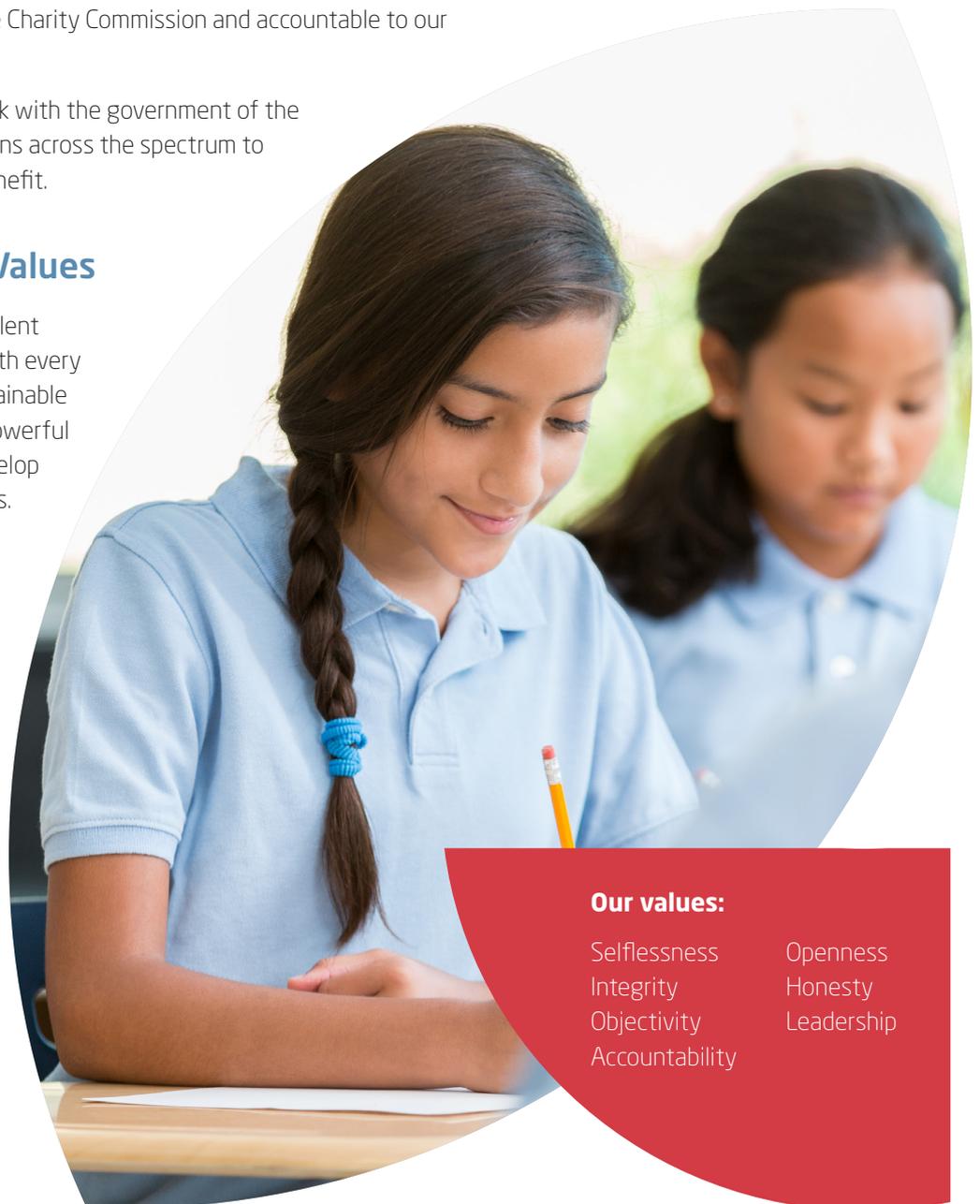
**Our vision is a system which holds trust on behalf of children.**

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By Leora Cruddas**

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### Our values:

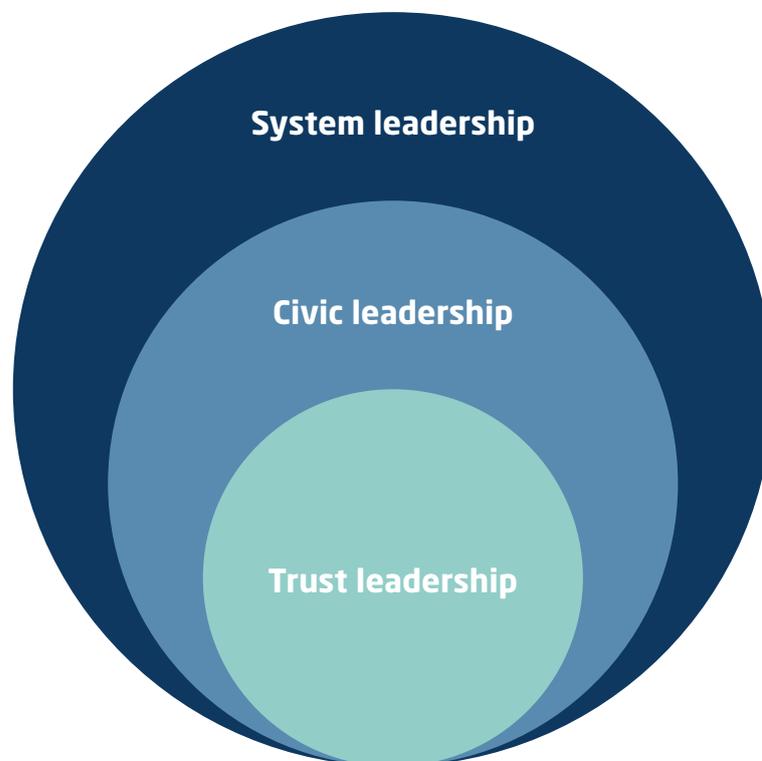
Selflessness	Openness
Integrity	Honesty
Objectivity	Leadership
Accountability	

# Systems of Meaning - Three Nested Leadership Narratives for School Trusts

Over the past twelve months, CST has been developing a new narrative promoting School Trusts as education charities with a single legal and moral purpose – to advance education for public benefit.

As part of our work on a new narrative, we have also been developing three 'nested' leadership narratives.

1. The first is about **trust leadership**: how we talk about ourselves, what we do and why we do it. School Trusts create the conditions for deep collaborations among teachers and leaders to improve the quality of education.
2. The second is about **civic leadership**: how we work with others to advance education as a wider common good. Civic trusts create the conditions for purposeful collaboration between and among trusts and other civic organisations.
3. The third is about **system leadership**: not in the old definition of 'working beyond the school gates', but rather how we need to act on, rather than just acting in the system. System-building goes beyond collaboration and engages deliberate system design and system building.



This short think piece sets out the overall narrative structure – the systems of meaning. CST will be developing and deepening the theory, knowledge and practice for each of these narratives over the coming year.

Importantly, our conceptualisation of leadership spans both executive and governance leadership. Executive and governance leadership are not the same by any means, and there are boundaries that need to be observed if trusts are to be successful. This paper does not deal with those boundaries – we explore these elsewhere in our guidance and development programmes. Here, we are seeking to develop leadership narratives that create a space where executive and governance leaders can work together for the common good of the organisation and can foster collaborative and collective leadership for wider civic and system good.

All three leadership narratives are underpinned by ethics – the Principles of Public Life<sup>1</sup>. Leaders must:

- Act solely in the interest of children and young people;
- Avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work;
- Act and take decisions impartially and fairly, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias;
- Be accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this;
- Expect to act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner;
- Be truthful; and
- Exhibit these principles in their own behaviour - they should actively promote and robustly support the principles and be willing to challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.



# Trust leadership

Our first narrative is about leadership of the organisation – the School Trust. Trust leaders are not heroic visionaries, but rather people with a deep knowledge and understanding of the substance of education, including:

- schools and how to improve them;
- organisations and how to build them;
- people and how to develop them; and
- finances and how to manage them.

The primary leadership task is about creating high quality education through developing expertise in curriculum and teaching across the group of schools in a financially sustainable way.

But there is a wider consideration beyond the knowledge and competence of trust leaders to lead their organisation. We need leaders who have the theoretical knowledge to participate in society's conversations and to lead conversations about education. We have allowed the narrative about academies and multi-academy trusts to be dominated by others, by those who believe that this is about business interest or private interest – the corporatisation and privatisation of education by the back door.

We must work together to change society's conversation. It is time we took control of the narrative. We need to say proudly, collectively, that academy trusts are education charities that run schools to give children a better future.

We need to say, *"Our trust is a group of schools working in collaboration as one entity to improve and maintain high educational standards across the group. Our trust has a*

*single legal and moral purpose – to advance education for the public benefit."*

We must put at the heart of our reform journey this simple and powerful moral purpose – that education is a public good.

We will build a world-leading education system in England if this is at the heart of everything we do, as we move irrevocably towards every school in England being part of a strong and sustainable group of schools. This is the end-point – and yes, it involves further structural reform but not as an end in itself.

This is not a public relations exercise. Trust leadership ensures that all the adults in an organisation are working together in deep and purposeful ways to improve teaching and ensure pupils have the best possible education.

Trust leadership is also about building trust – in at least five ways:

- 1. Trust as a relational principle:** Our education system must reclaim trust as a relational principle. By this I mean that all schools and trusts must have as a core focus, the behaviours and actions everyone will take to build trust – with children and young people, parents and the community and the wider society. Trust as a relational principle should also be at the contractual heart of employer-employee relationships. The principle of trust should represent an objective reality in our education system that transcends cultures and organisations. It is at the heart of education as a public good.

2. **Trust as a core value:** Trust is an essential human value that quantifies and defines our interdependence in relationships with others. As a value, trust should help us determine the rightfulness or wrongfulness of our actions.
3. **Trust as character:** Steven Covey<sup>2</sup> writes about trust being born of two dimensions: character and competence. Character includes integrity, intentions, capacity and results. This speaks to the ethics of leadership and public service.
4. **Trust as competence:** Competence includes knowledge, capabilities and impact. The public will not trust us unless they believe we are competent to lead and govern. Changing the narrative will require careful social persuasion based on trust as competence.

5. **Trust as a promise** – Kofi Annan, the late Secretary-General of the United Nations said: “There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children. There is no duty more important than ensuring that their rights are respected, that their welfare is protected, that their lives are free from fear and want and that they grow up in peace.”<sup>3</sup> Holding trust on behalf of children is CST’s value statement. When we establish a trust, we are effectively making a promise to hold trust with and on behalf of children.

*CST will be developing a theory of the instructional and cultural levers and mental models of trust leadership over the coming year.*



# Civic leadership

Trust leadership is necessary but not sufficient if we are to build a connected system in which all actors work together. Trust leaders must also understand their role as civic leaders. School Trusts are a new civic structure. As such, leaders have a duty to engage with each other and other civic actors for the wider good.

Last year, I was delighted to give evidence to the UPP Foundation Civic University Commission.<sup>4</sup> It was a privilege to have the opportunity to think hard about the civic role of universities and the role they play in their localities by making a strategic contribution to the greater social good.

Civic leadership is not the sole purview of locally elected politicians. It is enacted by many different civic structures, including but not limited to local government.

Civic leadership is different from community leadership. The community leader is a designation for a person widely perceived to represent a community. Civic leadership is about the protection and promotion of public values and addressing issues of place or public concern.

In the case of civic trusts, we need to help communities develop a better understanding of education and its role in regeneration, and engage in a collaboration of partners to deliver change and transformation in a locality or region. Civic leaders create the conditions for collective impact by addressing complex issues affecting children and young people that require different actors to work together, possibly even to change their behaviours.

Trust leaders are civic leaders. As well as leading a group of schools to give children a better future, trust leaders also look out beyond their organisation. They work with each other in a connected system and they seek to work with other civic actors to ensure the value of the child in the locality, and that the collective actions of all civic actors protect high-quality education.

As part of developing our understanding of School Trusts as new civic structures, they must be anchored in their communities. They must be 'anchor institutions'.

Anchor institutions, alongside their main purpose, play a significant role in a locality by making a strategic contribution to the greater social good.

Typically anchor institutions:

- Have strong ties to the geographic area in which they are based;
- Tend to be larger employers and have significant purchasing power;
- Are not-for-profit or as in the case of School Trusts, charitable organisations.

The concept originated in the United States in the 1960s. By the turn of the century, urban universities felt that they could no longer ignore the conditions that their communities were experiencing. As a consequence, universities started to create partnerships with other local and civic organisations to address the complex social and economic challenges faced by their local communities.

So an 'anchor institution' is an organisation with an important presence in a place. Examples include local authorities, NHS trusts, universities and housing associations. Anchor institutions are significant because they have a large stake in their local or regional area. School Trusts are anchor institutions.

It is possible to explore a range of ways in which School Trusts as anchor institutions can leverage assets they hold in trust to benefit the local area and local people – for School Trusts to offer not just educational value in a locality, but wider social value.

In this way, School Trusts become part of a civic community which is engaged, supportive and shares objectives, further supporting the places where they are based.

*CST will be publishing a Framework for civic trusts later this year, which seeks to inscribe the field for School Trusts and support leaders to take action.*

<sup>4</sup> UPP Foundation (2019) *Truly Civic: Strengthening the connection between universities and their places.*

# System leadership

Michael Fullan in his book *Coherence* talks about 'systemness' as a key system driver.<sup>5</sup> What he means by this is focusing direction and the need to integrate what the system is doing. Right now, in England, we have a divided school system. We need to begin to integrate what the system is doing. And the system is building groups of schools.

As we said in our 'white paper' *Future Shape of the Education System in England*<sup>6</sup>, the concept of legally autonomous organisations set up purely for the purposes of running and improving schools, has been part of the policy of all three main political parties – the Labour administration pre-2010, the coalition government (Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) between 2010 and 2015, and latterly, successive Conservative administrations.

It is almost ten years since the 2010 Academies Act which enabled 'converter academies' and saw the rise of groups of schools in multi-academy trusts, called School Trusts, to reflect their core education purpose throughout this paper. More than half of children and young people are now educated in School Trusts.

It has taken a ten-year horizon for this change to happen. To complete the reform journey is likely to take another ten years. Therefore, the time-horizon for the changes proposed in our white paper is 2030. We cannot limp on indefinitely with a two-tier system which leaves smaller maintained schools vulnerable as local authorities retract their school improvement services. It is imperative now that we create system coherence.

As Peter Senge points out, the deep changes necessary to accelerate progress require leaders who catalyse collective leadership.<sup>7</sup> This is the opposite of aggressive acquisition as a model of growth. It requires leaders who act collectively and strategically *on* – not just *in* – the system. The system leader is a strategic builder of local and regional systems.

System leaders enact the Indo-European root of to lead, "leith" which means to step across a threshold. We must step across the threshold into a new system. We need to build and share an understanding of the mental model of this system. And to do this, we need leaders who can see the whole system, not just parts of it.

There are a host of systemic challenges beyond the reach of existing institutions and their hierarchical leadership structures or plans for growth. We require unprecedented collaboration among School Trusts and trust leaders to foster collective leadership in order to build local systems, particularly in areas where the quality of education has been poor for years and decades.

In the next decade, the growth of trusts cannot be organic. It must be by design. We need to work together within and across cities and regions to build system coherence so that no school – and no child – is left behind.

*CST will be developing and deepening this narrative over the next year, looking specifically at the theory and knowledge requirements needed to develop system leaders.*



**Table one: systems of meaning - an overview of the three nested leadership narratives**

	<b>The narrative and purpose</b>	<b>The focus of collaboration</b>	<b>The focus of activity</b>
<b>TRUST LEADERSHIP</b>	How we talk about ourselves and our organisations, what we do and why we do it – to advance education for public benefit.	Create the conditions for deep collaborations among teachers and leaders to improve the quality of education.	Internal – looking down into our organisation to secure improvements in the quality of education.
<b>CIVIC LEADERSHIP</b>	How we work with others to advance education as a wider common good.	Create the conditions for purposeful collaboration between and among trusts and other civic organisations.	External – looking up and out and working with others to ensure the value of the child in the locality, and that the collective actions of all civic actors protect high-quality education.
<b>SYSTEM LEADERSHIP</b>	How we act <i>on</i> , rather than just acting <i>in</i> the system.	Create the conditions for collective system-building.	External/ system-focused – how we deliberately engage in system-building – locally, regionally and/or nationally.  The system leader fosters collective leadership to build local and/or regional systems.

# Why is this important?

There are several potential problems that we need to face as the system of School Trusts in England grows, and our knowledge, theories and practices evolve.

The first is that there is no clearly defined model of trust leadership beyond competency-based or generic domain-based models typically focused only on organisational leadership. Competency is the application of the specific knowledge, skills and attitudes that are needed to undertake a work role. As Leesa Wheelahan<sup>8</sup> has pointed out, the problem with competency-based training is that it ties knowledge and skill directly to workplace performances and roles, and not to systematic structured disciplinary systems of meaning.

The national professional qualifications and most other development programmes in England are competency-based. They induct leaders and potential leaders into a field of practice. CST wishes to inscribe the field of knowledge, rather than simply a field of practice. We need leaders who can think the unthought, solve persistent or novel problems, contribute to society's conversation about schooling and shape the system.

If our focus remains just on organisational leadership, we run the risk that the School Trust becomes another insular, inward-looking structure with little connection to its civic context and little interest in the wider system. This is potentially dangerous because it could feed 'producer interest' – in terms of acquisitive growth that is harmful to the local education economy; a focus on 'outcomes' for the children in 'my' organisation at the expense of others; and a belligerent system divided up into competitive fiefdoms.

Leadership narratives and programmes that keep us tied only to organisational competencies and leadership genericism will not produce the leaders or the system of schooling we need in England.



8 Wheelahan, L. (2010) The Structure of Pedagogic Discourse as a Relay for Power: The Case of Competency-Based Training, Toolkits, Translation Devices and Conceptual Accounts: Essays on Basil Bernstein's Sociology of Knowledge, 1, pp. 47 – 63.

# What does this mean for leaders of School Trusts?

This requires that we not merely shift our mental models of leadership but forge a new mental model. We need a radically different approach to leadership development which is not based on the tired rehearsal of leadership competencies, but rather gives access to a higher order knowledge and thinking which will allow the hitherto unthinkable to be thought, as trust leaders lead the national and international dialogue.

We need to develop systems of meaning that provide more access to theoretical knowledge than the weakly classified knowledge of competency-based programmes, with their focus only on the field of practice.

CST will work with leading partner organisations to create trust leadership development underpinned by secure mental models based on a body of knowledge, so that trust leaders are not just able to contribute to society's conversations about schooling, but actively shape them. We want to begin to classify the knowledge required to lead School Trusts as a field of study.

In this way, we will leverage leadership of the school system and enable the vastly more powerful and sustainable school system to be born.

