

Schoolsworks. Leadership Development

Introduction

Schoolsworks Academy Trust was established on 1 April 2012 under the Academies Act 2010, to manage its first academy (Edward Bryant School). The Trust grew out of an entrepreneurial vision between the Edward Bryant Head Teacher Cathy Williams and School Governor Chris Seaton. It has since grown to 7 schools with nearly 3000 pupils, over 400 staff, and opening a new free school soon.

Schoolsworks is a Trust “with a cause”, whose core mission is to build a culture of collaboration between staff, schools and pupils with the aim of ‘building children’s futures together’. The MAT focusses on creating local, cohesive hubs of schools that know each other well and support each other’s improvement.



The challenge

Having gone through the “forming, storming and norming” stages of its development, the MAT recognised the need to develop a more distributed and collaborative approach to leadership to achieve its mission, and to become less reliant on its 2 Founders for the long term. As a result, it was decided to explore how best to develop the leadership capability of the Executives and Head Teachers in addition to their educational expertise.

The approach.

The Action Learning Set gave me quality professional development time with trusted colleagues. Sharing issues and potential solutions was very productive and made it incredibly clear that I'm not the only one who feels like the ship is sinking when it's actually floating ok!

Richard Waddington. Head Teacher

Initially the leadership of the MAT were both sceptical **and** curious about the benefits a Leadership Development programme could offer the Trust and its schools.

As a result, Tricordant were engaged to work with the MAT Leadership Team to develop a pilot programme called Me in the Mix based on a mix of Coaching and Action Learning Sets.

The first key intervention was to engage the whole Leadership Team to explore what a voluntary programme of individual coaching and Action Learning Sets would look and feel like.

The Me in the Mix programme

Following the initial workshop, 5 of the 8 leadership team members (2 Executives and 3 Head Teachers) volunteered for the individual coaching offer of 2 sessions each, and 7 of the 8 (3 Executives and 4 Head Teachers) volunteered for the Action Learning Sets (ALS).

In both coaching and the ALS interventions the programme emphasised personal learning applied to real work issues and helping leaders to develop the conditions to deliver the “real work” of their schools.

Individual contracting was essential at the outset of the coaching session, with clarity that the coachee could go beyond “pure” coaching and invite advice regarding the coach’s personal experience and “thought models” to help with application to real-time leadership issues. Holding the coaching/mentorship boundary to be crossed only at the coachee’s invitation was an important factor in securing the opportunity for applied learning.



The coaching approach focussed on personal authenticity and “use of self”. While the primary aim was to help the leaders discover their own solutions, the permeable boundary to seek guidance from the coach proved to be valuable for learning new ways to frame and organise their approaches to real and present personal leadership issues.

The Action Learning Sets were set up as facilitated peer groups, one comprising Head Teachers with the other comprising the 3 MAT Executives. Each explored “in the moment” issues for each member and the facilitated approach encouraged “coaching questions” within and between the ALS members as well as offering the opportunity to explore one another’s’ experiences and solutions to shared challenges.

Evaluation

The pilot programme concluded with an evaluation workshop which offered the opportunity for participants of each of the coaching and ALS programmes to share their experiences and learning, and for non-participants to probe and explore the benefits from a peer perspective. It also served to help the Leadership Team determine whether the programme could create a suitable development platform for leaders and future leaders in the MAT and explore the extent to which leaders could facilitate a similar programme internally for purposes of sustainability and affordability.

The Leadership Team concluded:

- The Action Learning Set model will be cascaded to the next cohort of 25 leaders in the Trust through a programme of facilitated and experiential training with the express purpose of embedding the ALS facilitation skills into the Trust for the long term.
- Individual coaching would best continue to be sourced externally because of the need to avoid positional dynamics interfering with in the personal coaching contract.

We are a young organisation and one of our goals is to introduce a fresh culture of leadership development into the primary school sector.

The majority of our senior leaders participated in the programmes, and found them effective personally, helping address key issues in the development of our leadership culture.

As ever, Tricordant are a pleasure to work with, offering engaged, energetic and tailored resources; we are looking forward to working with them in leadership development further”

Schoolsworks CEO and Founder
Chris Seaton.