

LEADING FROM THE MIDDLE

A COMPENDIUM OF LEADERSHIP LEARNING

COMMISSIONED BY THE ETF AND
DESIGNED AND DELIVERED BY FE ASSOCIATES

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FOREWORD FROM MARK WRIGHT

As the expert body for professional development and standards in Further Education (FE) and Training in England, the Education and Training Foundation designs and commissions continuous professional development for teachers, leaders and trainers. Everything we do is designed to meet the sector's needs, to support government policy and pursue our vision of a self-improving sector. That vision requires first-class leadership at all levels.

The Department for Education-funded Leading from the Middle programme is part of an extensive offering of support we provide for those in leadership positions across the sector, from CEOs/Principals to Governors and Chief Financial Officers. It recognises the differing needs of those at all levels and the absolutely vital role they play for their organisation, their colleagues and ultimately their learners.

This publication focuses on the challenges that particularly face those in middle leadership. Reflecting learning from over 300 participants, it looks at a range of issues from different contexts – from engaging staff in tech-enabled solutions, to supporting ESOL learners to thrive in the UK. Each is presented in the same easy-to-dip-into format; the issue is identified, the action taken is described, its impact is assessed, and those behind it reflect on their experience. As you dip in and out of the more-than-30 projects described here, I encourage you also to reflect on the summary of key learnings – grouped thematically – that concludes the publication.

This is a rich resource of ideas and experience. I hope you find it a useful and stimulating read, and one that prompts you to reflect on your own practice and that of those you lead.

Mark Wright

Director of Design & Development

ETF

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the Education and Training Foundation commissioned FE Associates to design and deliver a new national leadership development programme focusing on the needs of middle leaders and managers from across the further education and skills sector – Leading from the Middle. A central theme of the programme has been for participants to develop their leadership learning and practices through engaging in focused learning activities; projects designed to address real organisational issues and challenges.

Since 2018, over 300 leaders from all corners of the sector have successfully completed the programme and we believe that this provides us with the opportunity to share some of the learning and leadership action through the programme. As people involved in the design and delivery of the programme, we have learned a lot from the programme participants and one of the main areas of learning has been that middle leaders and managers face similar issues and challenges, wherever they work. In publishing this compendium of middle leadership learning and action, we very much hope leaders from across the sector can use it to support their ongoing development and improvement.

Matt Atkinson and Stuart Barlow
Compendium Editors

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ENGAGING LEARNERS THROUGH THE CURRICULUM PLANNING PROCESS

All colleges and providers have a curriculum planning process in place but how often are learners engaged in the process of curriculum planning and what benefits can learner input into the process deliver for an organisation?

The Leadership Issue

Feedback received from Foundation Learning students regularly indicated that their engagement levels were not sufficiently high and that the content of their study programmes was not providing a sufficient level of stimulus to maintain their interest throughout the entirety of timetabled sessions.

Leadership Action

In order to build a better understanding of the issue, a number of opportunities were put in place for leaders to engage with both learners and staff through a series of focus groups. The central idea behind the focus groups was to engage a wider group of people in the process of curriculum remodelling and design. Staff were provided with opportunities to identify additional learning opportunities that could be integrated into the study programme for Foundation programmes and to play an enhanced role in the curriculum planning process.

The approach to learner engagement was somewhat more structured with learners being informed of what the curriculum planning process is and how it works. Leaders then worked collaboratively with learners to identify possible options for remodelling the curriculum and the views of learners were then sought about any possible changes identified through this process.

The Leadership Impact

This leadership project had a positive impact on the development of study programmes for the preceding academic year, and through this approach, Foundation learners were provided with new learning opportunities. There is evidence to show that the attendance of learners improved when compared to previous years. However, it was not easy to track and assess the true impact of the changes which would suggest that when implementing a change programme such as this, it is important to identify the measures for tracking success at the outset.

Whilst the key intention of this leadership project was to increase levels of learner engagement and motivation, one unintended positive outcome has been the impact on learner numbers which have grown due to the remodelling of curriculum, meaning that additional learners could be enrolled onto the study programme at various entry points throughout the academic year.

Leadership Reflections

When seeking to engage learners through focus groups, the approach tends to be to organise a meeting, invite them to attend and then expect them to engage in the process and make contributions. However, prior to holding the focus group, it is probably worth considering the knowledge levels of students by considering how much they actually understand the issue to be discussed. Therefore, in order to get the best out of learners in the focus group setting, it is advisable to provide them with some pre-work, and in the case of Foundation learners, this should take the form of supported pre-work that could be done in class with the support of tutors.

IMPROVING ATTENDANCE IN SPORTS ACADEMIES

All colleges have procedures in place to monitor students' attendance. Whilst these all seek to effect improvement, do those responsible for intervening have the information they need to effect positive change and improvement?

The Leadership Issue

A review of the progress of students in the college's Sports Academies showed that attendance at all sessions, especially English and Maths, was poor and affecting their ability to fulfil their academic potential.

Leadership Action

In order to provide a basis upon which interventions could be made effectively, it was necessary to generate timely and accurate data which separated out students' attendance in English & Maths at session level, from their overall attendance data, so that this could be used to prompt interventions with students identified as being 'at risk'.

The data was then used to provide prompts to personal tutors such that interventions could be made in a timely manner. The data was also used with students who missed sessions and this had the effect of identifying where high levels of attendance at vocational sessions was making poor attendance elsewhere.

The Leadership Impact

Initially, the opportunity for a positive impact was hampered by a lack of clarity about the actions expected by those staff

involved in the process. This particular issue was identified through a midpoint review of the project. The outcome was that a flowchart was produced to clarify the expected roles and responsibilities in the process. Evidence collected at the end of the project showed that attendance had risen across all groups by an average of 1% in the short period of the initial project activity (9 weeks) and this continued during the weeks that followed.

In addition, the increased focus upon attendance has prevented any decline in English and Maths attendance that the college would normally have expected to see during this period, such that, when compared to the previous academic year, attendance in English and Maths is currently 9% higher.

Another unexpected benefit of the project has been greater ownership amongst curriculum staff of their students' attendance outside of the vocational sessions and the positive use of newly available data to prompt other interventions related to student performance and behaviour.

Leadership Reflections

In order to impact on student behaviour and arrest poor practices such as non-attendance, it is essential that interventions take place very early on and as soon as the issue is identified. Early intervention related to performance can also identify other barriers to learning which can be addressed through a range of support measures. It is also essential that staff are given access to data in a timely manner and that this data is broken down to a level that is meaningful for those who need it, including students.

ENGAGING VOCATIONAL LEARNERS IN ENGLISH AND MATHS

When planning study programmes, it can be difficult to provide meaningful activities for learners who have already reached the required levels in English and Maths. How can learners be engaged in activities which are valued, meaningful and support their futures?

The Leadership Issue

Feedback from students who had already achieved English and Maths indicated that there was insufficient challenge and stimulation provided in the sessions that they attended while their peers were attending dedicated English and Maths sessions.

Leadership Action

In order to make sure that the activities for students who had already achieved English and Maths at the required level were impactful, the provider decided to structure sessions around community-based events which would increase the profile of students and skills; provide opportunities to raise funds for community projects; and, allow students real-life opportunities to use their English and Maths skills.

In choosing to use delivery hours in this way, the provider was trying to address the twin imperatives of engaging and motivating learners in structured learning activities whilst also ensuring the learners were continuing to develop with English and Maths skills.

The Leadership Impact

The project had a positive impact across the provider in that learners attached greater value to their programme of study as evidenced by improvements in attendance at all study programme sessions. The unintended outcome of this was that the provider was able to evidence that all hours of the study programme were being delivered and this had a positive knock-on impact on provider funding.

Additionally, there has been an improvement in the profile that the provider has within the community.

Leadership Reflections

When considering the make up of study programmes, it is important to identify the wider benefits of each element of the study programme to learners. Leaders need to remember that not all learners undertaking the study programme will have similar prior levels of attainment, therefore, trying to include differentiated elements based on existing skill and qualification levels is essential when designing a study programme.

IMPROVING RETENTION AND ACHIEVEMENT

When taking on new areas of responsibility, curriculum managers are often faced with the need to tackle under-performance. But how do they set about changing the mindsets of delivery teams in order to drive improvement?

The Leadership Issue

Analysis of students' performance showed that achievement on Level 3 Diploma courses was poor in many areas of the college. This was in contrast to that at other levels, suggesting that there could be an issue with the planning, design and delivery of the curriculum.

Leadership Action

To better understand the potential issues, research was undertaken to review college performance against national rates and benchmarks. Alongside this, a review of the available data relating to learner behaviour, preferred styles of learning and wider motivation was conducted in order to shape thinking about alternative approaches to delivering the curriculum.

As the project progressed, it was clear that the focus should shift to curriculum delivery and specifically the need for consistency in approaches to delivery. As a result, a 'Repeat, Retain, Recall' framework was trialled within the Construction area in order to establish the efficacy of the approach before being implemented elsewhere.

The Leadership Impact

The manager took a very brave approach to implementation by demonstrating the delivery model themselves to a group of challenging students outside of their area of specialism. They role modelled the behaviours they expected from their team and this was instrumental in gaining the confidence and 'buy-in' of team members, resulting in the successful adoption of this new delivery method across the curriculum area.

Learners first-time pass rates on the exam elements of their courses have shown significant improvement, whilst attendance and retention rates are also higher than those of the previous year.

Leadership Reflections

When making change, it is important to secure the buy-in of team members and role modelling the behaviours expected of team members not only achieves buy-in but also builds confidence amongst delivery staff. By role modelling changed behaviours, we, as leaders, are also accepting the fact that the change may fail and we are prepared to accept failure on the basis that we have tried to make something work.

IMPROVING THE LEARNER EXPERIENCE THROUGH A MORE VOCATIONALLY RELEVANT CURRICULUM

Increasing the vocational relevance of the curriculum is a challenge that all colleges face and will become even more important as T Levels are implemented. How do managers build the confidence of teaching staff to develop curriculum delivery and teaching practice to make it more relevant to today's workplace?

The Leadership Issue

Recent observations of teaching and learning had showed that staff often demonstrated insufficient appreciation of current industry practice and that delivery was not consistently contextualised in order to engage students. This was further corroborated by feedback from learners through one-to-one discussions and student meetings.

Leadership Action

To provide a more engaging experience for students, several opportunities were sought for employers to visit the college and deliver sessions to groups of learners. Additionally, further engagement with these employers was intended to provide a greater range of opportunities for students to complete relevant work experience placements. Delivery staff were fully engaged with this approach and also used the employer sessions as development for their own practice.

In addition, the manager, who was new to the role, took the opportunity to pilot a range of approaches to interact with delivery staff in new ways, all with the intention of engaging staff in the development of a plan for change. One of the main purposes of this was to understand the concerns of staff and any real or perceived barriers to changing their approaches to curriculum delivery.

The Leadership Impact

The approach adopted by the manager was perceived by staff as being highly developmental and non-threatening and staff fully engaged in the process of change. Success was achieved through combining one-to-one meetings with staff - in order to identify anxieties, concerns and barriers; a small number of employer-led sessions; and, actions and plans that the entire team signed up to.

Leadership Reflections

New and inexperienced managers often struggle to challenge the practice of experienced teachers and particularly of those who were previously peers. Designing a framework and structured approach to asking challenging questions is advisable in order to ensure that conversations are constructive.

Using employers to enhance curriculum delivery is an excellent way of also upskilling the teaching workforce and to create a culture of whole team learning and development.

CURRICULUM CHANGE – STRENGTHENING INTENT AND RELEVANCE

Colleges must show that a clear curriculum intent and provision are clearly rooted in meeting the needs of local employers and the communities they serve. But how do colleges build effective partnerships to ensure their offer delivers impact?

The Leadership Issue

Analysis of data for the area in question indicated issues with declining enrolments, decreasing internal progression and positive progression to meaningful employment. Addressing the issues whilst arresting the position was a focus for this middle leader.

Leadership Action

In order to build a distinctive curriculum intent as well as understanding the needs of students and the local community, a range of activities were undertaken including focus groups with students, meetings with staff and visits to local employers and community groups. Whilst the internal focus of the project was very important, building relationships with key local stakeholders was seen as critical in order to ensure the relevance of the provision offered by the college. Understanding the needs of target communities was a crucial element of informing the development of future provision, and giving the middle leader a role to work externally was important to strengthening the intent and relevance of the curriculum.

The Leadership Impact

The project had a positive impact upon the remodelling and redevelopment of the curriculum and also increased levels of

staff engagement through enabling them to work externally. As a result, the college has seen increased recruitment to existing programmes, the development of new provision and good recruitment to these newly developed programmes.

Focusing on external stakeholders and communities when rethinking the curriculum has resulted in a strengthened profile for the college and there are now more opportunities to partner with a wider range of organisations. For example, the local basketball club are now offering placements for students and other organisations are enabling the development of additional programmes for students to develop a wider range of skills and achieve additional qualifications.

Leadership Reflections

Introducing change is always difficult, particularly for new leaders. This project highlighted the need for the leader to be confident in their abilities to lead change and to engage in extensive communications around the change. Acknowledging the fears of others when driving change is key to embedding new habits and ways of working.

IMPROVING ATTENDANCE AND PUNCTUALITY FOR LEVEL 2 LEARNERS

Transition into college requires young people to thrive in an environment with greater freedom and risks of making choices that reduce their chance to fulfil their potential. How are students' growth and development maximised within an environment that seeks to minimise the risks of poor decision making?

The Leadership Issue

The analysis of data for the programme in question demonstrated that students' attendance was poor and that this had been the case from early in the college year. Traditional approaches to changing student behaviour had proved ineffective and it was clear that different approaches and solutions to the issue needed to be found.

Leadership Action

Engagement with students indicated many were struggling to adapt to the increased 'freedoms' that came with the transition to an FE college environment. Where the college curriculum lacks the whole day commitment that they have been used to since age 5, some learners struggle to adapt and sometimes their attendance and/or punctuality begins to suffer.

The first intention was to set in place revised behavioural expectations and to communicate these clearly to learners. Guidelines for staff were also introduced to set out how they should respond to those learners not meeting the new expectations with the purpose of ensuring all learners were treated consistently across all aspects of their study programme. Alongside the intent of improving learner progress and achievement, was the desire to minimise disruption to teaching because of poor punctuality and to inculcate a culture of fairness where those students who were meeting expectations were not disadvantaged.

The Leadership Impact

Analysis of student performance showed that the introduction of the new framework resulted in a 6% increase in attendance for the programme in question. What was not expected however, was the positive impact it had on attendance on other programmes which amounted to 2.5%. This was because the measures introduced for learners on this programme were transferred by staff on to some of the other programmes they taught on. Additionally, students were seen to show greater commitment in their efforts to be punctual and to behave in class, whilst learning walks showed that they were receiving better teaching as a result.

An associated benefit was the improvement in staff morale through seeing better engagement in teaching sessions; improvements in the focus upon 'at-risk' students; and, opportunities to focus upon supporting teachers to improve practice still further.

Leadership Reflections

When seeking to implement change and aiming to secure the buy-in of staff for the change initiative, it is essential to work with staff at the outset on defining the purpose of the change. When asked the question "why are we doing this?" the whole staff team must be able to give a consistent answer. For change to work, it needs to be valued by everyone involved and not seen as the latest whim of the leader. One of the roles of a middle leader is to check that what has been agreed is being implemented and one of the most effective ways is to walk the floor to see the change initiative in action.

SUPPORTING ESOL LEARNERS TO THRIVE IN THE UK

The UK economy can benefit from the extensive knowledge and skills of those settling here from overseas. Colleges have a vital role bridging gaps between students' past experiences and the expectations of UK employers – but how do they do this effectively?

The Leadership Issue

Student feedback demonstrated that significant numbers of students were highly qualified in their vocational field but could not translate this into similar level employment in the UK due to the current level of their English skills. Additionally, many would be looking for volunteering placements to bolster their employment prospects but could not access the available opportunities.

Leadership Action

Engagement with students provided the opportunity to identify the range of barriers that they faced as they sought to both build their literacy skills and seek opportunities that enabled them to make a meaningful contribution to their communities.

By positioning the college as a bridge between the learners and the outside world, opportunities were sought to build external relationships for the benefit of students. The college is surrounded by a significant number of community groups, voluntary organisations and other support agencies. Therefore, the college developed a range of new partnerships with the specific purpose of providing opportunities for the group of learners to better integrate into civic society whilst boosting their prospects for employment.

The Leadership Impact

There was a positive response from a wide range of local stakeholders and organisations to support this initiative. It has been hugely beneficial to work with partners to define the challenges of securing opportunities for the learner group because this has enabled a plan to be developed to address the challenges and issues. A number of local groups have attended the college and delivered workshops and these have been well attended and resulted in over 30 learners visiting local organisations. The nature of the partnerships developed mean that future learners will also be able to benefit from this initiative.

Leadership Reflections

Sometimes, when introducing new initiatives, the middle leader has a choice between starting the new initiative and stopping something else in order to create the space and time required to make the new initiative a success. External partnership working and building new relationships is often very time consuming and it can take time for the benefits to be apparent. Therefore middle leaders need to be clear about the opportunity cost of introducing new initiatives and making sure that the benefits outweigh the costs in terms of time and effort.

IMPROVING LEARNERS' AWARENESS OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION THROUGH INDUCTION ACTIVITIES

All colleges must achieve delivery of effective, engaging and impactful induction activities. How then, should they support those delivery staff to make sure that students' knowledge is enhanced and long-term changes in understanding are achieved?

The Leadership Issue

Through analysing surveys completed after the initial induction period over a number of years, it was evident that activities to develop learners' awareness and understanding of diversity and inclusion had failed to have the desired outcomes and impact.

Leadership Action

Conversations with staff found that many lacked confidence in their skills and abilities to deliver content relating to diversity and inclusion. Staff felt this was because the subject lacked the vocational contextualisation that would make it relevant to learners. This was reinforced by feedback from students that indicated that their engagement with the areas of diversity and inclusion would be strengthened if it was delivered in a manner relevant to the context of their desired career outcomes or personal life circumstances.

As a team, staff developed a range of vocationally relevant resources which they then delivered during the induction period. The middle leader used learning walks to get a sense of what was happening on the ground as well as assessing the effectiveness of the delivery of diversity and inclusion. In addition, learners were asked to complete a post-induction survey which indicated improved levels of engagement.

The Leadership Impact

Feedback from learners improved significantly to an average of 89%, indicating that their engagement with the revised content had a beneficial impact. The broad range of results ranging from 60% to 100% positive feedback did, however, suggest that further refinement was possible and this was corroborated by observations during learning walks which showed that implementation of the new resources was inconsistent, suggesting that a number of barriers remained which could be addressed through further development for delivery staff.

Leadership Reflections

Supplying dedicated materials to support teachers' delivery has often been an approach taken by colleges, awarding bodies and industry organisations trying to achieve consistency and raise quality amongst curriculum delivery. Whilst such materials are useful in setting a standard for teachers, they are rarely the panacea that they seek to be as they do not address the need to support teachers with developing the effectiveness with which they deliver the craft of teaching itself. Consequently, successful implementation is likely to come from a combination of materials and support for delivery staff.

BETTER IDENTIFICATION AND SUPPORT FOR LEARNERS REQUIRING LEARNING SUPPORT

Identifying the additional learning support needs of learners and providing high-quality and effective support is vital in enabling those students to fulfil their potential. How do colleges develop an integrated approach that ensures all learners are fully supported?

The Leadership Issue

An internal review found that arrangements for identifying, planning and delivering learning support to learners were not clear enough. When a new middle leader was appointed to this area, the opportunity arose to consider how more effective arrangements could be developed and implemented.

Leadership Action

A comprehensive review of arrangements involved discussions with team members and with staff from various areas of the curriculum, in order that information could be gathered showing how the current system had evolved, the challenges that it presented and its efficacy in making sure that as many students as possible received the level of support that gave them the best opportunity to succeed.

Based on the feedback obtained, a new system was designed and implemented and new working methods were established. New process documents were developed and an extensive training programme for key internal stakeholders was implemented. Teachers of English, Maths and Foundation programmes were specifically targeted as the main users of the new systems and approaches. At each stage of designing the new process, the question asked was how this would impact on learner achievement, success and the fulfilment of potential.

The Leadership Impact

New processes and approaches were successfully implemented which started to show benefits to learners, staff and the wider college very early on. Of particular note is that staff feel more confident in what they are doing. The college was able to increase the level of support being provided, not only to an increased number of learners but also to those for who high needs funding was already being claimed. As a result of improved and more targeted support arrangements, learner attendance and retention has improved in line with national rates. As a result of the project, staff in the core learning support team began to communicate more effectively with teachers across the college and there is now greater consistency of approach by staff.

Leadership Reflections

Bringing about change across multiple internal stakeholder groups takes a lot of time. Ensuring a robust and stress tested plan is in place is essential to driving change in a timely manner. As the leader of change, it is important to listen to feedback from internal stakeholders and to be prepared to flex your thinking. In order to maintain the motivation of staff during complicated projects, it is important to celebrate each small success along the route to achieving the final objective.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS TO CREATE WORK-READY LEARNERS

How can providers ensure they set expectations of conduct and behaviour that promote work-readiness whilst allowing learners greater freedom alongside the need to protect them from harming their futures as valued employees?

The Leadership Issue

Observations of learner conduct over several years across the whole organisation, indicated deteriorating levels of behaviour, particularly amongst new learners. This in turn had a knock-on negative impact on staff morale and employer feedback and, ultimately, on the performance of students.

Leadership Action

At the outset of this project, it was essential to build a clear understanding of the reasons why learner behaviour was consistently below the expectations of the organisation and how the current situation had been enabled to develop. Part of the approach was to work with learners themselves, to ask them to identify reasons for poor behaviour levels. One outcome that they highlighted was the impact of previous schooling upon their perceptions of what constituted acceptable behaviour. The identification of this factor meant that whatever approaches and initiatives were developed, it was essential to build in opportunities for learners to learn how to manage their behaviour and achieve consistency across all elements of their learning programmes.

Discussions with teaching staff identified inconsistencies in approaches and expectations with staff not working within a

clear behaviour and conduct framework. It was also clear that whilst poor learner conduct was impacting negatively on the morale of staff, at the heart of the issue was a lack of knowledge, skills and confidence in tackling poor conduct and promoting good behaviour.

The Leadership Impact

Through the implementation of a behavioural contract with all learners, it was possible to establish clear expectations and boundaries for students and defined expectations of how teaching staff would respond in instances of conduct that fell short of expectations. Through this approach, it was possible to introduce a clear framework with actions and sanctions that were understood by all.

The new approach quickly produced significant improvements in learner behaviour and the quality of their work and, through the lesson observation process, it was possible to identify improvements in staff morale. Having a clear framework also resulted in improved engagement with employers and a clear willingness on the part of employers to take part in collaborative reviews of conduct and behaviour of their apprentices with the provider.

Leadership Reflections

Whilst it is preferable to make changes and set new expectations at the start of an academic year or new programme of learning, it is not always possible. In fact, when an issue arises mid-year or mid-programme, it is essential that action is taken at that point and that the issue is not allowed to continue until a new year or programme commences. However, when introducing changes part way through a year or programme, it is important that these are developed in a collaborative manner and communicated widely. When introducing initiatives to tackle issues of conduct and behaviour, middle leaders should recognise that staff will often need coaching and developing to build their skills and confidence.

IMPROVING STAFF ENGAGEMENT THROUGH WELL-BEING INITIATIVES

The well-being of the workforce is recognised as key to organisational success and high levels of staff performance. Whilst many organisations now identify staff well-being as a strategic priority, how can this be supported effectively in a constrained financial operating climate?

The Leadership Issue

Whilst the college has a good track record of investing to support the well-being of staff, research highlighted the importance of leaders continually reviewing approaches and intervening to support the continued well-being of staff. In a financially constrained operating environment, it is difficult to enhance the well-being offer to staff but on the other hand, the need to focus on well-being is greater than ever before.

Leadership Action

A large amount of research on the well-being of staff already exists. Reviewing the available literature and considering how successful organisations approach employee well-being was the first step of this project. Based on this review, it was clear that an organisation could approach employee well-being initiatives in an affordable way by introducing a range of small-scale initiatives that had employee engagement at the core. Therefore, a range of events and activities were introduced including, group walks around the area; 'Time to Talk' events; scheduled sessions for staff to catch up with each other over coffee and cake; engagement with national initiatives such as Race for Life; and, the introduction of a staff sports day.

The Leadership Impact

Overall, staff engaged positively with well-being events and activities provided by the college. Attendance at the various events has been variable but has showed a continual increase during the period covered by the project activity. The whole-college staff survey showed a significant improvement in satisfaction levels with staff being more positive about working at the college.

Whilst not explicitly linked to this project but closely related to the subject matter, the college was named in the Times Top 100 List of Best Employers and this was a significant recognition of the shift in approach taken by the college. Of particular significance was the impact of this project during the Covid-19 lockdown period where a strong foundation for staff engagement and well-being was already in place because of this project.

Leadership Reflections

When a middle leader seeks to develop and implement a change project, it is essential that the support and buy-in of senior leaders is achieved. Having a champion for the project on the senior team can significantly contribute to whole organisation buy-in. Middle leaders should also recognise the extent to which they may have to develop some aspects of the change project for others due to the significant workload their day job entails.

BUILDING STAFF RESILIENCE THROUGH WELL-BEING INITIATIVES

Resilience is key to succeeding as an employee in the FE sector today. Whilst the need to focus on the well-being of staff is recognised across the vast majority of providers, how can leaders support the development of resilience amongst staff in an affordable manner?

The Leadership Issue

Through a programme of organisational change and development, the college gave a number of middle leaders greater levels of responsibility and accountability. However, the ever changing nature of the further education operating environment calls for increased levels of leadership resilience and the organisation found that a new imperative around staff well-being was now a clear leadership issue.

Leadership Action

Creating time and opportunities for staff to catch up and engage with each other proved to be a popular and successful initiative. By identifying a specific time in the college day, leaders were clearly saying to staff that it was acceptable to stand back from operational duties and responsibilities and engage informally with colleagues. When introducing well-being and engagement initiatives, it is also important that leaders do not control the events and put an agenda in place. In many ways, these types of activities should be informal, staff-led and provide an opportunity to informally network with colleagues, share issues and experiences, and discuss solutions. As part of the initiative, it was identified that the views of participants in informal networks are sought to understand whether they do value such approaches and initiatives. As a result of the success of this informal networking initiative, a cross-college group was established to build on the success of this project and identify new initiatives.

The Leadership Impact

The sessions quickly achieved a critical mass of regular participants along with a more transient group of staff who attended less frequently. Anecdotal evidence from the initial sessions indicated that participants valued the sessions and this was further evidenced by the participants becoming advocates for the sessions and encouraging other colleagues to take part. The sessions were initially supported by senior leaders on a pilot or trial basis and, given the initial success, the college has now decided to support the continuation of the sessions. The key area of impact however, was that the senior team have committed to further well-being initiatives being introduced and have given staff the permission to engage in sessions during the working day.

Leadership Reflections

When introducing new initiatives, middle leaders often have to commit their own time and work on the change programme in addition to their day job. When a cross-college initiative is introduced, it is helpful to secure the support of a small number of colleagues who are also prepared to commit some of their time to get the programme up and running.

Sometimes success can be achieved with relatively few resources and the determination of the project leader and support of colleagues is critical to success.

SUPPORTING LEADERSHIP ASPIRATION

Developing and maintaining a culture where staff feel valued, supported and able to achieve their goals for development is likely to enable colleges to sustain high-quality provision. How can career development pathways be built in organisations?

The Leadership Issue

Creating a leadership culture whereby leadership talent is identified and invested in through a 'grow your own' approach had been previously identified as a priority for the organisation. By supporting staff to build their skills and knowledge, they were better placed when opportunities arose to successfully apply and move into posts of greater responsibility. The college had also identified the likely beneficial impact upon staff morale at a time when providing staff with more tangible rewards was proving difficult. However, implementing actions and initiatives to support this organisational priority now had to be achieved.

Leadership Action

An internal team was formed to take this initiative forward and alongside the project leader, a Vice Principal and member of the Human Resources team also took part. Staff were invited to take part in an internal development programme and 83 expressions of interest were received. A final cohort of 30 members of staff were identified as being most likely to benefit from the development programme.

A programme framework was developed and project leads were put in place. In addition, materials for the programme were

purchased and a programme of development sessions was put in place delivered by college staff and external consultants.

The Leadership Impact

50% of the participants successfully completed the programme and all participants have been mentored either by their line manager or by someone from the project team. The programme content has included contributions from staff, colleagues from other colleges and external consultants. Exposing developing and aspiring leaders to a formal development programme has developed their ability to take on more responsibility. They have a better understanding of how their roles fit into the whole organisation and the contributions they can make to whole organisation performance. They also have a clear sense of the culture required to achieve success.

Leadership Reflections

Introducing leadership development activities requires clear and honest communication and an open culture that achieves buy in and commitment. Involving senior managers in development programmes secures the commitment and motivation of staff and also ensures that others in the organisation are not threatened by the development of colleagues. Providing development opportunities such as this achieves a sense that a career development pathway exists within an organisation to support a culture which enables colleagues to thrive and succeed.

IMPROVING THE VALUE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

There is a clear link between an organisation's approach to leadership and the process of performance management. So, when seeking to make leadership approaches more diverse and inclusive, how can a more inclusive and trusting approach to performance management be developed?

The Leadership Issue

College leaders began to consider how a range of leadership approaches could be used to enable the college to move to the next phase of its development. Consideration of the effectiveness of different styles and approaches was given and whilst top down approaches had resulted in real organisational success, was there now an opportunity to consider a more diversified range of leadership and management approaches within the organisation? Central to the thinking about leadership approaches in the organisation, was the way in which performance management was conducted.

Leadership Action

Current approaches to performance management were reviewed and all processes associated with performance management were examined. When reviewing the approaches and processes, the cultural impact was considered. Meetings with teams of staff were used to elicit open and honest feedback and an anonymised questionnaire was distributed to gain the views of staff about their perceptions of the cultural and technical barriers to more effective performance management. The college will use the findings from these activities to develop and implement revised processes, provide training for all staff across the college and monitor activities to measure the impact upon staff engagement.

The Leadership Impact

Adopting a research-based approach was extremely useful in identifying possible solutions for change. Giving staff the opportunity to provide honest and open feedback about how they perceived performance management approaches was useful as a route to securing greater employee engagement. The project also identified the potential to introduce a process of internal coaching as part of wider performance management approaches and that this would be considered more beneficial to staff than a top down approach based largely on performance review. Through the project, there has been a recognition that a sole focus on measuring performance will not achieve the culture required to continue to excel.

Leadership Reflections

Approaches to performance management are heavily influenced by the overall leadership culture of an organisation. For example, within command and control cultures, things will be measured, whereas in developmental cultures, improvement and support will be at the core. In developing a new approach to performance management, any metrics used should not be one dimensional and should be cognisant of all aspects of the leadership role, and, approaches should engender a culture of trust and support.

IMPROVING FINANCIAL AWARENESS OF BUDGET HOLDERS

Providing managers with the timely information needed to make effective decisions is both vital and challenging. So how can budget holders, who are not finance specialists, be supported to be more effective in the financial management aspects of their roles?

The Leadership Issue

Accuracy, reliability and timeliness in financial information is crucial to the success and sustainability of any organisation. In this organisation, at the end of the accounting year, a number of unforecasted surpluses had been identified in budgets and leaders were keen to discover these sooner in order to invest this resource into the learner experience.

Leadership Action

A review of current financial processes was undertaken with a view to identify how budget holders could be better supported to undertake the financial management aspects of their roles. Middle leaders with the largest non-pay budgets were interviewed to see how they used the financial information being provided to them and whether they encountered any difficulties or issues with the information or whether they had the necessary skills to competently undertake their roles as budget managers.

The Leadership Impact

Based upon the review and feedback, a new reporting framework was developed for budget holders which made use of graphs to provide a more visual illustration of financial performance. In addition, a training programme for budget

managers was introduced and a programme of one-to-one meetings with the finance manager was introduced. Managers felt that their budget management abilities had been strengthened and they now had a better sense of the budget planning process. At the end of the project, the financial information demonstrated that managers were able to forecast their expenditure more accurately and this enabled the college to redistribute underspends for the benefit of learners.

Leadership Reflections

When seeking to improve the budget management skills of non-financial managers, consideration needs to be given to the way in which data and information is presented. Is it user friendly and understandable to those who are not trained in financial management? Investing the time and effort into building the financial awareness of budget holders can bring tangible benefits to learners as well as building the leadership confidence of the budget holders.

LEADING CHANGE-FOCUSED CONVERSATIONS

Supporting colleagues with continuous change often requires middle leaders to have challenging and difficult conversations. But how can middle leaders do this with confidence and achieve the behaviour change which is often required of others?

The Leadership Issue

Like any sector organisation, the leader's college was subject to a programme of continuous change and adaptation, largely as a result of policy changes at a national and regional level. At the same time, leadership thinking shifts and requires organisations to change the way they operate and this often relates to the way in which staff undertake their roles. Ensuring that staff develop the skills and approaches necessary to respond to a rapidly changing learning environment is vital in enabling colleges to succeed in the future and it is often the role of the middle leader to support staff with these changes.

Leadership Action

Some people are more difficult to engage in change programmes than others. There is an extensive range of literature available on the subject matter and as such, the participant undertook a literature review to develop their understanding of the issue of change management as well as seeking to identify opportunities to pilot different approaches to working with individuals who are usually difficult to engage in the process of change. This literature review was also used to identify the potential reasons and factors for resistance to change in order to frame thoughts and responses to these prior to the process of individual staff conversations which were anticipated to be difficult. As part of the project, it was also important for the leader to build a better understanding of their own motivations and behaviours and the way they approached

change, specifically in relation to their interactions with others. The leader then trialled and evaluated several approaches to change-focused conversations to see how team members responded.

The Leadership Impact

The leader identified that in order for them to lead change, they should focus on ways to improve the engagement of team members. They sought to build emotional bridges through shared conversations; they framed conversations differently and placed a greater emphasis on the purpose of change initiatives rather than the detail of what staff would be required to do. The leader also considered the physical environments they used to have change-focused conversations and sought to use more formal settings to encourage a more inclusive approach to the conversation. Observations of individual behaviour have identified a change in behaviour and a greater willingness to respond positively to changing expectations. The leader has also grown in confidence and is more prepared to engage in challenging conversations, the outcome of which tend to be much more positive than before.

Leadership Reflections

When faced with a challenging change-based situation, a good starting point is to undertake a mini literature review and read some of the material on change management that is widely available. Building the confidence of middle leaders to handle difficult conversations and to engage staff in the introduction of change should be seen as a key development need of the sector. Prior to embarking on difficult conversations, the middle leader should reflect on their own behaviour and approach when embarking on a programme of change.

BUILDING SUCCESS TRAITS IN MODERN FE LEADERS

The FE and Skills sector is a rapidly changing and continuously challenging place to work. Do managers have the skills and knowledge necessary to be successful in today's sector and how can organisations support their middle leaders to develop the skills and traits required to meet the challenges?

The Leadership Issue

Experienced leaders in further education have long recognised that significant changes continually occur within the organisational environment and the wider sector. Senior leaders in the most successful organisations have recognised that successful leaders and managers of the future will need to be able to refocus and repurpose their existing skills and knowledge to reflect new expectations. Therefore, it is important for organisations and their leaders to be clear about what is, and will be, required of successful middle leaders.

Leadership Action

As a starting point, the leader focused their learning activities around developing their understanding of current expectations of those managing in FE today. This included reviewing literature and other available material; conducting meetings and discussions with staff, students and peers; and, identifying the skills considered necessary for leaders to succeed both now and in the future. Having undertaken this first stage of the project, a number of activities were identified that could be useful in developing the skills and knowledge of middle leaders. Out of this came recommendations to the college on future priorities for the professional development of leaders.

The Leadership Impact

By undertaking this project, there was an increasing recognition in the organisation that developing the skills and abilities of middle leaders was of great importance, particularly if the organisation wants to face the future from a position of strength. There was further understanding that crucial to building leadership capacity, was the promotion of a growth mindset across the organisation, aligned with a need to develop emotional intelligence, self-awareness and team awareness.

Leadership Reflections

By undertaking this project, it was possible to identify a number of traits of successful leaders. They are not afraid of change and believe in empowering people and nurturing the development of knowledge and skills. They also communicate not only their ideas but also their plans very well and they create a climate where it is acceptable to fail.

ENGAGING STAFF IN TECH-ENABLED SOLUTIONS

Providers are increasingly seeking more effective approaches to apprenticeship delivery whilst also looking to improve efficiency. When looking to implement tech-enabled solutions, how are staff, students and employers effectively supported?

The Leadership Issue

The provider identified that in order to deliver high-quality and cost-effective training, it would need to further develop the use of technology in its delivery model. One aspect of this, was the need to reduce the burden of paperwork, improve assessment and record keeping, and, ensure that evidence of progress was being captured effectively. Therefore, it was decided that an e-portfolio system was the solution they wished to embed across the provision.

Leadership Action

Prior to addressing any of the technology elements of the project, the leader decided that if the change programme was to be successful, a coherent plan to engage staff, students and employers should be put in place. The plan identified potential barriers and this enabled solutions to the barriers to be identified before the barriers presented themselves. The most significant barriers identified related to low levels of digital literacy amongst some staff members and resistance to the implementation of new systems. In managing the project, the leader decided to role model the desired behaviours and took a clear role in demonstrating and using the system, being open about the issues and obstacles as well as sharing the benefits of the system. Most importantly, the leader also created a non-judgmental climate where staff were able to share their concerns and fears. This then led to a support and training package to be developed to help staff overcome their anxieties about moving to a new digital system.

The Leadership Impact

As a result of starting with the people aspects of the project, rather than the technology aspects, the project was successfully implemented across the organisation with high levels of consistency of use. Teachers and assessors have successfully embraced the system and are actively using tablet computers during placement visits to complete documentation that can later be uploaded on their return to the office. One of the unintended but positive outcomes of this approach has been the way in which learners engage their employers in their learning as employers can now access information on the progress that learners are making. The process of moving to a tech-enabled solution has also created more collaboration between staff members as they all developed their skills and knowledge together to use the new system.

Leadership Reflections

Where providers wish to successfully bring forward new tech-enabled solutions, they should not underestimate the support that the end users will require. Creating a change culture that starts with the people elements of the change, rather than the technology elements, will foster greater buy-in and support. Any change programme should seek to minimise fear and anxiety, and leadership approaches should be non-judgmental.

IMPLEMENTING NEW SYSTEMS THROUGH AN ENGAGEMENT-LED APPROACH

As the structure of apprenticeships changes, colleges are reviewing existing technological solutions to see if they are still fit for purpose. If new systems are then implemented, how are staff, students and employers effectively supported?

The Leadership Issue

Having previously migrated to an e-portfolio system, the college was finding that the current system was increasingly not fulfilling its requirements. Consequently, the leader was given the task of identifying the most appropriate system for future needs and leading its implementation across the organisation, all within the context of the introduction of the new apprenticeship standards.

Leadership Action

At the outset, it was decided to engage with staff who would be the end users of any new system. This enabled the project leader to gain the views of those who would be using the system and to flag any issues or concerns. This also gave the leader the opportunity to focus on the purpose of the change and to define the problems that a new system would solve. As part of the implementation strategy, staff champions were identified within each vocational area and their role was to support both staff and apprentices with any issues that were identified from the initial training and the early stages of implementation. This enabled the project lead to share the workload of implementation, build a team of advocates for the new system and, approach and make sure that support was readily available to staff and apprentices.

The Leadership Impact

The implementation approach resulted in all staff and apprentices being successfully migrated to the new system and staff feedback about the process has been particularly positive. Key to the success of the project was a phased approach to implementation whereby the various aspects of the system were implemented in priority order, that being that end users were not overwhelmed with new information and processes all at once.

Leadership Reflections

When bringing forward significant system changes, and particularly new technology-focused solutions, providers should think carefully about how they are going to achieve buy-in from the end users. Phased and priority led implementation is often a good way to ensure that those that are new to the systems are not overwhelmed. Delegating responsibility for supporting end-users and through building a team of champions is a highly effective way of sharing the workload and achieving the buy-in of staff.

BUILDING INTERNAL COLLABORATION IN MARKETING

Effective marketing is something which has the power to transform a college's image and reputation. How can leaders of marketing ensure that internal stakeholders are adequately engaged and involved so that they feel their needs are being met?

The Leadership Issue

The lack of a coherent marketing strategy meant that much activity was not planned and was reactive, based on the requests being made by staff. Where marketing plans existed, they were not fit for purpose and they were lacking in innovation and creativity and crucially, there was little overlap with the wider group marketing plan.

Leadership Action

A new college strategy was developed in order to ensure that priorities were clear, marketing objectives were set and the outcomes of marketing activity were clearly defined. How marketing worked with other parts of the organisation was also considered and key internal stakeholders were identified. A process of Account Management was introduced whereby marketing could work closely with internal stakeholders and positive collaboration could be promoted. This approach was also put in place to ensure stakeholders had visibility on marketing activities and were aware of key developments.

The Leadership Impact

As a result of a new strategy and plan being developed, communication is now more effective between members of the marketing team and internal stakeholders. Stakeholders now have a clearer understanding of developments and activities

that are taking place and colleagues in marketing are now more satisfied with their job roles as a result of having clarity about their responsibilities. Colleagues in marketing are also provided with better opportunities to work with curriculum staff and they feel that there is now greater recognition of the impact their work has on the college. Greater connectivity between the marketing team and curriculum staff has resulted in more collaboration when planning events and delivering new activities.

Leadership Reflections

Tensions between the demands of curriculum leaders and those charged with delivering marketing plans are often inevitable. As a way of reducing such tensions, a focus should be placed on managing expectations and addressing perceptions as well as bringing clarity to the respective roles and responsibilities of individuals and teams. Giving curriculum staff an active role in the development of marketing plans and thereby creating collaborative networks, brings a range of benefits including a reduction in professional tensions, the creation of more impactful plans and joint problem solving.

DELIVERING RAPID IMPROVEMENT THROUGH JOINED UP QUALITY STRATEGIES

Sustaining Good provision, whilst continuing to improve towards becoming Outstanding, is a challenge that many colleges face. How might systems and processes change to reflect the latest inspection framework and promote sustainable improvement?

The Leadership Issue

As a provider judged to be 'Good' at its last inspection, the college recognised the need to strengthen strategies and interventions to achieve consistency in quality across the organisation. Like many providers, as well as having good and outstanding provision, some areas of curriculum were deemed to be performing below the required standard and it was essential that the pace of improvement in these areas be accelerated.

Leadership Action

As the lead for quality in the organisation, the leader stood back from the issues themselves and sought to build a clear sense of why current approaches and systems are not having the desired impact in some areas of provision. Part of this process was to undertake research into how other providers tackled similar quality difficulties as well as undertaking a review of the available literature on improvement, including performance management approaches. As part of this discovery phase, the leader also engaged with curriculum heads and managers to understand their perceptions of the issues and how best to implement initiatives to drive engagement and accountability for performance and standards. In-house performance data was also reviewed to consider how this data could be integrated into, or considered as part of, performance improvement processes.

The Leadership Impact

A new strategy was implemented with the intention of improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment; improving learner outcomes including achievement, value added and learner satisfaction rates; and, ensuring consistency in the performance of staff. Actions and processes to quickly tackle underperformance were also identified. The new approaches can be used on a differentiated and target basis and make use of a combination of data driven intervention, quality driven intervention and needs led intervention which is based on departmental intelligence. At the heart of this new approach is a focus on 'root cause analysis' which ensures the key issues are identified and interventions targeted accordingly.

Leadership Reflections

When driving a holistic improvement strategy, there should be full integration between data and information, key quality indicators and processes, and, aspects of performance management systems and approaches. A coherent and joined up framework with a process of 'root cause analysis' can deliver rapid improvement through the identification of the real, rather than perceived, issues.

BUILDING UNDERSTANDING FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

Expected standards for the quality and focus of FE and skills provision continue to change and develop. So how do we ensure that our people have the skills and knowledge to identify and tackle underperformance?

The Leadership Issue

Having identified current systems were not achieving improvement in a fast enough time scale, the leader set out to establish the reasons why this was the case in order to devise and implement a more effective approach to improvement.

Leadership Action

Whilst the leader had their own opinions as to why existing processes were not effective in driving improvement, it was important to engage team members in professional conversations as to why improvement was not occurring at the desired rate. The leader was also able to draw on a number of observations they had made based on seeing processes and systems in action. The decision was also taken to get an external view by discussing issues with peers and their mentor who was able to point the leader in the direction of practice elsewhere. When designing and implementing new processes, the mantra has been that these should have 'quality at the heart' and should therefore be capable of impacting positively in a timely manner. This is not, however, just a systems issue or a process issue, it has also been necessary to restate expectations and bring clarity to team members.

The Leadership Impact

It is often taken for granted that team members have the requisite level of knowledge and experience to tackle underperformance and deliver improvements but this is not always the case. What this project did was to build understanding of how to deliver quality improvement and staff were supported in their roles. By using a combination of data analysis as well as qualitative analysis, it has been possible to engage staff in the improvement agenda and it is now more likely that staff will be able to identify issues and solutions for themselves.

Leadership Reflections

Where any organisation is seeking to develop effective systems for quality improvement, there should be a focus on diagnosing the reasons why quality improvement initiatives have previously failed to have impact. Supporting, coaching and training staff to build their knowledge and understanding of how to drive quality improvement is essential and it should not be assumed that they already know how. When seeking solutions for quality improvement, it is advisable to start looking outside the organisation as good practice will certainly exist elsewhere in the sector.

SUMMARY OF KEY LEARNING

One of the key outcomes of the Leading from the Middle programme is that leaders reflect on their learning across the whole programme as well as that which arose from their focused learning activities. Some of the main learning that has been identified by the participants themselves is given below and for ease of reference we have grouped this across a range of key headings:

1. Culture and Change

- In order to develop a culture where learning takes place across the organisation, there needs to be a willingness to be open about the challenges faced by teams and individuals.
- If an organisation wants real transformation to occur, there needs to be a culture that encourages considered risk taking at middle leadership level.
- Senior leaders need to create a climate where teams and individuals can define their purpose and how their work relates and contributes to whole organisation success.
- A lot of change initiated by middle leaders is delivered above and beyond the day job and this extra discretionary effort deserves recognition from senior leaders.
- Building confidence in middle leaders to deliver change is crucial and this often requires coaching and mentoring support.

2. Internal Stakeholder Engagement

- The most successful change and improvement projects start with structured and planned stakeholder engagement rather than jumping to the issues or solutions.
- Communicating purpose or the 'why' of an issue, challenge or change programme makes it easier to get people involved and can create a willingness in others to contribute to finding a solution.
- Creating a climate where stakeholder concerns, fears and frustrations are recognised makes it easier to identify potential barriers and to identify solutions prior to issues becoming real problems.

3. Project Planning and Delivery

- Investing time in research and review prior to launching into the main aspects of a project is always useful. It is often the case that a wealth of information exists already and you don't have to reinvent the wheel.
- The best projects have clear, well-considered and appropriately SMART actions and the desired end state has been identified at the beginning.
- Many projects start with large ideas which others struggle to comprehend. Chunking large projects into small units of delivery, where successful achievement is celebrated along the way, can achieve buy in whilst maintaining project focus and momentum.
- Assume nothing and communicate everything. Many projects fail because we assume that our teams know how to do things or have the expertise to deliver change. Clear, timely and two-way communication will ensure that incorrect assumptions are identified and addressed.
- Time spent planning is always time well spent. Identifying potential variables, barriers to success and contingencies can only be of benefit.
- Resilience is a crucial requirement for successful project delivery. Often things do not go according to plan but rather than give up, we need to be resilient enough to keep going until the goal is achieved.
- Be flexible; recognise when an approach is not working and move on to the next thing.

4. Building Leadership Confidence

- Middle leaders need to maintain confidence in their own skills and abilities and recognise that it is acceptable to struggle and sometimes fail.
- Many of the skills developed in other parts of your career history, i.e. teacher, tutor, coach, administrator, will be highly valuable to your role as a leader. You often have the answers to difficult questions, you may just have to reframe the question.
- Confident leaders are willing and able to listen to the views and opinions of others, even where they run contrary to your own views. Don't be afraid of challenges and objections and recognise when someone else's input could help you deliver your objectives.

- When problem solving, before considering the behaviours and practices of others, think about your own and the impact they have on the outcomes of situations.
- Think about how your leadership objectives align with those of your senior managers and the organisation as a whole.

5. Leading from the Front

- Advocating new proposals and initiatives requires leaders to be clear and consistent about the purpose of the change and be willing to role model the practices you expect from others.
- Honesty is a vital element of successful, engaging and trusted leadership. This includes being clear with yourself and others about the skills or competencies that you need to develop in your own leadership practice.
- The visible leader is the one who is most likely to achieve success in project delivery. Understand that you have upward and downward stakeholders who both need you to perform and succeed.
- Recognise that you can't do everything yourself and draw on the strengths of those around you. Understand that it is OK to be an incomplete leader but identify those who are going to complete your leadership and include them in your practice.

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Registered charity number: 1153859

Company registration number

(England and Wales): 0854059797

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