

TAKING LOVE OF LEARNING BACK TO SCHOOL



DR CHINTHA DISSANAYAKE EXAMINES THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPARTIAL AND ONGOING PROFESSIONAL CAREERS SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS IN BUILDING A RESILIENT AND POSITIVE LEARNING CULTURE FOR ALL

Avenues of entry have improved for those considering a career in teaching, however the opportunity for teachers to receive ongoing and impartial professional career support once working within a school is still limited for many. Whilst professional training and development provision in the form of In-service training (INSET) is made available to teachers, where such efforts are not incorporated meaningfully into a 'Personal Career Development Plan' they function only to add to an already over-burdened workload.

In October 2015, I was contacted by a governor of a medium-sized secondary school in Wales, via the CDI Register. The school was under threat of closure following an unfavourable ESTYN report regarding staff performance management. By early 2016, amidst a highly hostile environment of performance goals and severe budget cuts, we embarked upon an ambitious 'Staff Talent' development programme that focused heavily on personal and professional career development via the creation of a strong school-wide learning culture.

As an occupational psychologist, I am no stranger to talent development within the commercial sector, where effective engagement of staff is linked to performance and productivity; and where leaders play a key role in creating and maintaining a culture that actively supports talent, by supporting personal growth, well-being and resilience. Since state schools tend not to engage occupational psychologists, especially for their staff, this project was a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate the wider impact of tailored career development, and to reveal the significant impact it can have on student performance: the ultimate measure of success for a school.

Psychology in the workplace is still met with a degree of scepticism in many sectors, and I found the school environment to be no different, with the general feeling being that teachers' career development was already covered within professional development for staff as part of an existing strategy, so that any additional effort in this area would simply be a waste of already scarce resources.

With financial assistance from external sponsors and full backing of the school leadership, the 'Talent Development and Mobilisation' programme crawled to a start in January 2016, with a few daring individuals taking up

the offer of confidential coaching and impartial career planning.

The following outlines the interventions made:

1. Professional **career development coaching** to all teaching and non-teaching staff, to help develop greater self-awareness, control and management of own performance.
2. Linking individual goals and personal aspirations to the **strategic goals** of the school.
3. Identifying school-wide **strengths** and areas for further **development** using surveys.
4. Regular school-wide monitoring and feedback to facilitate **learning and self-correction**.
5. **Confidentiality** to encourage openness and change.
6. Bespoke **communication** and **well-being** workshops designed and delivered to address school-wide developmental needs.

Findings

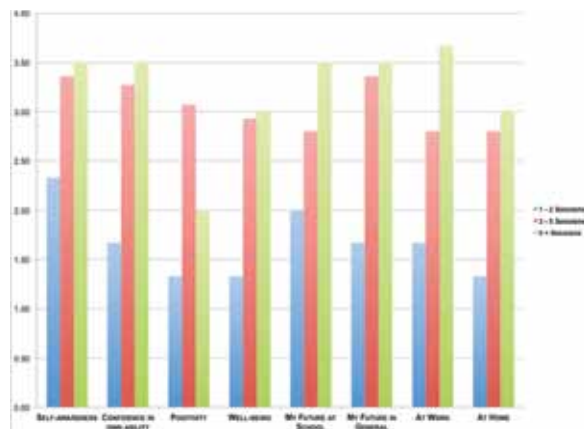
By December 2016, over 90% of staff had taken up the opportunity for **career development coaching** and 98% had taken part in group **communications meetings** and **well-being workshops**, organised to stimulate the *four key areas* (measured by the ASSET well-being survey) that contribute to team well-being and resilience:

- a. Confidence** in their own and each other's abilities;
- b. Purposefulness** that linked to personal and school strategic goals in Career Development discussions;
- c. Adaptability** that challenged negative thinking patterns and helped develop more flexible approaches;
- d. Social Support** in helping individuals discuss issues more openly and frankly with common language to reduce seclusion.

Research reveals that *expectations, habits of thinking and assumptions* all have powerful effects on behaviour and thoughts. With stress and burnout increasingly reported in UK schools, tackling the way in which problems are perceived can often help those who habitually see problems as threats, especially since such perceptions undermine resilience, as negative emotions escalate stress.

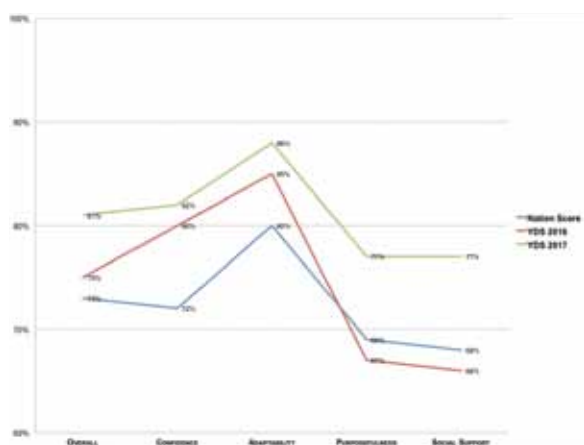
1. The positive impact of career coaching increased in line with number of sessions over the 12-month period with improvements reported across a range of areas, both at work and at home (where 0 = No Impact and 4= Significant Impact of Coaching). See figure 1.

figure1



- The 'Talent Development Programme', helped staff to reflect and build upon individual and collective strengths to find solutions to their problems. This led to staff initiating many innovative projects across the school with support from management.
- The ASSET surveys benchmarked the school's well-being scores against a 250,000 case powerful normative database (from the *General UK Working Population*) and revealed an overall rise in resilience of 6% with significant rises across *purposefulness* (10%) and *social support* (11%). See figure 2.

figure 2



- The ASSET Survey revealed improvements across a range of **physical** symptoms of health. These findings were supported by teacher absence data, where a fall of **48%**, was observed over a comparable period from 2015 to 2016, with a cash saving of £14,000 in supply teaching.
- Student performance at A level results saw a 25% rise in A*—A grades compared to that of the Welsh average for the same grade band; and a 14% rise in number of Level 2 threshold*, in GCSE grades A*-C, incl. maths and English/Welsh, against the Welsh average. Meanwhile, similar schools and the Welsh average saw an overall drop in performance in 2017. In 2018, with 79% GCSE grades reaching A*-C, the school is now one of the best performing schools in Wales.

NB: Level 2 qualifications are GCSE grades A*, A, B, C. In England, since 2017 these grades are represented as 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4. However the Welsh qualification system kept the letter grading system from A-G. Level 2 inclusive threshold, therefore is a performance measure that allows direct comparison of students and schools, and in Wales, it is where students achieve five A*-C grades, which include English or Welsh first language and mathematics.

Conclusion

The Talent Development programme, encompassing career coaching, within a Welsh secondary school adds to a growing body of evidence supporting the benefits of creating a positive learning environment in organisations. The learning and development climate created by leadership was seen to have a direct impact on how staff perceived themselves, their future and the future of the school. These findings have since been supported by further research which demonstrates that employees' perception of their organisations' learning environment has a significant impact on their engagement, knowledge sharing, creativity, innovation and employee proactivity in problem solving.

The Welsh school in the study has made major strides in improvements since 2016. However, ongoing challenges such as restructuring, major job cuts, cutbacks in subject choices, continue to pose threats to the school. Whilst staff resilience in adapting and supporting each other through difficulties continue to have a positive impact, the challenge of maintaining well-being within the school remains an enduring task for its leaders. Helping staff to focus on their own career and professional development, whilst adapting to their ever-changing roles, remains a central part of this goal.

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