Empowering the leadership team to raise expectations

Project focus

As a new head, I felt that teachers’ expectations of what the children could achieve were not that high in the school. This was evident from the pupil test results (45% combined in 2013) and in all kinds of areas, such as behaviour, displays, and the children’s books. I believed the poor results were due to staff not having high enough expectations rather than the children not being capable. At the same time, I was spurred on by Ofsted’s judgement in September 2013 that the leadership team ‘required improvement’. This was partly because several of them were very new to their role at the time of the inspection and were unsure what their responsibilities were. The aim of the project therefore was to meet these twin concerns through involving the school’s senior management team in raising staff expectations across the school.

What we did

I decided to employ an external consultant to run a series of four workshops (at a rate of one a month) for the senior management team, but worked closely with him over their content. I anticipated pockets of resistance and felt that bringing an outside specialist in would foster more open and honest dialogue than if I led the training. I also thought it was important for staff to hear the same messages coming from someone else. I hoped the team would gain greater understanding of their roles from the training and that they would therefore be able to carry out their responsibilities effectively in ways that would ensure consistency across the school and help raise standards.

The workshops covered different aspects of leadership such as managing teams, leadership styles, relationship building, and ‘blockers’ and ‘enablers’, whilst also exploring the issues around expectations and within school variation. All the sessions were evidence based and involved a mix of short presentations, discussion and activities such as role play etc.

In between the sessions, the team were given tasks to complete and feedback on in the following session. For example, the team was asked to investigate expectations in their own area. This inquiry work involved the team collecting evidence through carrying out observations, behaviour walks, pupil interviews and ‘book looks’ etc. using a proforma which I provided. The team were then invited to share the variations within the school they had noticed. These included:

- differences in the orderliness of classrooms
- inconsistencies in the quality of pupils’ work in their books
- lack of differentiation, extension, challenge and progression in mathematics lessons

Another activity – ‘The 5 whys’ – enabled the team to reflect on the causes of the low expectations they had found, such as lack of experience, lack of knowledge, not knowing how to find the answer, lacking time to find the answer, and confusion over changes of policy. They then worked on action plans designed to address the issues they had identified.

New academic knowledge gained

The session on ‘in-school variation’ presented by Professor Christopher Day during the final workshop helped to reinforce the messages I wanted to get across to the leadership team about levers for change including:

- establishing a school ethos and culture that fosters open discussion about sensitive issues associated with in-school variation
- the importance of sharing data to identify excellence and deficits
- the value of gathering data on teaching to allow for the sharing of good practice and promote discussion
- using standard operating procedures to provide consistency and reliability and to promote shared expectations across the school

What has changed

Leaders are more confident – they understand their roles and responsibilities and take them seriously. Other staff see them as leaders and respond accordingly, and greater trust now exists between senior and middle leaders.

Leaders are more united as a team – having discussed what has happened in the past openly and honestly, we are now beginning to move forward with a common purpose, with everyone giving the same message to staff.

Leaders are more proactive – they don’t wait to be told what to do, but see when they need to update policies or develop action plans etc. for themselves.

We have raised expectations – our inquiry work led to the senior leaders developing audits in consultation with staff, which make clear what we expect of staff. The audits provide a means of providing staff with written feedback on:

- the quality and quantity of pupils’ work,
- the learning environment (classroom displays and room organisation)

"We’ve never talked like this before!"
"We’re more of a team now!"
*Staff and children are feeling better about the school!*

University partnership role

The university was important for motivating me to do this work – I probably wouldn’t have done it if I hadn’t been involved in the university project, even though I knew I needed to. I’m glad that I did – the leadership team were very appreciative of the huge investment that was made in them (both financially and in time) and responded accordingly. The first meeting with Professor Christopher Day was particularly helpful for supporting me in identifying fruitful areas to focus upon. Being part of the University of Nottingham project helped me to stay focussed on the task and has driven the action plan.

Evidence of impact?

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