

# Brent Adult and Community Learning Service (BACES)

## LSIS case study: ILM Level 5



*“I am not sure if that is to do with the way I am managing and leading, I just know it was different, and as a result of that we have seen organisational improvement – which means as an organisation we have gone from satisfactory to good, and I can see quite a difference to staff morale and a real desire to move on from here to becoming outstanding.”*

### Summary

The use of coaching has allowed the Head of Service for Brent Adult and Community Learning Service, Sue Hasty, to bring a broader range of leadership and management approaches to challenging internal and external situations. Through adopting a more listening and facilitative approach she believes she and the organisation have been able to further focus their efforts to where it counts, raising standards, achieving an improved Ofsted rating in May 2012.

### About Brent Adult and Community Learning Service (BACES)

Brent Adult and Community Learning Service (BACES) is Brent Council’s direct provider of adult learning and skills, funded largely by the Skills Funding Agency. The service is delivered in partnership with local voluntary and community groups at 4 main venues, and some 60 other venues including schools and community and faith centres. The service’s main centres are situated within the council’s designated priority neighbourhoods which are the areas experiencing the highest level of deprivation. It is a service that has a history and culture of widening participation and inclusion and its mission is: “To broaden minds, create opportunities and change the lives of individuals and communities in Brent”. Sue Hasty is Head of Service with around 220 staff and 5,500 learners.

### The Challenge

Sue faced some particularly challenging management tasks, managing complex and difficult staffing situations and needing to have tough conversations against a background of reducing funding. She wanted a way of proactively managing this differently:

*“I was looking for a way of changing my style of communication so I felt more in control of these difficult management challenges, and felt that coaching might be one way of approaching the situations and provide a new way of communicating. It was a way to consider what I could do, how I was managing it and what I could do differently.”*

## The outcomes

Sue says that:

*“in terms of leadership and management, I think I have changed...I’ve really learned how to listen and hear what people are saying. I’ve become much better at giving both positive and negative feedback and I can relate that, in particular, to handling difficult management situations.”*

Leading a recent staff consultation on structural change with staff and unions Sue had to deliver difficult messages and says she felt much stronger and in control and felt she was really able to listen and hear what people were saying, understand and reflect that back to them.

*“Consultations have been much easier to handle, I don’t feel threatened and have confidence that I do have those skills.”*

Sue also believes that leading up to the Ofsted inspection she was more composed and this rubbed off on other managers. She wonders if the organisational improvement results from the different, better quality conversations she is having with staff at all levels, really getting to the heart of what the service needs to do to improve.

Sue is aware of using some of the approaches learned on the programme like solutions-focus and perceptual positions (looking at things from different points of view). When staff have felt overwhelmed by changes and budgetary restraints, she has asked what it is they *can* do. This allowed them to concentrate on what they can control when the external environment has been so challenging from a funding point of view and their parent organisation, the local authority, was going through restructuring and downsizing. She believes that while there have been a lot of challenges there’s also:

*“quite an atmosphere of calm in the organisation and positivity and that’s really turned around in the last year...with staff saying that next time we want to go on to be outstanding. That’s a definite shift. We know we are on an upward trend.”*

## Why LSIS?

Sue had considered undertaking a postgraduate coaching qualification at Oxford Brookes University, but felt the level of time commitment was not feasible professionally or personally. So she looked elsewhere and the course on the LSIS website appealed through the pattern of study, the broad introduction to a mix of formal coaching theories and practice and its blended learning approach with face-to-face modules, telephone and online support. Sue felt she could make the time commitment, allowing her to do a university course at a later date. She points out that it is not an easy option and requires commitment to do the assignments and the coaching practice.

## The Advanced Coaching Programme

Sue really enjoyed the face-to-face delivery as it appealed to her personal learning style. She also enjoyed the mix of theory and practice, the collaborative learning in a group, the opportunities for questions and discussions and the regular opportunities to practice coaching skills in a safe, non-threatening environment. She felt the space to learn from peers was particularly important, including in the Action Learning after the modules. Sue also found the on-going coach mentoring support really beneficial, allowing her to reflect on what had gone well or talk through any difficulties related to her coaching practice. It was also space to reflect on things she’d learned about herself with someone, rather than just write it down, helping to clarify things.

*“I thought the quality was excellent, the facilitators were very experienced and very skilled, they really knew how to handle a group and how to give people space and time to think in a group. Their facilitation skills were just excellent.”*

## **Coaching compared to other change interventions**

Sue believes coaching is very successful as a change intervention, provided the individual having coaching is ready and wants to be coached. While she doesn't believe it entirely replaces face-to-face training programmes she believes it is an important aid because it is about the development of an individual's personal skills. It provides the individual with time for reflection on how they behave, their style of communication and their inter-personal relationships at work so it is about how they manage in practice, something a management or business studies course, which is focused on hard strategic and operational issues, can't achieve in the same way. Sue adds that because the individual gets a lot of 1-2-1 time with someone who is entirely objective, as they don't know about the person or their particular situation, it's really good quality 1-2-1 feedback.

*“It can be challenging and make you think about things you might not want to hear, but it encourages you to take action. If you can discuss things out loud, question yourself, and realise that you need to work on doing something differently, that's the thing that moves you forward. But it also encourages you to reflect on the things you are doing well, and you get positive affirmation too.”*

As a Head of Service Sue was not comfortable offering coaching to her staff. She is part of an LSIS Peer Review and Development Group with some other London boroughs, and members of the group have set up a coaching exchange. Sue is offering coaching to another organisation in the group and another member, who is now gaining the same qualification on Sue's recommendation, will work with members of Sue's organisation. Other BACES staff have trained with LSIS as subject learning coaches and the Local Authority have also offered some managers the opportunity to gain coaching skills.

## **Sue's lessons on successfully completing the Programme**

- Try to think about who your coachees will be before you start. If it is inappropriate to coach staff in your own organisation it can take time to find clients.
- Make the time commitment – to do the reading, coaching and assignments
- Really be prepared to have an open mind about the people you work with in the Advanced Coaching Programme, and about what impact the coaching will have on you in the workplace as well.

*“It certainly shifted my perception in certain management situations...have an open mind and you find that you think about things very differently as a result.”*

- Individuals need to want coaching for it to be successful.