

Winstanley College

Case study: Bespoke Difficult Conversations Made Easy programme



Principal Jo Bailey says:

“To a great extent management is about conducting difficult conversations effectively. The LSIS approach enables managers to plan and prepare themselves for such challenges, to ask appropriate questions of themselves and others, to understand why people behave as they do in such circumstances and to reflect on the effectiveness of a given approach and other possible ways forward. The course is very helpful in supporting managers to implement difficult changes effectively.”

Summary

Winstanley College has a determined focus on improving teaching and learning and making changes that will work towards that goal. After a new Principal was appointed there was a programme of structural change in its leadership teams. The College used a bespoke LSIS programme to support it in having tough conversations that would support both the manager and the individual towards the most positive outcomes for both.

About Winstanley College

Winstanley College is a large, oversubscribed and highly successful sixth form college that has been in existence for over 30 years, with 163 staff and 1906 students. The mission is simple: ‘To achieve academic excellence for 16-19 year olds in a supportive and challenging learning community.’ OFSTED consider it “outstanding in all aspects of its provision.”

The Challenge

There were challenges for the senior team, with the College facing a lot of changes. A new Principal, Jo Bailey, was in post and changes included reviewing the structure of the senior management team. The Principal wanted to enable staff to have an understanding of how to broach these difficult conversations, to be fully prepared and also to avoid backing off if people became defensive.

Charlotte Fitch, the Clerk to the Governors, describes the open programme she attended as being:

“Really illuminating and informative. I am more aware of the importance of preparing to have such a conversation. If you are busy day-to-day, getting through the paperwork, you need to factor in the time to have these difficult conversations.”

The outcomes reported from using coaching

The training senior managers received has been rolled out to middle managers with a consequent improvement in the quality of communication between middle and senior managers. Another consequence of the original training was the re-structuring of middle managers' meetings in terms of membership, chairing and construction of the agenda. Middle managers are now leading agenda items in the presence of senior managers and chairing the meetings. Meetings involve more discussion and less information-giving and the discussions are frank, robust and increasingly making decisions rather than a 'talking shop'.

Charlotte believes she is still drawing from the learning in conversations she has. The senior team have applied the ideas when having difficult conversations, for example in terms of explaining change and the rationale for cutbacks. Staff satisfaction surveys have continued to be high, despite the change background. And more generally communication, for example in staff meetings, has continued to improve and is very good.

The College is determined to maintain what OFSTED describes as its relentless focus on teaching and learning, so any improvement programmes are always fed back into teaching and learning. Middle managers and prospective middle managers have undertaken NCSL courses in leadership and other experienced leaders have acted as coaches supporting staff on such programmes. The College operates a three year internal inspection cycle and in the third year peer observations and sharing of good practice takes place. Most recently this has taken the form of all teaching staff being involved in Supported Experiments into an aspect of teaching and learning. Each experimenter has a buddy with whom they have worked through their plans and practice and each teacher has also acted as a buddy to a colleague. The College is hoping to publish the resulting research on its website.

Jo believes the College is slowly but surely embedding a culture with coaching at its core.

"It is gradually becoming the norm to take a coaching approach to a whole range of challenging conversations which need to take place within and outside the College."

For example, Jo Bailey has been appointed as strategic director of the Academy which the College sponsors and has regular meetings with the Academy Principal to manage the Academy's performance. These meetings have coaching at their heart. Senior managers meet to discuss critical incidents they are dealing with in their leadership and all are encouraged to reflect on their leadership practice and to actively seek feedback from others with whom they work.

Why LSIS?

Jo Bailey, the Principal says they trusted LSIS' understanding of the sector and the consistent high quality of their training.

The activity

Initially the senior team brought in LSIS to run a bespoke programme for the College. At the time this involved 8 people, and was held off site. The programme covered areas such as exploring levels of listening, the use of Transactional Analysis and how to engage an "Adult" state, how to prepare appropriately, tips on helpful language and role playing positive and negative ways to give feedback. Following the success of this in-house, Charlotte attended an open programme for staff involved in governance.

Coaching compared to other change interventions

The College has embraced change in order to deliver its Mission and Strategic Objectives and has also had to deal with the change brought about by funding cuts. Coaching has provided the best means to work these changes through, keeping stakeholders on board, receiving feedback and facilitating continual review and revision of what they do. Significant changes to their Guidance system, delivering measurable cost benefits whilst seeking to maintain or improve quality, has been approached in this way leading to what Jo describes as “maximum buy-in and minimum turbulence and negative noise”.

While there are no recent Ofsted or IPP reports to draw upon, the College has absorbed an 11% funding cut without redundancies and has seen considerable change in terms of working in formal partnership as an academy sponsor. Staff turnover, often an indication of morale and satisfaction, remains very low – far lower than benchmarks – and exam results and student satisfaction remain outstanding. An Organisational Health Check conducted by LSIS in 2011 cited strengths in what Jo describes as the College’s:

“commitment to placing the learner at the heart of all we do, the active contribution of staff at all levels to the SAR process and our whole-hearted support for professional development and training to the tune of 1% of our budget (far higher than benchmarks)”.

“If you are experiencing challenges or difficulties and realise that the cost of not doing something is greater than the cost of doing something then it is valuable to embrace this. It was a very good programme that I recommend.”