
Becoming confident leaders in challenging times: Action Learning for Local Authority Leaders

Background

Emma was invited to work with leaders across three local authorities; organisations that were undergoing huge changes.

They'd all experienced large-scale cuts and were reeling from the impact of them; one of these leaders was now responsible for a post that had previously been carried out by two full-time directors. Their performance was adversely affected and they could not see a way to reverse this.

Emma initially met with them to understand what the issues were and determine an appropriate solution.

Key Issues

Following a period of changes to their roles, migration of team members, political maneuvering and cuts to budgets, these leaders were more stressed than they had ever been.

As one of them said, "I'd had difficulty resolving personnel issues with warring and dissatisfied staff, and other managers undermining my role."

A huge drop in confidence was a key issue. The entire group felt undermined by a combination of factors. These included: being left out of the loop when decisions were made (even when these decisions affected their own teams); subtle and overt forms of bullying; having to carry out unpopular decisions; and being on the receiving end of grievances.

As the stress increased and their confidence plummeted, these once able people were now questioning their own ability and whether these were jobs they wanted anymore. This was impacting their effectiveness in their roles, which led to even more stress and lower confidence; they were trapped in a nasty cycle.

Solution

Emma felt that the group would really benefit from a long-term solution to help them develop strategies to cope and provide support. Therefore, she helped them use an action learning format, setting up their own Action Learning Group (also known as a set), which Emma facilitated.

In this set, the key principles were equity, confidentiality, commitment and non-directive questioning. When applied, these principles enabled the group to build up strong bonds of trust and friendship.

This had many benefits:

- the group supported each other
- they quickly realised that they were not alone with their issues
- problems were shared and resolved
- their confidence began to return and shift forward significantly when they began using their values to respond to problems.

"The set has helped me see issues more clearly and get to the crux of a matter rather than be distracted by the 'noise' generated in organisations."

One of the Action Learning Sets' participants observed that: "The format gives you the opportunity to share experiences with people who are encountering similar issues, in a safe environment, and gives you the

feeling that you are not alone; you aren't the only one who might be having difficulty with certain aspects of your role."

Another one commented that: "Emma has created an environment that is respectful and supportive. I never cease to be amazed at how the set can help me move forward on issues where I felt completely stuck."

Results

Being a member of the action learning set has produced many results for the leaders, and therefore for their teams and organisations.

These include:

- reduced number of hours wasted on feeling frustrated and helpless
- have the ability to move on quickly from negative feelings
- being able to reflect and plan a way out of difficulties
- increased confidence and self-belief
- ability to see issues clearly and get to the crux of the matter
- reduced amount of stress-related sick leave
- able to be more assertive and more consistent in their actions
- feeling they aren't alone and having a safe place to discuss and resolve issues.

As a result, the leaders' self-confidence and self-belief has not just been restored to previous levels but has increased beyond that. This has significantly improved their performance as leaders, with a positive impact on their teams and organisations.

"If it wasn't for this action learning set I think I would be on the sick, or quit my job a while back."

A member of this action learning set fed back that: "This action learning group has been one of the most rewarding and engaging forms of leadership development I have experienced in my years of working for the public sector."

"Instead of getting stuck in a cycle of negativity, I am able to move on much more quickly.

This has helped my own confidence and belief in myself and it has improved my performance as a leader of my team and in the wider organisation."

Conclusion

Leaders in incredibly tough situations have been enabled to come together in a safe, respectful and focused group. They have been able to share their issues, deal with the emotions, then set them aside and get on with the job of calmly and rationally solving any problems knowing that they have the support of this group behind them.

Names have been changed to protect client anonymity