

Case Study

Institution

Sheffield Hallam University

Project title

Deputy Heads Appreciative Leadership

Background/Context

Sheffield Hallam University was embarking on a programme of major change and believed that in order to be successful as a truly transformational institution with good people at its heart, it was essential to build a strong and effective leadership. It was felt that the University was too transactional in its approach, rather than putting people first.

Solution

The University was seeking a leadership learning programme for 40 of its deputy heads, in both academic and professional services roles, across the institution, to include both strategic and operational leadership development.

Designed and delivered by Advance HE, an Appreciative Leadership programme, based on the knowledge that excellent 21st century leadership is appreciative, inclusive and relational, was put in place through a series of workshops, case studies and peer learning, running for nearly 12 months.

Outcomes

Those leading Hallam from the middle of the organisation took part in experiential learning based upon their own real-life situations and challenges, establishing how to indirectly influence behaviour and decisions from their own positions, where they might have no formal authority, resource, or perhaps even perceived legitimacy.

Advance HE's programme emphasis throughout the whole programme was explicitly and deliberately relationship-centric and was designed to help participants to identify and take forward their own ways to appreciate and optimise strengths, both their own and those of the people around them, and to match these to best support engagement, innovation, increased customer focus, responsiveness to and readiness for ongoing change and uncertainty, accountability and building a "one-University" ethos of excellence.

Participants expressed their own appreciation of being able to use some of the time for self-reflection, learning to understand and navigate both individual values and organisational culture.

Following completion of the programme, several peer support groups were set up by participants and many commented on the value of being able to exchange experience and insights with colleagues from different parts of the institution.

“Over the past years, the sector has been experiencing change in a way not experienced before. At the time of designing the programme, the world of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) seemed to be an appropriate backdrop to start the alignment of culture, process and systems with wellbeing and values in order to assist in creating an environment that staff and students would thrive in. Advance HE not only understands this ‘tapestry’ of inter-woven elements but also facilitates the design and delivery of discussion and understanding very effectively.

“Often the unsung heroes, staff at Assistant or Deputy Director level experience inordinate amounts of challenge and often conflicting requests and instruction. They notice the tensions from all around them and have to deal with the demands from staff above and below and from their peers. They notice the role-modelling from more senior people, whether for positive effect or negative and their experiences can determine their future. They are the people who are often without support or not as supported to the same degree as more senior people. They are the key layer of people in any organisation who need, and deserve, top quality development and support.

“This programme was for them and comprised Professional Services staff and Academics as I wanted people to interact much more freely, not just for the duration of the programme but for always. I wanted permeable relationships where professional services staff could understand the tensions and frustrations for academics and academics could understand the tensions and frustrations for professional services. Hallam prides itself on its applied nature as a University so it is important that we understand our own theory and practice.

“Experiential learning was at the heart of the programme and whilst we still have more work to do, the programme offered a great opportunity for staff to gain a shared understanding of appreciative leadership and how the cohorts could create momentum to champion new ideas and approaches. The extended modular approach over which the development took place enabled deeper reflection and learning and working with real-life scenarios (adapted for confidentiality) helped development as a leader and manager.

“Advance HE’s Mark Trezona is exceptionally skilled and gifted at eliciting thoughts and reflections. He does this in a gentle and humorous manner which is nonetheless serious in its approach. The key points of heightened awareness-raising, collaborative relationships, an enhanced one-university approach and most important of all the palpable increase in confidence and capability were clearly evidenced. “

Dr Sally Jackson, Chief People Officer at Sheffield Hallam University