

Case Study – Top Team Development in the South West

Summary

The South West Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership (SW RIEP) recognises the importance of strong political and managerial leadership and is committed to top team and middle management development within the public sector. It has been sponsoring, financing and leading on a programme of work to help local authorities develop their top teams of councillors and officers so that both individuals and their organisations can manage their work more effectively and plan for the future with confidence.

Quotes

“It usefully helped the management team to examine its own performance as individuals, and as part of a team, in its work to deliver the council’s priorities and meet new challenges affecting local government.” David Barnes, Christchurch District Council.

“One of the sessions was used to develop a new leadership empowerment model. Having the facilitated session enabled some difficult conversations to be undertaken and the development of an aligned vision about the way in which the council should function in future.” Andrew North, Chief Executive, Cheltenham Borough Council.

“The work has led to a better understanding of common issues and distinct roles, a focus on the future rather than the past, and an improved set of processes for managing the business. There is also greater interpersonal understanding, enabling the testing out of new ways of officers and top members working together. There is improved trust and greater efficiency.” Caroline Taylor Deputy Chief Executive / Commissioner - Corporate Support, Torbay Council.

“The Top Team training initiatives gave individuals an understanding of how to cope with their new roles while balancing work/life issues, and how to build relationships, trust and awareness so that they can work together as a coherent team.” Lynn McElheron, Strategic Manager, Teignbridge District Council.

“Our aims included enabling officers to manage performance better throughout the Council and to drive change in ways that are aligned with the Council’s agreed Vision and Values.” Phil McStraw, Head of Revenues and Social Support, Purbeck District Council.

Project Background

The South West Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership (SW RIEP) knows through the work of the Audit Commission that both political and managerial leadership is crucial to success in local government. It’s important for senior managers in local authorities to be able to work effectively with senior politicians.

SW RIEP has made a commitment to supporting local authorities to develop strong leadership through its Top Team programme. Its aim is to create talented and effective executive leaders and managers, by working with

individuals and groups of officers and councillors to address individual and organisational needs through training and development programmes.

This approach focuses on assessing and responding to the context of the organisation by providing tailored support which addresses the needs of top teams in a range of roles and disciplines. The support builds on the knowledge and expertise which already exists within organisations and many programmes demonstrate innovative uses of collaborative learning.

Sector knowledge is harnessed using experienced officer peers from other local authorities and partner organisations, and this is matched to individual needs. Support includes:

- middle managers programmes
- collaborative learning programmes
- working with peers

Objectives

As can be seen from the experience of local authorities in the South West described in this case study, the ultimate prize of Top Team development is to achieve improved performance in meeting both strategic goals and day to day objectives on the ground. Top Team work has been found to be useful at important times of change for councils, for improving team working arrangements and their effectiveness, and for addressing particular issues that a council may be working through.

Benefits

Benefits include:

- Helping local authority staff and their leaders to achieve their full potential
- Enabling authorities to deal positively with changing demands
- Delivering more effective leadership
- Allowing greater initiative in developing new and improved ways of working
- Greater understanding between top team individuals
- Improved communication and more effective team working
- Better staff relationships 'top to bottom'
- More effective planning for the future

The SW RIEP Delivery Plan for the work stream 'Building Capacity for Overall Improvement in Authorities' earmarks £580,000 for leadership development for the three year programme 2008 - 2011. It's expected that up to 29 councils could bid for a maximum of £20,000 worth for leadership support from this budget. This can be bid against the following categories:

- community leadership
- leadership of place
- top team
- leadership of change

- strategic leadership.

Below are several examples of local authorities which have already received top team support and are reaping the benefits.

Christchurch Borough Council

Christchurch's Top Team experience involved working with SW RIEP to implement key features of the National Framework for Workforce Development.

Christchurch was able to help its managers examine their own performance as individuals, and as part of a team, in their work to deliver the council's priorities and meet new challenges affecting local government.

As part of the work, two of the team obtained the Level 7 Executive Management Award from the Institute of Leadership and Management. And all of the team undertook 'Colourworks' psychometric profiling, giving an insight into team dynamics and how best to use the diverse range of skills within the group.

The team was able to carry out an exercise to inform proposals for implementing closer partnership arrangements with a neighbouring local authority.

Management were also better able to lead the council through an officer restructuring which refocused skills and competencies, and better able to deal with the management and fall out of a council-wide job evaluation process.

A recent staff opinion survey has shown improved satisfaction with the council as a place to work, with staff particularly highlighting the improvements in management. There has also been improved confidence and awareness going into the Dorset Pathfinder project.

Cheltenham Borough Council

The work at Cheltenham focused both the Board and the Cabinet members on the roles and relationships of the authority's top teams, with SW RIEP funding enabling support for away days and specialist leadership training.

It also helped the council's then new Chief Executive to build his relationship with the Board and the Cabinet, and facilitated a smooth transition to the new administration, which included new Shadow Cabinet briefing sessions.

Development days between Cabinet and Board led to a greater understanding of the two teams and how they needed to work together. They also led to expansion of the Board to include the Chief Finance Officer and the Assistant Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development.

One session supported the development of a new leadership empowerment model, enabling some difficult conversations to be undertaken, and the development of an aligned vision about the way in which the Council should function in future.

Further funding was invested to enable consultancy input from Achieve Breakthrough to undertake leadership development for the Board and Assistant Directors. This resulted in further improving the leadership, resulting in Board and Assistant Directors coming together to form one Senior Leadership Team.

Following the Top Team work, the council has reduced the number of Assistant Directors and Strategic Directors, and identified a clear vision for the council's role within the community and an empowered culture.

This has been communicated throughout the organisation, and both Board and Assistant Directors are now using a coaching approach to lead and empower others.

Board and Assistant Directors are now working more closely together on key strategic issues, which has led to a different way of producing the council's business plan and far more engagement and ownership of issues and priorities.

Assistant Directors are now more involved – and, in some cases, accountable - for cross cutting aims rather than just their own service area. For example, one is leading on the development of a council-wide service commissioning framework.

The council has also benefited from a different culture of handling meetings and from identifying ways in which to move forward programmes and projects. A project to improve and change how key meetings work has resulted in significant capacity gains by reducing duplication.

Torbay Council

The Top Team work at Torbay supported the development of a joint member and top officer focus on strategic commissioning, and joint working at a time when the organisation was faced with managing great change in its operating model.

The work coincided with a political change of Conservative leader affecting the administration during the year, which would have undermined progress but was supported through the Top Team process already being in place.

The Top Team input included one-to-one coaching, group training and some separate and then joint development with both officers and Cabinet members.

It led to a better understanding of common issues and distinct roles, a focus on the future rather than the past, and an improved set of processes for managing the business.

There is also greater interpersonal understanding, enabling the testing out of new ways of officers and top members working together, improved trust and greater efficiency.

Teignbridge District Council

In 2007, the council underwent a major management restructure, with four new strategic managers (director level) and a complete change in the grouping of services. There were new lead posts for heads of service covering 12 areas which meant new roles for all of the wider management team except the Chief Executive.

With six of the 12 new service leads being promoted internally, as well as a new way of working aligned to the strategic goals of the council, which was set out in the members' 10 year vision, there was a need for top team development in a number of areas.

The council commissioned Crooked Stick, a local business, to deliver a short development programme with all service leads. 'The 7 habits of highly effective people' is an internationally recognised Stephen Covey programme on 'managing yourself, leading others and unleashing potential'.

The two day course was well received by participants and a follow up day seven months later confirmed learning and actions for the future. Eighty per cent reported their knowledge and skills had improved, with ninety per cent feeling able to use these new skills in the workplace.

Meanwhile, the four strategic managers had a series of coaching sessions with a facilitator, whose challenging and thought-provoking sessions ensured directors were aware of each others' styles and ways of working. The sessions gave managers a better understanding of the challenges and barriers ahead, and how to cope with them.

Both Top Team training initiatives achieved their aim of giving individuals an understanding of how to cope with their new roles, balance work/life issues, and build relationships, trust and awareness, to enable them to work together as a coherent team.

Purbeck District Council

Purbeck engaged SHL to provide one of their 360 Degree Review Tools (PD360) to enable each of the council's senior managers i.e. the Chief Executive and five heads of service, to participate in a 360 Degree Review.

Each Head of Service was reviewed by their line manager (the Chief Executive), their peers (other heads of service), direct reports and a senior councillor. The Chief Executive was reviewed by leaders of the political groups and heads of service.

Individual results were treated as confidential to each participant, but were presented in an anonymous format to enable analysis at management team level. Feedback was also given to individuals and the management team.

Personal plans were then produced by each individual to address a maximum of three things identified as possible areas for personal development. A management team development plan was also produced with four actions agreed:

- To ensure team agenda items are only those which truly require the attention of the management team, and to ensure meetings are more effective, with preset timings for each agenda item.
- To better harness the potential of the council's middle managers in order to maximise their contributions and provide opportunities for their development.
- To manage performance better throughout the council.

- To drive change throughout the council in ways that are aligned with the Council's agreed Vision and Values.

Future plans following the Top Team review include using a 360 degree tool to cascade the work down to 'middle' managers, although participation at this level will be optional. Another aim is to retain this learning and avoid the expense of engaging consultants in the future.

Critical Success Factors and Lessons Learned

Planning is essential for Top Team development as it can be a time consuming process. It is particularly demanding for smaller authorities, where taking a day out once or twice a month can become quite onerous for the individuals involved.

Ensuring those involved are fully onboard and aware of the potential benefits is vital to secure their enthusiasm for what can be perceived as a soft issue compared with the many other demands on their time.

Consensus building is key to reinforce the core aims of the process, its value for money, and the aspiration to be a top team, to generate success.

Another issue worth considering in advance is some form of contingency plan in case new senior members of staff are appointed during the Top Team process. This would ensure that those coming into the authority can be, in some way, incorporated into the training or perhaps given an insight into the work as part of their induction.

Political changes during the Top Team process may also have an impact on group dynamics. Adopting some of the Top Team training skills in house, as part of the development work, is one option which can mitigate this.

Risks

Individuals can feel the scrutiny involved is a little too close for comfort. It is essential that the team involved is supportive of each other and that individuals see the process as being positive rather than negative or critical.

It is useful to promote an understanding that the diversity of individuals with different personalities and characteristics is what makes a team work. One to one conversations with any who do feel disengaged by the process can help to put aside petty issues which cause tension in pursuit of the bigger prize.

Transferability

Top Team work can benefit any organisation. It can help those undertaking re-organisation, tackling change, to develop a team focus on key issues or simply seeking to improve the effectiveness of their existing management to further improve organisational performance.

Useful Links

For more information and discussion surrounding effective leadership, visit:

www.stephencovey.com
www.idea.gov.uk
www.infed.org/leadership
www.peoplefit.com/managerial-leadership
www.missionmindedmanagement.com

Contact

To enquire about any aspect of the South West Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership's (SW RIEP) support to councils, or to find out how it can support you, contact:

Andrew Winfield
Improvement Manager
Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA)
Direct line: 01288 381683
Blackberry: 07786 542754