

Reflections from an evening with Nicky Moffat CBE

Overcoming barriers: Building leadership resilience in MATs

20 November 2023

We recently held an evening dinner for 40 leaders of some of the nation's largest multi-academy trusts, focused on 'Overcoming barriers: building leadership resilience'. Senior HR Consultant Hannah Bingham shares her personal experience and insights from the evening.

How wonderful and refreshing it was to sit amongst some of our clients, listen to one another, and be inspired by Nicky Moffat. Although COVID restrictions are a distant memory, it felt like an achievement to all be present and connect as a community without screens and tech linking us all together.

I am forever curious to learn what our colleagues and clients are working on in the Education sector, using all of their nuggets of insight to give me a better understanding of how HR fits into it all.

Nicky spoke about her own experiences as the highest-ranking woman in the British Army from 2009 – 2012 and how she successfully navigated the barriers in her way, whilst cultivating a sense of 'team' when the headcount was well into the 10s of thousands.

Tapping into your 'engine room'

The British Army's motto of 'the team works' remained a theme when Nicky spoke, referencing the 'engine room' as the best place to find solutions, ideas and creativity. This led to discussions with clients I sat amongst on how leaders seek out solutions, and whether their own 'engine rooms' are used to their full potential.

Much like the military, schools are habitually hierarchical. Whilst discussing how much time is spent in meetings, to which we all agreed was 'too much!' we reflected on how much of this was spent with their 'engine rooms'. After a quick think, and a bit of back and forth, it emerged that although these meetings held value, there certainly was more scope for speaking more directly to the class teachers, the teaching assistants, and the site staff.

The hierarchical nature had led to leaders meeting with leaders, keeping the engine room at perhaps too much of a distance. I shared my concerns that without the more granular insights into what the main proportion of staff thought and felt whilst at work, there may be a risk emerging that intelligence provided by leaders may be self-serving, and perhaps not a true reflection of the staff voice and culture.

The great resignation

Recruitment and retention was a common theme during my conversations with Trust leaders, and rightly so, as it remains a challenge within the sector. There was some healthy debate around government investment and backing to help tackle the teacher recruitment crisis, with most realistic that there will be no quick miracle. The general consensus found that instead of investing in 'golden handshakes' and 'R&R payments', money is better spent on talent development, leadership development and home grown CPD packages which embed the vision and values of their own Trust. It takes time, but the rewards are far more sustainable and long lasting.

I was eager to learn how culture and engagement is measured, which still appears to be in its infancy in some Trusts. With teachers leaving the profession at a higher rate than ever, investment in high quality data, with clear links to action should remain a priority for any

Trust seeking to address retention challenges. Although a cheaper method, rolling out your own annual staff survey does present risks which we discussed. Risks such as:

- Poor response rates leading to data which is not meaningful.
- A lack of trust in 'it is totally anonymous' and therefore a less honest version of their views.
- A sense of 'no action is taken' after the survey results are gathered.
- A lack of knowledge and resource to analyse and present meaningful actions.

Trusts are best placed to assess their own needs and resources when considering the best approach to measuring engagement and culture, but serious consideration should be given to external providers who can work with you to create, communicate, benchmark, roll out, analyse and present actions.

“Wellbeing fatigue”

A natural direction of travel when considering recruitment and retention was wellbeing, and a client next to me put it quite plain, 'I think we are wellbeing fatigued!'. He shared some of the experiences of his own Trust, where they are taking the wellbeing of their staff seriously but was beginning to feel that their efforts were in vain, as many challenging aspects of the job were not in his control.

He feared that by continuing the dialogue with staff regarding their wellbeing, without the tools to remove all their challenges, may lead to staff and leaders growing tired of discussing potential solutions.

This is an interesting angle to take, and one that I empathise with, adding further reason why engagement and staff voice remain a priority. The 'why' is often the most important aspect of any action we take at work and should form part of all communication with staff.

- Why are we making this change?
- Why are we asking this of you?

The reason needs to be at the centre of any conversation or strategy to ensure our people understand decisions, action and sometimes inaction.

“My interactions are often only a short, focused phone call”

The event was enjoyed by all, with Nicky providing interesting and thought-provoking conversation starters. I checked in with several attendees in the days following and amongst the positive feedback, a client shared that 'often my interactions are only a short 'focused' phone call', which is not only true for them, but most of us across the sector.

It felt right to sit together and talk, it felt right to laugh when the day job is serious and challenging, and it felt right to hear that children remain the focus of all that we do, including HR. If these themes resonate with you, and you want to talk with like-minded professionals, please get in touch.

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