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CASE STUDY:

SCHOOLING ACADEMICS: CONFIDENT CONVERSATIONS AT UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH

Introduction

As a public academic institution, the University of Portsmouth has strong values; they are ambitious, responsible and open. Knowledge is created, shared and applied to really make a difference to individuals and society.

This approach to continually be better, to achieve potential and confront the challenges of life, is integrated into the strategy and vision of the university. In 2021, Executive Dean Sherria Hoskins worked exclusively with The TCM Group to transform workplace culture to be more ambitious, responsible and open.

Sherria Hoskins is Executive Dean of the Faculty of Science and Health at the University of Portsmouth. The University of Portsmouth values an agenda of ambition through innovative and inclusive education. Sherria knew that their approach to workplace culture should be no different: she led the way to push and empower staff to take a more compassionate stance on resolution.



Stephen Adams is our Head of People and Resolution – the best person for putting people first.

He has over 26 years of experience working in Director and Executive roles with Lloyds Banking Group, carrying out more than 1000 hours of training and coaching to colleagues across the organisation.

Clients note Stephen's vigilance, professionalism, and balance as his standout qualities when providing expertise on client liaison, detail, and integrity.

Targeting issues

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, the atmosphere at University of Portsmouth was tense. Breakdowns between staff members and postgraduate researchers amplified due to pressures of mounting work intensity and team conflict.

Culturally, the institution had embedded a resolution approach that was strictly “formal” – favouring litigation as the first and last resort to resolve all disputes, complaints and grievances. It’s important to stress that it wasn’t through a lack of personal motivation: this deeply entrenched cultural process meant that senior staff were disempowered to have critical conversations.

Leaving cases to brew until breaking point was common, meaning that an extremity of cases was recurring. Leaders would only step in once a formal complaint had been made. The option of mediation existed as a recommendation after the investigation of a formal complaint, jumping through several hoops to serve only as a suggestion to those unskilled in alternative resolution.

Making resolutions

Sherria understood the unique cynicism of her colleagues: it would be impossible to sell pseudo psychology to a staff of academics and psychologists. Stephen met with Sherria to understand her needs, tailor the project and add his own creative ideas. The training was initially trialled by a small team and, after success and positive feedback, rolled out to the entire leadership team as a 1-day session.

Across November 2021, five separate Confident Conversations sessions were facilitated by coach Stephen Adams with the aim of empowering staff to take a restorative approach to resolution. The programme is highly interactive, teaching learners to navigate difficult conversations, manage performance and prevent disputes from escalating out of control.



It centres on four main areas of development:

Coaching



Team development



360 degree feedback



Personality profiling



“The programme wasn’t straight from a textbook: it was pitched to our unique organisational needs and the complexity of our human situation. The activities were engaging and entertaining and gave us a chance to reflect, explore and practice new skills. Stephen was flexible, credible and most of all, human, as a coach.”

SHERRIA HOSKINS, EXECUTIVE DEAN OF THE FACULTY OF SCIENCE AND HEALTH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH

Impacting culture

Following the programme, Sherria watched her fellow cynics transform into optimists. She received six voluntary emails from participants thanking her for introducing them to the training. Senior leadership have been utilising skills that were taught to them, such as Faculty Manager Elisabeth Hudswell and Head of School of Health and Care Professions Jason Oakley, leading to zero current live cases. By nipping issues in the bud, the need for formal litigation and investigation has completely dissipated.

“The course taught us some valuable lessons about ourselves. We all slipped into the narrative of “the fixer” when faced with conflict, rather than engaging in adult-to-adult collaborative dialogue. Becoming the arbiter – or mediator – of a difficult situation means giving people the autonomy and empowerment to resolve their own issues.”

Looking ahead

Restorative resolution is here to stay at the University of Portsmouth. There will be annual refreshers, with the first held in the spring of 2022, to ensure that current and new staff are schooled on the value of having confident conversations. The biggest lesson for Sherria was to not promise staff the earth – but provide them with the skills, tools and understandings to work through difficult moments.



If you would like more information on how your organisation can benefit from leadership training, please contact us today to speak to a member of the team.



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