



Senior Leadership Development – Critical or Cancel in a Crisis? Mansfield District Council Case Study

2020, the year a pandemic strikes the world. The UK Government introduces social distancing guidelines, followed by more stringent lockdown rules leading to the closure of schools, workplaces, shops, bars and restaurants. Who could have imagined the mantra “Hands: Face: Space” less than a year ago? Life as we know it, has changed.

One thing that has not changed however, is the need for Local Authorities to provide council services to citizens. People still need a safe place to live, bins still need emptying, Crematoria still need to facilitate cremations. And now, on top of juggling these services after a decade of austerity, the imperative of controlling the spread of the virus to protect our communities and the NHS.

Tough decisions have to be made. As technology is swiftly mobilised to allow public servants to work from home as much as possible, non-essential services and activities are cancelled or postponed indefinitely. It’s all hands on remote deck to enable the delivery and maintenance of essential services in a COVID-safe manner.

At such a critical time when some authorities are cancelling organisational and leadership development activities, Mansfield District Council decide not to. An Authority with a well-established and respected Learning & Development function and a long-standing relationship with Solace’s Leadership & OD team, Mansfield not only opt to continue with existing leadership development plans remotely, they pro-actively seek to adapt them to ensure ongoing and relevant support for the CEO and wider Corporate Leadership Team. Such development activity includes Executive Coaching, focused and regular team development sessions and Action Learning.

Hayley Barsby, CEO believes that it is the consistent value added from their established relationship with Solace that has been a driving force in continuing to prioritise leadership development throughout the different stages of the pandemic.

“Because of the investment made in our senior team to date, I firmly believe that we were, and continue to be better placed to deal with the pandemic. The danger in any crisis is that leaders retreat into their own silos, something that would have been particularly easy given the enforced remote working. Fortunately for us, the work we had already done on understanding ourselves individually and as a collective, meant we were in a stronger position to tackle the crisis as a team.”

Hayley continues, “Don’t get me wrong, we are not perfect and we continue to develop. But I’m convinced that the empathy and understanding that Corporate Leadership Team members have developed for one another during our work with Solace means we’re better able to tune in and offer or ask for support when someone is inevitably feeling the pressure.”



With Solace, Mansfield's most senior Officers have actively sought to develop their emotional intelligence and have gradually shifted to a place where being vulnerable with each other is very much a strength and not a weakness. Hayley believes that this plays out in how they collaborate as a team, as well as how they lead across the organisation.

"Our primary responsibility at the outset of the pandemic was to our colleagues. I wanted our people to feel that we were all in this together as *Team Mansfield* and so this needed to start with us role modelling compassion at the very top. If I don't show that I care for the wellbeing and development of my senior team and myself, how can I expect to see that throughout the organisation?" Hayley is also keen for colleagues across the District to experience consistent leadership, something of an added challenge when the majority are working remotely, and this is something else that they have actively worked on with the help of their Solace Coach.

James Biddlestone joined the authority in October 2019 as Head of People and Transformation and noticed the people development culture immediately. "I've been bowled over by the investment that Mansfield makes in its people at all levels, not just the technical skills needed to do the job, but personal development so colleagues grow and are happy in their work". James sees a link to Mansfield's recruitment and selection process. "It makes total sense really. We are serious about selecting the best people, those who are committed to our *One Council* ethos, so why would we not continue that investment once they are onboard?"

Of course, Mansfield's Corporate Leadership Team has regular meetings to discuss the Council's goals and plans etc, but James strongly believes that the quarterly Solace development sessions deliver something else. "The dedicated development time with Solace means we get to work on ourselves which is quite different to working on the organisation and our services. Our Coach expertly facilitates the sessions in a way that keeps us focused on how we are working together and helps us consider the impact we have on each other. Deeper discussions are stimulated which leads to greater levels of trust and understanding."

Whilst the value of leadership development is notoriously difficult to measure in monetary terms, in James' mind the benefits are clear. "Our people not only tell us they feel valued, they demonstrate it through their attitudes and behaviour. We've seen many colleagues willingly change roles to support our Covid-19 response." James sees this as an example of *Team Mansfield*, where their people do things for the greater good. "..... and I'd like to think that as a Corporate Leadership Team, we set that positive example," he concludes.

Mansfield District Council undertake an independent Culture Survey typically every 18 months to measure progress towards their desired culture. The *Organizational Culture Survey* (Cooke & Lafferty) shows that they have achieved "encouraging and significant" changes between September 2018 and March 2020 in relation to the "Humanistic



Encouraging” style which is characterised by leaders being supportive, involving, and enabling growth and development.

Management Guru Peter Drucker famously said, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast”. Mansfield is an example of a culture where learning, development and wellbeing are part of the organisational make up. It’s more than words written in a strategy or plan, it is “what we do around here” and it is seen to contribute to organisational performance. Mansfield believe that Solace have played a key role in helping them achieve this and they continue to work together.

It is a sense of equal partnership, shared goals and not viewing leadership development as a “one off, solve all activity” that are at the heart of Mansfield’s relationship with Solace. Hayley summarises it in the following way; “Solace don’t just teach us theoretical leadership jargon or tell us to do it a certain way. We are invited to learn and discover more about ourselves, each other and our organisational patterns in a manner that helps us to be the best leaders and leadership team we can be”.

So, rather than wait for the next unexpected situation or crisis, why not ask yourself the question now; is Executive and Leadership development something to be cancelled, or something to invest in as part of the long-term solution for organisational success?

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