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The Strength in Numbers Report 2017

Multi-academy trust leaders share their tips
for developing a strong performance culture

Setting and Shaping a Performance Culture

Every multi-academy trust (MAT) wants to provide an exceptional learning community, with students achieving their full potential and staff who are fulfilled.

And yet, although the desire to achieve this vision is shared among all MATs, their success at achieving it varies.

To improve consistency at achieving success, MATs need to develop a solid performance culture across their schools. But what does a good performance culture look like and how can it be nurtured in a loose structure of schools that are often many miles apart?

We ran a workshop on this subject at Capita SIMS' annual MAT conference and asked academy group leaders for their advice, views and ideas.

This is what they told us.



1. A shared set of values is the beginning, middle and end

A strong set of values across a MAT makes it easier for teachers, learners, support staff and parents to work towards a common goal and strive for better performance.

Values can drive up standards, enable effective management and also ensure parity of direction across schools in a trust even when they are geographically dispersed. But how do you get everyone in your trust living and breathing its values on a daily basis?

According to one academy leader, the answer is simple. *"We would start by involving staff. They should be informed at every step of the way and therefore it would help them buy into the culture."* Another delegate agreed: *"Staff don't want to feel done unto. They want to feel like they belong to the values that are being developed."*

How to involve staff

"One way to achieve this is to write school improvement into everyone's job title or job description," said one CEO of a trust. This should include all support staff, SENcos, teaching assistants – in fact anyone employed by the MAT.

"Then everyone becomes involved in understanding what the problems are and believing that they have a role in addressing them."

Coming up with ideas on how to solve issues then becomes an everyday part of any role in the trust.

Share objectives

Clear and consistent two-way communication between senior leaders and staff helps develop these values too.

One large academy trust decided to grab the bull by the horns in their geographically challenged trust. They brought all 1600 staff, from caretakers to principals, together in an arena to communicate their vision and mission.

The result was very positive – everyone left with a sense of belonging to a much larger organisation, something they may not have had before due to the dispersion of schools' locations around the country.

Staff had a chance to talk about what the trust's values meant to them and this underlined their ownership of the process of improvement. The event was so successful the trust has repeated it this year in smaller groups.

Include other stakeholders

While an important part of creating a strong performance culture is bringing staff into any changes, it is also important to remember that the school community is much wider than those who work within the MAT.

Schools should look to involve parents too so families can recognise that their contribution doesn't end with dropping children off at the school gate. One academy recommended that you take the opportunity to share values whenever parents and teachers get together to let everyone know what they can expect from the MAT.

Students should also be part of this. One primary MAT disclosed that they use their school council to examine what the trust's values mean for the pupils and their role in achieving them.

Highlighting the positives of being part of a greater whole creates the right energy for building a vibrant performance culture.

2. Leave room to grow together

While having a clear vision and values was discussed at length, the academy group leaders at the conference said that leaving enough room for a trust's culture to grow and change was equally important.

One CEO likened the process of joining an academy trust to a marriage. When a new school comes on board, it can feel like joining an old married couple who assume that everyone knows and agrees with their standards, without anything being explicitly said. But flexibility within this culture is essential as long as they do not compromise the core values of the trust.

One delegate felt very strongly that a board imposing a culture on schools would never work – schools need to be able to adapt the shared vision to their unique situation.

Balance autonomy and belonging

The 'sweet point' for trusts is where core elements are aligned across all schools and yet schools are also free to decide certain less critical elements for themselves, making them relevant to their own unique environment.

This delicate balance of belonging and autonomy was roundly recognised as being difficult to achieve and maintain. It was suggested that one option was to have the main trust board providing direction but then other groups of schools or individuals within the MAT coming together for their own shared purposes and objectives.

One academy trust leader explained that each of his schools belonged to three different 'families' of schools as well as being part of the trust.

Schools belong to one family of schools within the same geographical area and meet to share resources or solutions to common problems. The other family is a phase group who teach the same aged children and so share resources for that reason. The third family is totally up to individual schools – they could be with schools which belong to the same faith based groups or those promoting literacy and they do not have to be part of the trust.

This means each school has permission to explore the best way to make decisions on running their school as they see fit, within the framework of upholding the trust's values.

This strategy creates a very strong sense of reciprocation. For every 10 issues which need to be addressed on average only two things tend to fall to the trust. For everything else, schools are helping solve the issues through these family networks.



3. Motivate staff

Retaining staff in the current atmosphere of staff shortages is essential to the smooth-running of all schools and strengthening a performance culture.

So how do you create a supportive environment that encourages teachers to buy into their part of a bigger picture and develop their careers within a MAT?

Some ideas put forward included:

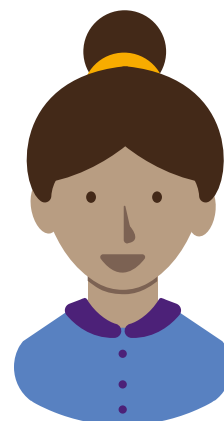
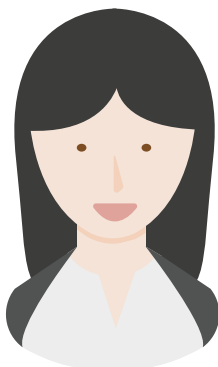
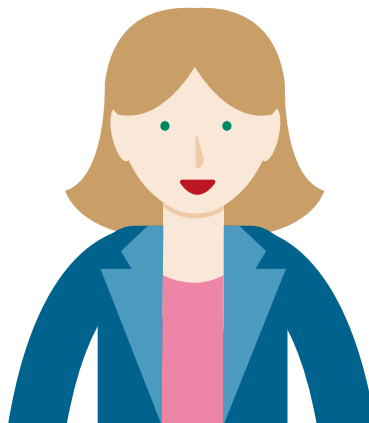
- **Promote professional development**
Highlighting the opportunities to develop and progress, and allowing individuals to grow rather than be stifled, were seen as crucial to retaining staff and contributing to a strong performance culture.
- **Offer advantageous career progression**
One academy leader said they had a policy of only recruiting from within their schools so that their staff had the best opportunities to progress. It was also suggested that MATs are well placed to enhance teachers' careers as they allow teachers to 'try before you buy'. For example, a senior teacher might not be sure whether they want to be a headteacher or not, but by working laterally across four schools as the Head of Physics, they can be offered leadership opportunities and sample whether they would like to further their career or not.

- **Communicate the benefits of working in a MAT**

Another academy leader said it was important to appeal to people's sense of 'what's in it for me?' and remind staff how working in an academy is beneficial for them and their development at all stages of their careers.

- **Encourage good relationships with senior leaders**

Healthy and effective relationships between teachers and the leadership team are critical. As one delegate put it, ensure heads don't rely on a stick during the appraisal process, but use the carrot as well.



4. Define success and stay focused

A hot topic for discussion was the conundrum around how you define success. After all, if you do not know what success looks like, how will you know when you get there?

MATs have to make the decision about what success looks like for themselves. Is it academic, pastoral care or staff management? Or is it being involved in your local community?

One academy leader from the Catholic Diocese gave a great example of this when he discussed the fact that the Progress 8 measure of success doesn't include religious studies. And yet 10% of his schools' curriculum is religious education.

So should his MAT measure success by the same measures as the DfE with good attainment in Progress 8 or by accepting that there will be an impact on Progress 8 and ensuring their pupils receive the sound religious education that is fundamental to his MAT's values?

Other MATs faced similar questions, believing that their focus was not just academic. It was also about the emotional impact of what they do and how they can improve outcomes in their pupils' lives.

One factor emphasised by all was that whatever your vision of success, you should know how you measure it and find ways to judge progress along the way.

Having quick access to reliable data was one way you have the tools you need to move forward. Not having to scabble around collating information means you can get on with making any necessary changes more quickly and effectively.

However, many academies agreed success was also about gathering other benchmarks for success too – a parent body that is much more engaged in children's education being one example.

Whatever the MATs goals, measuring your progress along the way, was a critical part of developing a strong performance culture.



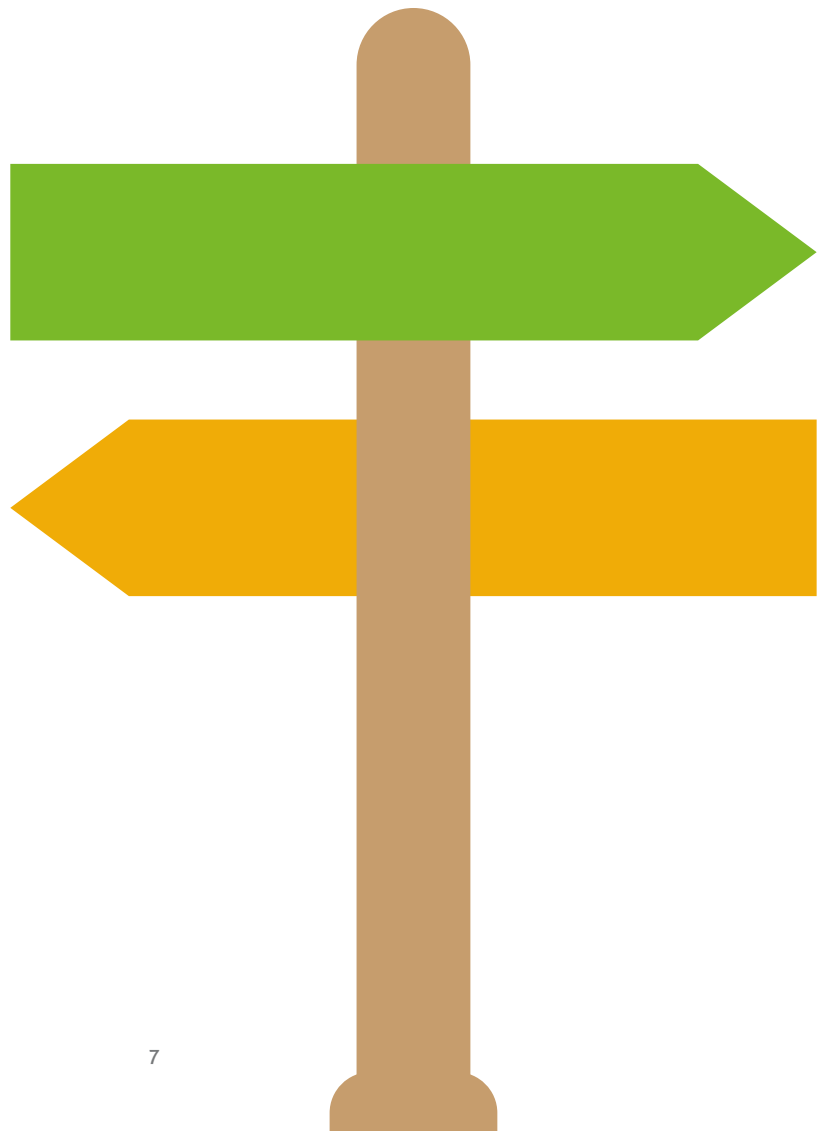
A final word

In summing up, one speaker used the analogy of Captain Amundsen and Captain Scott's respective missions to the South Pole to demonstrate why some MATs may excel at achieving their goals and others struggle.

While both Antarctic explorers shared the same aim, they differed in many ways as to how they organised their expeditions. Scott had a diverse agenda, planning to continue his scientific work alongside his journey. Amundsen's competitive drive meant he focused single-mindedly on his only objective – to be the first man to the Pole.

Scott's team did not make it home alive. Amundsen's succeeded.

The advice therefore was that to develop a strong performance culture of improvement, you need to ensure you are clear about where you are headed and then map your path by working back from there.



If you would like to hear about future Capita events for multi-academy trusts please register here www.capita-sims.co.uk/mat-communications-signup

You can also share your ideas for creating a performance culture in multi academy trusts on our dedicated Twitter feed, [@CapitaSIMS](https://twitter.com/CapitaSIMS)

Academy groups will now be able to assess their schools performance at the touch of a button thanks to SIMS SchoolView.

The new tool will provide academy group leaders with a dashboard of data, showing key metrics such as attendance, behaviour and demographic information pulled directly from their SIMS schools.

To find out more about SIMS SchoolView visit www.capita-sims.co.uk/schoolview