

e-Leading

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Strengths vs weaknesses in leading others

“What our training in strengths has provided for our staff and students is a common language by which we can engage in those critical conversations, both respectfully and constructively, whether it be our leaders openly discussing how we effectively work together in our staff teams...”



St Philip's Christian College Cessnock, Principal Darren Cox Centre

With so much discussion on positivity and strengths-based leadership, many expect these actions lead to an avoidance of weaknesses or ‘tough’ conversations. The truth however is quite different. The focus of evidence and appreciation for the individual leads to greater comfort in candid discussions addressing shortfalls, response or personal growth.

Having worked with schools to implement strengths frameworks in education, we are often asked to explain “how it works” and “what is the impact” for leaders within the school. As such, to follow are experiences from one of our clients, St Philip's Christian College in Cessnock. We

are grateful that Principal, Darren Cox, and his wonderful team of staff are keen to share their inspiring journey utilising our strengths-based leadership coaching.

1 Leading executive staff and aspiring leaders through strengths

“I have heard it said that behind every expressed frustration is an unexpressed hope. What our training in strengths has provided for our staff and students is a common language by which we can engage in those critical conversations, both respectfully and constructively, whether it be our leaders openly discussing how we effectively work together in our staff teams, building staff PD plans

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e-Leading

Leaders with a range of experiences and backgrounds require the opportunities for proactive, structured interactions to build ability and allow for honest reflection enabling meaningful exchanges with staff



Executive Leadership team at St Philips Christian College Cessnock

or addressing how to respond to a challenging student in the classroom. As we have come to know our strengths we are affirmed in the contribution we make and learn to appreciate the contribution of others.”

Martin Telfer, Deputy Principal

Dedicating your focus to the whole individual, their proven competences, attitudes, motivations and talents, means a commitment to the distinct capabilities, ability to extend themselves and openness to learning. Leaders with a range of experiences and backgrounds require opportunities for proactive, structured interactions to build ability and allow for honest reflection enabling meaningful exchanges with staff.

Through awareness of natural talents and preferences we are well positioned to engage in purposeful and deep conversations with school leaders to respond to change, growth and issues. Having a comprehensive understanding of your team allows you to:

- Structure effective teams for maximum outcomes
- Respond to challenges in connection
- Prepare for potential issues with positive contexts
- Create determined development plans
- Enable success of the school, its faculties and students.

At SPCCC Darren Cox explains, “Our regional location delivers its own challenges for leaders. Within our school we have over 48% of teachers with under five years teaching experience and so

we recognise that the way our leaders interact with staff directly flows to our students. Embracing the individual as a whole and focusing on their core wellbeing is at the essence of our school’s leadership. Focus on individualised coaching conversations at various levels of the school supports us in embedding our school vision with all involved.”

2 Strengths mapping for staff leadership roles

“As a new leader, the Gallup survey has allowed me to recognise my identity as a leader. Not only has it developed my confidence, but it has also affirmed me of the qualities that I bring to our College Leadership Team. It has also helped me recognise the strengths and qualities that my fellow colleagues bring to our team and how we can work well with each other based on that.”

Sarah Hopkins, Assistant Head Middle School

Working with strengths awareness allows us to create a holistic school or business. It enables better cross-faculty or departmental communication and so whole school outcomes. With a comprehensive approach to staff we harness future capacity through current incumbents as we can recognise:

- Opportunities for mentoring across the school to advantage both parties
- Engagement on projects to benefit the school based on stretching existing or underutilised skills, rather than “filling” gaps of knowledge

- Improved morale and staff engagement through a feeling of attainment and meaning

A key focus of our work with SPCCC has been to create clarity for staff in leadership as to the beneficial differences in our approaches. Opportunities to utilise strengths-based maps have been integrated into executive, staff, classroom and support areas of the school. Darren Cox explains, “By using our strengths we have changed the way we approach meetings with each other. It has altered how we approach each other to bring out strengths in each other to support broader thinking and so solutions to benefit our school and its community. Our staff are enjoying the journey of understanding each other as unique. They are focussing on their own development by seeking out the opinions of others with different work styles and thoughts. Our strength work has facilitated this process.”

When looking for areas where the school has benefitted from mapping out capacity, he shares, “It has been really quick to identify and implement. Staff are using the leadership insights at their faculty level to impact the execution of school plans, to improve classroom activities and to consult on a personal level with students who were previously seen as more challenging.” He goes on to outline that the information has shared positive in negative, differences become strengths and weaknesses lessen through greater understanding of their impact and intensity in different situations.

3 Identifying up and coming leaders through natural talents

“I’ve never considered my personal strengths in such a structured way. It’s enabled me to see value in my skill set and be more intentional as a leader in those other areas.”

Paul Ivey, Head of Curriculum K-6.

Forward planning and recognition of natural attributes within staff is integral to proactive leadership development. Accepting that our role is to grow great leaders also means responding to staff who:

- Do not have the clarity or style to align to the leaders’ or school’s vision
- Recognise these valued traits within themselves
- Are confident to demonstrate and challenge their own abilities
- See optimism, commitment and dedication in those around them.

Leadership is different in various settings and so can bring its own challenges in understanding. At SPCCC Darren Cox explains he has dedicated executive and staff meetings creating a deeper understanding of leadership within the school, to share examples and situations that highlight the fact that leadership at his school does not come with the role, rather it is earned through trust and respect in the staffroom and classroom. Darren outlined how the school had “focused on the integration of our individual leadership across the school to deliver the core values we represent; we have an amazing staff who bring such unique gifts and experiences to the school. We are thrilled to see these recognised as benefits to support us through the challenges and

expansion ahead. As a growing school we are constantly trying to achieve much with little time. Strengths allows us to better position staff to succeed and so encouraging all to be part of our future.”

4 Addressing weaknesses and issues management

“Great opportunity to reflect on professional practice. Incredibly practical. Expertly delivered in bite size and manageable chunks.”

Katie Kelly, Head of Science

Working with others’ abilities and engaging them in honest, purposeful dialogue around their capabilities does not directly ignore weaknesses; rather it is framing interactions in a manner that the recipient is more likely to embrace. De-personalising feedback and issues management allows us to deliver individual perceptions with grace and humility combined with attainable outcomes to move forward.

We each identify with our greatest weaknesses by recognising our use of our dominant talents. If not used in good measure and with awareness, these gifts become our undoing. They require understanding of effective utilisation and regular self-reflection and assessment.

Darren Cox shared his philosophy on responding to weakness in his leadership. He explains, “Strengths makes this a really easy conversation. We can see how great we can be but often it is the same skills that create our weakness. I could be a great communicator who can share all my thoughts with ease however if I don’t frame them for my audience or simply become too verbose this gift becomes an issue. So many of our teachers have really dominant strengths styles so it is fabulous when they get to use them but demotivating if not embraced. Equally if we allow them to override everything else we are not engaging others at their level. Strengths has been a great platform to build emotional intelligence across the staff and student community. It has created conversations about things we wouldn’t have had the opportunity to before.”

The skills executives bring to their job do not necessarily lead to better performance. Streamlined use of talents, combined with intent and context, support clear areas of development that align to the school’s mission or vision, along with personal aspirations to improve meaning, purpose and energy for the daily demands faced.

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Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.

John F. Kennedy

Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality.

Warren Bennis