

Client Story

Restored pride, confidence and direction: A District Council turns around

East Lindsey is a District Council covering a large rural area in East Lincolnshire. After many years of unstable leadership and confusion, it scored very low on the local government comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) and was regarded as a failing council, on both leadership and delivery. Two previous chief executives had been removed from their posts.

A history of blinkers and uncertainty



As two previous Chief Executives had been removed from their posts, the newly appointed CEO realised that the senior team, and the council as a whole, needed help if it was to turn around, start working effectively and deliver results.

As one senior manager put it; the senior team itself wasn't a coherent whole; about half the team members were new to their posts, while those who had been there for some time were in danger of being burdened by the negative baggage of the council's recent past. Although people were doing their jobs, they weren't working together as a team and had little understanding of each other or of where the organisation should be going.

With little leadership from the top, ELDC's staff was floundering too. Not only had they lost direction and faith in their leaders, they were at the receiving end of a dysfunctional culture of power; staff were fearful of speaking out, lacked confidence that their views would be heard and were cynical about attempts to impose new direction.

Given the resistance and confusion, the new CEO felt it would be important to bring in some outside help, to validate a team building process and get everyone involved in formulating a new approach. Having previously worked with Harthill, he approached us again with two basic needs: find ways to gel the top team and help them get the whole staff back on board and feeling positive.

“The Council had been stagnating. In terms of organisational theory, it was as if the 90's had passed us by completely. We assumed that within everyone lay all the necessary talent, confidence and ability to get things working again. Harthill worked with us to make the transformation we hoped for”.

Nigel Howells, Chief Executive

Senior managers in silos

Harthill's first task was to help pull the senior executives together into a coherent team. A two-day team building event for the Chief Executive, Directors and Heads of Services helped them to look at their history and work out where they wanted to go. Using ExTPF, our team assessment tool, we helped the team look at their effectiveness across a range of areas, including how they did business together. It became clear that while the senior managers were individually all working hard, they were tending to work in silos, separated from each other, with no real joint programme and little opportunity for mutual reflection or support. Added to this, some of the long-standing members were unsure if the new Chief Executive actually wanted them on his team, and needed to understand the new style of management in order to develop more confidence in it. The result was a reduction in stress, more realistic expectations and greater comfort with their roles.

The initial two days were followed up by another away day, and further sessions supported and tracked ongoing development. This programme was complemented by the offer of executive coaching for members of the team who wished to take it up. It has so far been used by individuals who wish to accelerate their own leadership development and the performance of their teams.

Open access events for all staff

For the whole staff, we helped the council design a series of events. Rather than run these events ourselves, it was important that the council's own managers were seen to be invested in the process. So we coached and supported a small group to run them. The events, titled 'Being Valued, Feeling Proud', were intended to appeal to a cross section of the whole staff – from the rubbish collectors to senior managers – and were run on an open-invitation basis.

Before the events, the sense was that many people felt powerless, at the mercy of the recent past, and were unsure about the new leadership. The purpose was to look at how they all worked as an organisation and to express, openly and without fear, what would make them feel proud to work for the ELDC. This included answering the question 'If you were CEO for a day, what would you do?' from which emerged a surprising list of priorities. The senior team took an active part in the proceedings, and became more visible to the staff and more trusted by them as a result.

We were involved in three such events, and the ELDC has subsequently run two more. The signs are positive; although there is still a way to go, staff are feeling more hopeful, more valued and more committed to their jobs.

Overall, the process was something the East Lindsey District Council needed to do and which it embraced willingly. The work is ongoing, and while it has raised some new problems along the way, the sense is that the process is working. Now the organisation will root out any problems that arise, rather than letting them fester.