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leaders in the Further Education and Skills sector



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According to LinkedIn, 9 in 10 employers in the UK believe soft skills are more important than ever, with communication, leadership and problem-solving among the most sought after. Teaching staff in the Further Education (FE) and Skills sector know how crucial it is to imbue their learners with these skills, but are they as diligent in developing their own?

Too often, honing soft skills in a sector as busy and subject to change as FE and Skills can be overlooked or neglected. “It feels like everything is urgent because of short academic cycles, but FE is not A&E,” insists Joss Kang, director of FE Constellations, an online membership community for FE and Skills professionals, who has led a number of professional development workshops for the Education and Training Foundation (ETF). “It feels as though everything is

happening so rapidly, so we end up being quite reactive.”

However, finding the time to build soft skills creates a virtuous circle: teachers and leaders are better able to cope with whatever is thrown at them; they support colleagues through improved communication; and they become role models of the skills their learners need to acquire to succeed.

Here’s how you can develop your own soft skills and do the same for your colleagues and team.

Engage in peer-to-peer learning

“While soft skills are necessary for all industries, the fact that many who work in the education sector refer to them as ‘human skills’ only reiterates the valuable role they play,” says Paul Boucher, deputy head of teaching, learning and assessment at Luminate Education Group, which runs Leeds City

College and others in the region.

“It’s often these skills that allow a teacher to really reach a student, facilitating conversations that open the door for the ‘teaching’ to begin. Soft skills are a vital part of pedagogical practice and another reason why many teachers want to see them incorporated into CPD opportunities.”

One way in which Luminate has done this is to take a team of Advanced Practitioners who provide one-to-one and group coaching to other staff. It has also offered themed workshops where teachers can share experiences and best practice.

“When it comes to onboarding teachers who have recently left the industry, we have found that soft skills training can also facilitate the transition to the classroom,” adds Boucher. “It allows those who are new to FE to

Soft skills are a vital but often overlooked attribute for anyone involved in teaching, helping teachers do their jobs better and benefiting learners too.

Jo Faragher takes a look at just what’s required, and the areas you can look to develop

HUMAN TOUCH



use communication and critical-thinking techniques to teach the future workforce and bring the curriculum to life.”

Take-away *Use experienced colleagues’ skills to mentor and coach others who are newer to the classroom or newly qualified*

Build resilience to change

‘Systems change’ is something that has been around in the business world for a while, explains Kang, and refers to the process whereby when someone makes a change in one area, it then has an impact on another. Long-term sustainable change, rather than constantly tweaking timetables or teaching materials, comes from an awareness of how one change can often seed another.

“Tinkering at the edges can lead to staff turnover or burnout, or teachers deciding to only do what they need to,” she says. “On the ground, we can build

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the skills to deal with change through peer-to-peer learning, putting teaching practice at the heart.” Doing this requires soft skills such as facilitation, listening and coaching, so it’s constantly developing these behaviours.

Emma Hughes, a partner leading the education HR practice at law firm Browne Jacobson, thinks FE and Skills leaders need to elevate the role of soft skills in their recruitment and retention efforts. “Staff may have great technical skills in their subject matter, but are sometimes ill-equipped to lead teams and deal with challenging day-to-day people issues, creating tensions among wider staff,” she says. “This can contribute to recruitment and retention challenges.”

“Leaders can also break the cycle of losing skilled educators during the recruitment process by placing a greater emphasis on soft skills needed for line management roles →



→ specifications, rather than just prioritising technical ability.”

Take-away *In interviews, place as much emphasis on candidates’ soft skills as their technical and teaching background, and be clear about the support on offer*

Encourage better conversations

A typical day in an FE or Skills setting can throw up a diverse range of difficult situations: disrupting an argument between learners who were over-enthusiastic during a debate; a conversation with a colleague about an awkward safeguarding issue; or a negotiation with the leadership team on next year’s budget.

Trying to be all things to all people can lead to reactive behaviour, says Alex Efthymiades, director at workplace mediation firm Consensio. “Something small such as sending an email in anger is often how relationships break down,” she advises.

Building self-awareness and becoming more intentional about the language we use can help FE and Skills professionals develop tools that take the heat out of such situations. “If you go into situations leaving your assumptions aside, asking open questions such as ‘Can you tell me what happened?’ or suggesting you return to the conversation when it has had time to de-escalate, it can make things calmer,” she adds.

The added bonus is that just as anger can be contagious, so can kindness



WE START WITH
SMALL THINGS LIKE
SETTING BOUNDARIES,
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HOW WE DO IT

CAPITAL CITY COLLEGE GROUP

Capital City College Group, London’s largest FE college group, offers soft skills training and coaching to staff at all grades, both teaching and non-teaching. It recently rolled out a two-year leadership and management programme in which all managers and aspiring managers can take part.

In addition, all employees can take 10 days for professional development throughout the year. Five days are directed by the organisation, with sessions covering topics such as stress awareness, resilience, neurodiversity and managing conflict. The other five days are self-directed learning. There’s also an online learning and development hub where staff can access resources on soft skills training, including recordings of the professional development days.

Trovene Hartley, HR director for the group, says soft skills are crucial because they help staff work together better as a team; they build effective and cohesive relationships; and they help everyone to understand themselves and resolve conflicts when they arise. “It is important to build awareness in this area and to assist in developing these skills where we can, not only as a productivity measure but ensuring that our employees are developing personally as they develop professionally,” she says.

“Ensuring we are developing the whole individual, not just particular professional skills, further ensures that our employees are effective role models for the learners that we support.”



and empathy: “When we have a good relationship with others, we’re more likely to be able to address any conflict with them.”

Take-away *Encourage colleagues to reflect on their own biases when negotiating with other staff or learners, perhaps listing questions they could ask themselves before reaching a conclusion*

Sow the seeds of leadership

Leadership training is no longer the preserve of those on a fast-track programme to a senior role, and leadership skills are something that can be dispersed throughout your staff body.

Indeed, the leadership themes in ETF’s Professional Standards challenge traditional ideas of hierarchical or charismatic leadership, and promote a culture where leadership is facilitated by individual behaviours, underpinned by organisational values. “In this culture, leaders recognise they can only go so far to create the conditions for change, and that their knowledge can only go so far, so they invite

“STAFF MAY HAVE GREAT TECHNICAL SKILLS IN THEIR SUBJECT MATTER, BUT ARE SOMETIMES ILL-EQUIPPED TO LEAD TEAMS

perspectives from others,” adds Kang.

According to Sharath Jeevan, founder and executive chairman at Intrinsic Labs, leadership can absolutely be nurtured in this way, even in a busy FE setting. “As FE professionals face a multitude of challenges, they must be prepared to address their inflection moments,” he says.

“These tend to be turning points when something profound changes within ourselves or in the external environment around us. Inflection points are great opportunities to nurture potential

because they require us to climb the next mountain even when it feels like we aren’t fully prepared.”

From an organisational perspective, leaders can recognise broader inflection points and build roadmaps for themselves and others.

Take-away *Have open feedback sessions on where staff feel their inflection points might be, and how they can learn from them*


Look to the future

Because FE and Skills professionals are often time-poor and do a lot of face-to-face teaching, developing soft skills will often need to be self-directed, says Tim Mart, co-founder of coaching platform Know You More, which works with several education providers.

“They need to know what’s in it for them; the human stories as to how people have benefited from building their skills,” he says. “We can start with small things like setting boundaries, which helps them to manage their workload and be productive without burning out.”

Building soft skills capacity in the system – rather than focusing skills development on a certain group – is crucial if it is to be sustainable, adds Mart. “Ultimately, you don’t want to be reliant on an external provider as that runs the risk of being cut if your budget is reduced,” he points out.

“Training people in coaching skills such as curious inquiry, asking questions, communication skills and active listening means they can then have these conversations themselves both in their pedagogy and with colleagues.”

Take-away *Bring people together from across subject areas and settings to share their challenges, allowing staff to learn how others adapt to situations* 

JO FARAGHER is a freelance journalist with a strong background in education