

# CASE STUDY

From Good to Great at Gloucestershire College



A subsidiary of General Physics (UK) Ltd  
[www.bathconsultancygroup.com](http://www.bathconsultancygroup.com)



*A head of school left my section and we were not able to replace them, as the section was contracting. A number of support staff were asked to take on much more responsibility for the section and to take a key role in setting up courses. When the situation was explained to them, they were pleased to take on these extra tasks. This shows that when people are given full information, they are normally happy to help find a solution.*

*My manager now trusts me to make informed decisions about the running of my department. I do not have to justify every decision made and my budget is my responsibility. This is a departure from previous experience, and could be a result of the project or the fact that he is now more settled in the post. There has been no single incident, but I discern a general increase in supportiveness and cooperation across the college and a real sense of one team working together, rather than a range of teams working in isolation.*

*Top management is taking an active role in operational events. During the enrolment week, all the senior managers were on duty to support the process. Each day, they made improvements to the process, increasing customer service and the process for the rest of the enrolment period. My team volunteered to support the process, which they saw as being important function, because they had seen SMT involvement. This was a very positive experience for my team.*

Greg Smith - Principal, Gloucestershire College

## **Reflections from the Principal on being part of a pilot project in helping colleges deemed satisfactory move towards excellence...**

When Lynne Sedgmore, chief executive of Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL), asked me whether I would consider being part of a pilot project aimed at helping so-called 'satisfactory' colleges develop high performing cultures, I jumped at the chance. I had been at the college for nine years, joining it at a time when it was nearly bankrupt. Since then, the leadership team had turned the college around so that it was once again a viable entity. We had built new, state-of-the-art college premises at Cheltenham, and our Ofsted inspections were generally satisfactory or better. But I was concerned that the rate of improvement was not great enough; the challenges were forever getting tougher and I felt the management team was already stretched to its limit, pushing and working harder, but not getting the progress they deserved. The question keeping me awake at nights was how on earth could we reach a consistent standard of excellence throughout the college without driving people to an early grave by pushing them ever harder?

CEL had appointed Bath Consultancy Group (BCG) to work with three colleges as part of its consultancy development work, because of their track record in working with organisations on the softer side of change.

I was a bit sceptical at the beginning because I wasn't totally clear about what I was buying. But my instincts were telling me that the college was capable of a lot more. If only we could get more people to take responsibility for change at all levels in the college. When two of the consultants came down to meet the leadership team and me, their idea of working with the college as a whole system - not just the top team, or middle managers, or teaching staff, but across all levels and functions - really appealed to me. I also liked the idea of working with an appreciative enquiry approach. I didn't want another report telling us what was wrong and what we needed to do about it, but was attracted to a proposal to identify, connect and learn from existing pockets of excellence.

John Watters, the lead consultant from BCG, drew distinctions between planned and emergent change and explained how both were necessary to shift performance. He also drew on the difference between technical problems (which had an answer) and adaptive challenges (which required the whole system to find a way through a messy situation) in positioning the work. He and his colleagues helped us realise that we were over reliant on the three Ps of procedures, paperwork and processes, trying to keep the external stakeholders happy, and under focusing on leadership and core motivators.

# LEARNINGS

Over nine months, through a series of facilitated away days, meetings, one-to-one coaching and occasional workshops, we went on a rollercoaster of a journey. John introduced us to the book 'Must-Win Battles (by Killing and Malnight pub Prentice Hall). I believe that the explanations of underlying theories really helped some of my leadership team colleagues to feel more confident about the approach.

It hasn't all been plain sailing. In fact, it has been quite uncomfortable at times. Early on we were challenged in terms of our own working inside the management team. I had to face up to the fact that the college had become very 'principal-centric', and that even within the management team people were not speaking up freely to challenge each other and me. But the relationship I had with John, our consultant, really helped me stand back and listen more, lead in a different fashion, show more of my own vulnerability at times and, most importantly, stay with the journey and encourage others to do the same when it became confusing and challenging. I was really surprised at the effect this had on the college. Its positive impact was one of the main messages from the external evaluation that CEL commissioned and was delivered through Quality Improvement Process Ltd.

One workshop that had a profound effect on the college more widely involved a day spent with about 80 managers, from both support and curriculum, doing a culture simulation, based on

the work of Barry Oshry. We had all been warned that this was a risky thing to do, and that potentially sceptical managers might not engage with a learning process that was highly participative and quite challenging. But it was a huge success. It gave people a real understanding of organisational dynamics and a very straightforward language with which to talk about it.

I remember vividly being a 'bottom' at one point in the exercise and how quickly I slipped into feeling powerless and 'done to'. The design of the workshop afforded us short times for reflection, enabling us to talk about what was going on at each point in the system. Everybody recognised those unhelpful patterns into which we all fall - blaming others, opting out, stepping in when we should be helping people to take accountability, and so on. Just as a computer has default settings, which one can choose to override, we all have more choices than we care to admit and can, more often than not, choose to take a different stand.

*"I will remember my experience of being a 'top' for the rest of my life - it wasn't a role play. An amazing microcosm of life - the lessons will stay with me."*

Peter White, Director of Customer Services and Marketing,  
Gloucestershire College of Arts & Technology

*"I found the day of real value, despite being the biggest sceptic before I walked in."*

Andy Arkell, Head of School, Mechanical and Electrical  
Engineering, Gloucestershire College of Arts & Technology

Nine months later, one of the big changes for me is that I am now much more conscious about what I do. I had seen my job mainly as decision making; now I see it as providing the conditions for other people to make decisions. I have had lots of feedback about the importance of being visible in the college, and this has become a much more significant consideration in how I spend the week. I feel better equipped to help others in the leadership team raise their game, and am certainly more able to listen when my own blind spots are pointed out. That means being brave enough to let decisions go out of our hands and happen at appropriate levels. It's also clear to me that this isn't just me. About 72 per cent of the managers who responded to the external evaluation said the project had had a specific positive impact on them personally. And in many ways that is what I was after.

What about going forward? BCG has helped us to frame a significant investment that we now want to make in leadership development across the college. We have formed a relationship with another college in the pilot, and are using that to exchange, support and challenge each other in the way we do things.

We have not finished the journey. The feedback from staff shows that we have more work to do within our senior management team and college management team to show the leadership that the college needs. I do feel, however, that our involvement in the pilot has enabled us to see

things which we couldn't see before, and to have renewed confidence in our ability to sustain the rate of change.

In particular, we are resolved to listen more to staff, learners and customers, and to have the courage to say we disagree. When we do that, we will work collaboratively for a solution. We will also be more creative about considering the possibilities. Sometimes this might mean being willing to do things very differently; and looking for the positive.

About 75 per cent are confident about the college creating effective improvement, and scored at least 6/10 for each of the following:

- That the college will build its capacity to improve in ways that achieve noticeable impacts on learners over the next three years (Q.5)
- In the ability of senior managers to plan change well (Q.6)
- That the college takes stock of the success of its initiatives (Q.12)