



Department
for Education

A guide to effective practice in approaching cultural change in colleges

**Learning from and for the sector about
principles and practice**

October 2023

Contents

Culture in colleges	3
Background	3
Ofsted and culture	4
Aims and objectives	5
Approach	5
Methodology	5
The main triggers for cultural change	6
Symptoms of poor culture	6
Emerging principles for successful cultural change	7
Case Studies	11
Bedford College Group	11
Bradford College	13
Chichester College Group – Crawley College	15
Cornwall College Group	17
First College	19
Heart of Yorkshire	21
Moulton College	23
Nottingham College	25
Riverside College	27
Tameside College Group	29
St Dominic’s Catholic Sixth Form College	31
West Hertfordshire College Group	33
Next steps	35
Acknowledgements	36
Cultural Change Case Studies	36
Project Research Team and Contributors	37

Culture in colleges

Background

“ Know yourself, your values and what you’d resign for; know your team and the organisational culture; know your business and your distinctive position in a globalised and changing world; engage staff in the change process and invite contrasting perspectives; focus on the core business and embedding change but remain outward-facing and in touch with the needs of your clients; invest time in modelling and creating an inclusive, aspirational learning culture; be bold and rethink how you work when necessary, including by forming new partnerships, recognising that you and others will make mistakes if you are to innovate; distribute and grow leadership at every level, particularly middle leadership”

Greany et al (2014:63)

The word “culture” is mutable. When applied to organisations, we find it modified with a range of adjectives which change its meaning- “toxic culture”, “student-centred culture”, “staff-centred culture”, “bullying culture”, “compliance culture”, “culture of fear”, “inclusive culture”. Generally, we associate it with the norms, values, expectations, and behaviours in an organisation. Sometimes it is used alongside “ethos”.

There are interesting real life test-beds for culture, which many of us would recognise. For instance, you can tell a lot about the culture in a GP surgery from the behaviour of the receptionist you initially encounter. The “relative test” used in the prison service is associated with a positive prison culture of respect which we would want for friends and family were they to be in custody.

There is a vast amount of information and research evidence around culture in organisations. It is harder to find specific information in relation to organisations whose primary business is education and training and where there are 2 groups, students, and staff, as well as multiple stakeholders and partners, all of whom will experience and perhaps embody a college’s culture. Yet the word and its associated concepts are frequently used to describe both positive and negative aspects of a college’s success.

A desktop review of inspection reports on outstanding and good colleges under the EIF shows that the text frequently uses the word “culture” to identify aspects of a college where vision, values, policies, and practice align. This alignment, which comes from the “deep dive” approach, is critical, because it is possible, at least in the short term, to achieve great results without a culture of, for instance, openness, respect, innovation, and kindness.

Ofsted and culture

References to culture within the text of Ofsted inspection reports include the following:

- learners and apprentices embody the outstanding culture of high standards across all the college sites
- leaders have created a culture of aspiration, support and challenge for staff and students
- a culture of relentless self-improvement and continuous improvement permeates the college
- since the previous inspection, senior leaders have successfully transformed the organisational culture of the group
- leaders have established a positive culture of safeguarding
- students experience a culture of very high expectations
- leaders and managers foster a culture across the college that is compassionate and accepting of difference...the mission infuses the organisation...the behaviour of staff, students and governors reflects this mission daily
- students benefit from a strong culture of positive respect and tolerance across all college sites
- students benefit from a positive and inclusive culture.
- leaders have taken effective steps to promote a staff culture of accountability and ownership
- learners and apprentices benefit from the strong culture of mutual respect and tolerance that leaders, managers and staff have created
- ... positive and harmonious environment...wide range of cultures

The triangulation methodology enables an evidence base which shows that there is no gap between college “words”-headline statements of vision, purpose and values, and the reality for students and staff. Careful reading of these reports shows that underneath comments on culture there is evidence of it in every aspect of college; student learning, professional commitment of staff, accountability of staff, and in leadership which nurtures and sustains the culture. It seems that a positive culture is what happens when statements, policies and processes become reality and part of the lived experience of those who lead, work, and learn in the college.

Aims and objectives

We would like to garner the rich experience of the sector in understanding some of the ways in which cultural change is brought about and crucially, sustained. Further, we would like to see if it is possible to identify some common aspects of the culture change journey which may support leaders in developing and sustaining a positive culture.

We would like to learn from leaders at various points on the culture continuum, whether this is at the start of the change journey, in the midst of it, or at a stage where the culture is self-sustaining.

- we want to look closely at colleges where leaders have changed, developed, embedded, and sustained a culture which generates success
- we want to try to identify some of the ways in which this has been achieved and sustained
- we want to use this experience to support leaders who are faced with the need to challenge ineffective and inappropriate behaviours and values and foster an ethos which aligns values and vision with high quality professional practice

Approach

The team's approach was informed by

- intelligence from the FEC team to produce a longlist of colleges where leaders have successfully brought about a change in culture. This was used to identify a shortlist
- Observations from recent college inspection reports (EIF) which identify culture as a significant and powerful force in successful colleges

Methodology

The team contacted the Principal/CEO in each college to ascertain levels of interest and willingness. A short briefing based on the introduction text was provided. All 12 Principals were interested in contributing to the work and were invited to take part in a structured discussion either online or face to face.

The team developed a discussion format which was sufficiently structured to enable a focus on a full "menu" of issues but also to allow for wide-ranging exploration of the most relevant aspects of culture change in each case.

The interview notes were written up, and content and accuracy agreed with each Principal/CEO.

The interviews were used as the basis for a list of key principles of culture change emerging from the interviews.

Each interview was then summarised in a shorter (500 word) case study with its

distinctive key principles identified at the start and some transferable learning at the end.

Principals/CEOs were asked to talk about the following:

- the context in which the college operates
- the issues in the culture- or culture vacuum- which were limiting or undermining the college
- the approach to changing culture
- the part played by senior leadership in leading cultural change
- the significance of middle leadership in bringing about change
- the role of teachers
- the role of students
- stakeholders and partners
- the systems and processes, including HR, which were developed, removed or changed to support cultural change
- the role of communications and external networks in supporting culture change
- structural change implemented to drive and support cultural change
- sustaining a positive culture

The main triggers for cultural change

- merger and expansion
- financial difficulties
- Ofsted judgements
- change of leadership

Symptoms of poor culture

- lack of vision
- poor communication
- staff not encouraged to challenge or use their own initiative
- high senior leader turnover
- industrial relationships not constructive
- lack of focus on students and their learning
- distrust and lack of respect for senior leaders
- poor compliance, inconsistency, and lack of guidance
- declining student numbers
- low morale
- governors and leaders losing sight of core purpose

- staff drifting through each term, with little idea of how to work effectively
- lack of ambition for student achievement

Emerging principles for successful cultural change

- 1. It takes a whole college to change a college culture; using simple messaging and involving everyone in defining values enables the whole college community to have a voice and play a part.**

This principle was evident in several colleges where all staff, and sometimes governors, students and stakeholders were involved in enabling culture change through articulating and defining values. Sometimes this process was part of strategic planning where the values were positioned within the document. Other examples involved events and activities around values and the subsequent embedding of these in all college processes, and in CPD events to provide real-life, real-time exploration of the values as a touchstone for behaviour.

- 2. Turning the biggest priorities into simple, memorable headline goals, messaging and re-affirming them can support culture change.**

Promoting headline goals relentlessly and sometimes establishing a “rallying cry” to focus everyone on the improvements which will have most impact can support a common goal and collective ownership and effort. Repetition and reinforcement of simple targets ensures that at a fundamental level, people know and remember what is expected. Several leaders used the “power of three” to ensure that common goals and targets were embedded in the memory.

- 3. Establish a culture of accountability for performance, language, and behaviour and apply this to every member of the college community.**

Accountability and responsibility at every college level, supported by objective information can change behaviour, most successfully that of students and teachers, who are each accountable for the same things. The chain of accountability is important for clarity and for ensuring that every individual understands why their own accountability matters for the common good. The principal holding senior leaders to account and curriculum leaders’ high expectations of teachers will lead to teachers’ high expectations of students. This chain of accountability enables objective and impactful performance management.

- 4. Establish structure, routine and expectations early**

One factor in cultural change is the early establishment of expectations and routine especially around meetings and communication. This can drive the pace of improvement and can bring buy-in from staff who have lacked clear direction and strong leadership.

Disciplined communication also helps build respect and credibility; decisions made within a week, information communicated within 48 hours and meetings only held when they will have an impact on students send a strong signal to staff about purpose and impact.

5. Affirm the core business of education in leadership language, behaviour and messaging.

Putting the students, teaching, and learning at the heart of the organization and demonstrating this in leadership behaviour can be a powerful tool for re-setting priorities. Examples of this include Principals who are out and about in classrooms, not judging but learning, senior staff and Principals delivering CPD, all interaction and communication referencing the core purpose. These and similar behaviours send out powerful signals that students are at the heart and their success is the core purpose.

6. Values can help to “bake in” the culture by articulating them in college functions and process and applying them in decision-making.

“Values” work to change culture was used effectively in several of the colleges. These included whole college events and processes to generate values and support both the identification of a culture and the sustaining of it in everyday practice. Staff-generated values are particularly effective in enabling both celebration and challenge. The follow-on work to embed values in all college processes, including recruitment, probation, and performance management can help make them part of the daily life of the college. Some colleges included students, stakeholders, employers, civic and community groups in these values events so that the communities served by the college know and understand its culture.

7. Governors can be powerful as leaders of values and culture.

Governors' involvement in cultural change can take different forms according to college context, but where boards have participated in and helped to shape values and culture work, this has had an impact. Some boards adopt the values in their governance structures and challenge and interaction are strengthened through meetings, papers and reports which reference and reflect the values. There are examples of chairs adopting a pragmatic response to need and supporting culture through leadership coaching and changing governance models to enable a sharp focus on teaching and learning.

8. Achieving cultural change sometimes necessitates initial compliance, as a means of establishing consistent expectations of standards and behaviour.

Compliance is sometimes necessary to bring consistency to college process and operation and to signal the importance of this to staff. Early insistence on compliance can evolve into a culture of innovation, collaborative problem solving, and imaginative teaching and learning.

9. Open, honest, regular communication is essential, even when the messages are difficult.

This is a significant factor in changing culture and establishing a mature dialogue with staff. Telling them the truth about the hard work ahead, setting out the challenges and sharing with them the improvement targets which must be met can set the tone for positive interaction and progress. As targets are achieved, all members of the college community can celebrate success and the distance travelled.

10. Visible leadership helps to change and embed culture.

This can work in subtle as well as obvious ways. Leaders who are out and about across the college, listening and learning can not only build a rich understanding of cultural issues but can at the same time model values, standards, and expectations in interactions with students and staff. In this way they can act as a coach, giving staff confidence to challenge students outside their sphere of influence. At the same time, students are reminded of expectations and standards from the leader of the college. Linked to this is the position of the leadership base in college. Proximity to staff and students provides ongoing reciprocal learning about culture and values.

11. Building leadership teams can be effective in linking past, present and future.

A combination of strong external appointments and identifying and promoting talent from within can achieve more than just the strengthening of the team and accelerating the

pace of change. It is also a morale booster, sending out a message to college staff about valuing their abilities and creating opportunities for them to progress.

12. Middle leaders can be frontline cultural game-changers.

Middle leaders were considered a powerful group in the culture change process. Several of the principals prioritized this group, assessing their potential quickly, and identifying both strong talent and development needs. In some cases, re-structure at this level with a mix of internal and external talent enabled the emergence of a positive culture, retaining and developing the best of the previous team and enriching it with strong external appointment. This kind of talent management can build ambition and aspiration whilst having an impact on students and staff.

13. Staff turnover may be an inevitable consequence of new expectations of performance and behaviour.

Early in the cultural change process, robust messaging around the need for compliance, alongside clarity of expectation, values and behaviour can lead to staff turnover. Managing this sensitively can support cultural change. Staff who stay see fairness in the process and want to be part of the success journey which will follow.

14. Recognition and reward are important in challenging times, and significant in building a positive culture.

Empathic leadership can play a significant part in embedding and sustaining values and culture. Identifying and rewarding individuals and teams who have demonstrated values re-affirms these for the college community. Principals commented that rewards can be small but thoughtful and can generate positive feedback. Recognition and reward are often linked to specific staff wellbeing routines and initiatives, including the appointment of Values Champions.

Case Studies

Bedford College Group

Key principles:

- turning the biggest priorities into simple, memorable headline goals, messaging and re-affirming them relentlessly can support culture change
- establish a culture of accountability for performance, language and behaviour and apply this to every member of the college community
- values can help bake in the culture by articulating them in every college function and process and applying them in decision-making

The context

Bedford College Group is a large general further education college which has merged twice, in 2017, with Tresham College and in 2023 with Central Bedfordshire College. The group has multiple sites across Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire which include a town centre, a sixth form centre, a land-based site, and a range of community learning centres, one of which is located in the National College for Motorsport based at Silverstone.

In 2019 the college was inspected and achieved an overall grading of good for overall effectiveness. At this point there were around 5,500 students on study programmes, around half at level 3. A similar number of students were on adult learning programmes and approximately 5,500 apprentices in Engineering, Motor vehicle, Construction and Business Administration. There was specialist provision for Approximately 130 high needs students. In March 2023 Central Bedfordshire College, which has campuses in Dunstable, Luton and Leighton Buzzard, joined the Bedford College Group, therefore extending both the reach and impact of education and skills.

The culture change issue

The principal has a longstanding interest in and commitment to a high-performing culture as a powerful means of raising the ambitions and achievements of the college's students and the communities it serves. He had a clear vision for a culture which would draw on and reflect college values. These values would permeate the college from policy to practice and would sit at the heart of day-to-day operations and interactions. The success of the values-driven culture was identified in the last inspection of Bedford before the merger with Tresham, and the principal believes that the sustained and secure culture in Bedford has been a significant factor in the vision for incremental group expansion and its successful implementation.

The approach to culture change

The Tresham merger enabled leaders to both strengthen the values-driven culture and embed it across the group. Despite issues in quality, performance, and finance at

Tresham, buy-in to culture change was helped by the fact that merger was achieved without redundancy. The same is true of the 2023 merger. A pay award enabled recognition of staff across the group. Values were defined and used to promote and maintain an ethos across the organisation that is both student-focussed and highly responsive to community needs. At the Bedford College Group this means being relentlessly focussed on raising expectations and on maximising the progression potential of all learners. This needs to be translated in very practical ways on a day-to-day basis, such as setting challenging targets for learner progression and holding teams and individuals to account for achieving these. Staff in the group work to 3 headline sets of values. These are student focus, high performance and respect, openness and honesty.

Three transferable “takeaways”:

1. The translation and interpretation of values in the day-to-day work across the group, especially in robust expectations of students’ work and progress.
2. The relentless and explicit articulation of the group’s headline values, and the modelling of these by senior leaders.
3. The formal and frequent interface with senior leaders, who lead meetings with individual staff to enable honest communication, productive dialogue and trust.

Bradford College

Key principles:

- turning the biggest priorities into simple, memorable headline goals, messaging and re-affirming them relentlessly can support culture change
- governors can be powerful as visible leaders and champions of values and culture
- building leadership teams can be effective in linking past, present and future.
- middle leaders can be frontline game-changers with powerful impact on students and staff

The context

Bradford is a city centre GFE with 3,500 young people, 3,500 adults and 977 apprentices. When the principal was appointed in 2019, the college had been in intervention for several years. Financial notices to improve were coupled a Requires Improvement grade in 2017. Between 2019 and 2021 the college culture underwent a transformation, coming out of intervention in 2021 and in the same year achieving an Ofsted Good.

The culture change issues

The principal describes the college when he arrived as “broken”. Staff were directionless and did not know how to work together as an organisation. The Executive Team were almost all new to the college and strategic leadership. There was little of the college “story” which new leaders can draw upon to understand culture. There was a deep distrust of leadership based on several years of turbulence and incompetence. There had been no pay rises for 8 years, and strike action had undermined the college in the community.

The approach to culture change

The appointment of the Chair, recently recruited as governor and very skilled, connected past with present. Her approach to the role was pragmatic, understanding what was needed in the moment their development as strategic thinkers and decision-makers and to the pace of values-driven leadership across the team.

The principal invested time listening and bringing clarity to confusion. There was a “bonfire” of glossy documents, replaced with 2 things- a simple purpose- “working together to transform lives” and a set of measures to achieve this, the master targets. Key to both these things was the focus on testing every action and every system in terms of its impact on students. This was the backbone of a new Strategic Plan. The physical re-location of the Executive to the central hub signposted visibility, a new teamworking culture and was a visible symbol of the newly articulated simple purpose.

The principal led culture informally and formally. The previous meeting model (separate groups of “academics”, vocational and administrative staff) was replaced by all staff events with consistent messaging later re-affirmed in meetings with smaller groups.

The principal invested in middle leaders as champions of culture, using informal and formal networks. The responsibility of this group for effective, high-quality and efficient curriculum planning has strengthened their skills and understanding of organisational business planning. In turn, this secures a pipeline for executive leadership.

The master targets were and still are used to ensure teamworking and to foster an understanding not only of the individual’s area of responsibility but those of others. Reporting and accountability and reviewed regularly to invigorate teamworking and collective responsibility. This promotes strategic thinking and supports talent management and succession planning.

Three transferable “takeaways”:

1. Pragmatic governance with leadership coaching from the Chair.
2. Investing in middle leaders as the powerhouse of culture and behaviour.
3. Simplicity of messaging to affirm purpose - “working together to transform lives”.

Chichester College Group – Crawley College

Key principles:

- establish a culture of accountability for performance, language and behaviour and apply this to every member of the college community
- affirm the core business in leadership language, behaviour and messaging
- it takes a whole college to change a college culture; using simple messaging can enable everyone to have a voice and play a part

The context

In 2015, significant challenges at Central Sussex College (CSC) started to emerge underpinned by poor financial performance. A 'requires improvement' Ofsted (2016) resulted in the Sussex Area Review (2016) recommending the college seek a merger partner. Chichester College emerged as the leading contender being Ofsted 'outstanding' (March 2014) and financially robust. The Chichester College Group was formed in 2017.

The culture change issues

The merger process was not easy. CSC leaders opposed what was perceived as a hostile merger and pre-merger contact was minimal. As a result, planning for transformation and turnaround were difficult. Post-merger it became apparent that a gulf existed between leadership and staff; self-preservation had created a 'door closed' or silo mentality. The perception of management was negative, support and development were minimal and there was an atmosphere of anxiety and lack of trust.

The approach to culture change

A critical decision taken was to rebrand Central Sussex College as Crawley College thus putting the brand at the heart of the local community. From the outset the number one priority was teaching and learning. The message was that students come first with staff a close second and this necessitated an important cultural shift towards high expectations, agreed values and core behaviours. The group vision was about identifying the ways in which this cultural shift could be established and sustained whilst also providing the opportunity for everyone to have their own voice and contribution. The appointment of the principal was fundamental to communicating this vision and achieving turnaround which could be sustained. Visibility, listening in order to understand, recognising both individual and collective progress and contribution were behaviours founded on emotional intelligence. Senior leaders used the vision to work with staff and develop them as collaborative individuals and teams. This approach was important to a sustained culture of collective and collaborative progress, rather than achieving some quick short-term wins.

College processes and practices were reviewed to ensure they reflected the simple mantra- "simple, relevant, and impactful", a useful way of determining priorities and ensuring the integrity of every action, enabling individuals and teams to evaluate their contribution within the vision.

The accountabilities and responsibilities of individuals and teams at every level were identified and clarified with training provided to strengthen performance and develop confidence. The importance of compliance was acknowledged but was used as a starting point for consistency which would strengthen progress and impact. The evidence indicates that this more fluid approach has achieved transformational change at pace.

Three transferable “takeaways”:

1. Using the power of language- in the re-branding of the college which shifted the focus to students and their communities; and in the power of “simple, relevant, impactful” as an audit tool for all activity.
2. Recognising that genuine cultural change comes from a place of understanding and that this comes from listening, learning and being present.
3. Compliance as the starting point for progress towards excellence, rather than the end in itself.

Cornwall College Group

Key principles:

- turning the biggest priorities into simple, memorable headline goals, messaging and re-affirming them can support culture change
- building leadership teams can be effective in linking past, present and future
- middle leaders can be frontline cultural game-changers

The context

The Group comprises 7 campuses in Cornwall and two in Devon. It provides a wide range of vocational and further and higher education courses and apprenticeships, from pre-entry level to level 7. There are about 2500 16-to-18- year-old students, 4,500 adult learners, and over 1000 apprentices. There are also about 650 higher education students. The college recruits from an area recognised as economically challenged with significant areas of deprivation. The college had been in intervention since 2018 and was supported through the fresh start initiative.

The culture issues

The principal inherited a college that had struggled with financial viability for many years with changes to the senior leadership in rapid succession adding to the instability. Leaders and governors had lost focus on teaching, learning and students as they wrestled with financial matters and focussed on peripheral enterprises. Teaching and learning were not viewed as the core business and every opportunity to chase projects and commercial income was grasped which diverted senior leadership time and focus. The college lacked a clear purpose and tried to be all things to all people. Data and information to enable accountability and ownership of performance were weak, and leaders did not have a clear line of sight to and responsibility for the student experience and outcomes. Communication was poor and senior managers did not share vital information with other managers and the staff team sufficiently. There was a lack of trust and buy in from staff and managers.

The approach to cultural change

The first steps led by the principal were all to do with communication, clarity and content of messages and timely delivery to everyone. The key message was sharp, simple, and consistent- “Challenge 90”- a reference to targets for achievement, retention, and attendance. This memorable “call to arms” started the process of regular communication on progress and performance towards achieving the “90” challenge. Communication, clear leadership, and direction were welcomed by staff, and the impact evidenced in marked improvement in a short time.

The next steps focussed on the urgent need to clarify accountabilities to enable a clear line of sight to the quality of education and the student experience. Governors’ focus on students was affirmed and senior leadership restructured with several external appointments to strengthen and accelerate the improvement journey. The visible leadership from this group was used to build trust and credibility, and the role of this

group in developing middle leaders was key to embedding a positive performance culture. Middle leadership re-structure followed with work to establish strengths in the team, identify development needs and address weaknesses.

Three transferable “takeaways”:

1. Reversal of mission “drift” through simple but powerful messages, stripped back to reflect the core purpose of student attendance, achievement and retention.
2. “Challenge 90” underpinned by leadership structures to enable both achievement of the targets and progress towards them.
3. Swift appraisal of the capacity and ability of the middle leadership group to drive the new culture.

First College

Key principles:

- values can help “bake in” the culture by articulating them in every college function and process and applying them in decision -making
- staff turnover may be an inevitable consequence of new expectations of performance and behaviour
- it takes a whole college to change a college culture; using simple messaging and involving everyone in creating values enables the whole college community to have a voice and play a part
- recognition and reward are important in challenging times and significant in building a positive culture

The Context

The college is a medium sized GFE with around 5,000 students located in the north of England. It recruits from several of the most deprived areas in England. Many neighbourhoods adjacent to the college are within the 1% most deprived in the country. Significant numbers studying maths and English reflect lower levels of working age adult qualifications. The principal took up post 3 years ago. The college is graded good by Ofsted.

The culture change issue

The principal inherited a culture which was “absolutely not broken” because it was founded on deep care and support for students. However, there were aspects of this care which sometimes tipped into over-protecting, over-supporting and under-challenging. Students were sometimes experiencing a comfortable time in lessons, and this was limiting their potential and that of the college as an engine of social mobility. There was a reluctance to evaluate quality of teaching and learning forensically and a tendency to celebrate positive headlines to governors. There was a need to re-set the culture so that teachers and leaders would provide students with a high-quality experience to enable them to achieve and exceed expectations.

The approach to culture change

From the outset, the principal’s bedrock messaging was around the words honesty and accountability. “If any one of us- including me- drops a ball, we admit it, we stand together and we put it right”. College values were developed in stages. The Merlin Principle was used to envision the future. A “proud to wear the shirt” event was held to identify and articulate 5 values which were then central to a strategic development event involving all staff, students, and stakeholders. Each of the values-integrity, accountability, excellence, innovation and collaboration-was subject to a deep dive, and to case studies to enable them to become a touchstone for behaviour. College systems, interactions and processes were embedded overtly with the values. Governance systems followed suit. More recently, the appointment of 6 Values Champions and a recognition scheme is helping to “bake in” and sustain a values-driven culture.

This culture re-set enabled change in teachers' professional practice, so that students were increasingly challenged to work hard, engage with struggle, and exceed expectations. Middle leaders were tasked with honest and accurate appraisal of quality and governors provided with information which enables both celebration of strengths and challenge around weaknesses. The appointment of Values Champions is a symbolic and practical means of sustaining the culture, and the standards which everyone is expected to uphold.

Three transferable “takeaways”:

1. Whole-community engagement with development work in values and culture and the embedding of values within governance structures and processes.
2. The principal's modelling of values and clarifying the need for honesty and responsibility when mistakes are made.
3. The sustaining of culture through initiatives such as Values Champions across the college.

Heart of Yorkshire

Key principles:

- visible leadership helps change and embed culture in several ways
- values can help “bake in” the culture by articulating them in every college function and process and applying them in decision-making
- it takes a whole college to change a college culture; using simple messaging and involving everyone in the creation of values enables the whole college community to have a voice and play a part
- governors can be powerful as visible leaders and champions of values and culture

The context

Heart of Yorkshire is a merger of Wakefield College (GFE in West Yorkshire) and Selby College (Tertiary College in North Yorkshire). 4,173 young people aged 16-18, 3,550 adults and 1557 apprentices learn in Wakefield, Castleford and Selby. Both colleges hold pre-merger good inspection grades. Selby’s declining financial health and quality led to merger in 2022.

The culture change issues

Morale in Selby was low. Funding, leadership, and vision for the future were in short supply. Staff worked from day-to-day rather than to long term goals. There was anxiety that leadership from Wakefield would erode Selby’s identity and that introducing qualifications below level 2 may bring challenges. It was clear that the time was right to forge a new culture across the colleges for the benefit of students, staff, stakeholders, and the communities served by the group.

The approach to culture change

The established culture of visible leadership at Wakefield was adopted at Selby. Senior leaders spent time there, eating lunch in workrooms, working in offices, and sitting in social areas with students. They listened, watched, and gleaned rich insights into prevailing cultures in Selby- and in Wakefield. The team spent many hours sharing their findings, talking to governors, staff and students about values and behaviours. This strategy of listening, looking and learning enabled them to respond on the basis of evidence. There was an understanding that the issues were not just about Selby-the new college needed a cultural renaissance across the organisation.

Reflecting on their learning about anxieties and perceptions in Selby, the decision was made to work with an external consultant. Staff, students, governors, and stakeholders would be tasked with defining and formulating their values and culture. The resulting shortlist of 4 values was then explicitly referenced in every college event, system, and process- recruitment, induction, probation, appraisal, and in all key messaging. The principal launched the values, and this was followed up by CPD. The training gave staff a toolkit to challenge themselves, colleagues and students, and case studies were used to probe issues. (This work is ongoing, ensuring a sustained focus on behaviour

underpinned by value, and the embedding of a positive culture). Feedback from CPD enabled senior staff and the principal to work through issues on a one-to-one and small group basis. This strategy of macro and micro communication allowed the delivery of messages “en masse” to be followed up with individuals.

Three transferable “takeaways”:

1. Personal intervention by the principal in her leadership of culture; her willingness to engage in difficult conversations and model values in her own behaviour.
2. Embedding values into all aspects of the staff and student experience.
3. Giving the task of defining college values and culture to its people.

Moulton College

Key principles:

- visible leadership helps to change and embed culture
- building leadership teams can be effective in linking past, present and future.
- middle leaders can be frontline cultural game-changers
- recognition and reward are important in challenging times and significant in building a positive culture

The context

The college had been outstanding for many years, but a combination of serious financial challenges and weak leadership led to consecutive Ofsted Inadequate judgements and an inadequate financial health score. The consequent reputational damage exacerbated both the decline in student numbers, and the very high staff turnover.

The cultural change issues

A ‘closed door’ invisible leadership culture prevailed, in which people were discouraged from asking questions and were afraid to use their own initiative or to make a mistake. This coupled with poor communication and teamwork across the college and lack of strategy and vision to galvanise the team, led to a rapid decline. Staff had been excluded from decision making and hadn’t been involved in developing the values and strategy. As a result, they felt disenfranchised.

The approach to cultural change

It was clear that this was not a one-person fix and that it would take a whole college to rescue the college. The principal had to lead open, honest, and thorough communication and share the issues and challenges with staff to enable everyone to play a part in recovery. Sharing ‘warts and all’ was essential but when balanced with ‘we can do this and we can recover’ established a positive, collaborative, confident approach. It was essential to leave past mistakes, blame culture and practices behind in a new way of working and a new culture based on trust, integrity, recognition and reward.

The principal recognised that cultural change would emerge from values and behaviours overtly demonstrated by senior leaders and at the same time from whole college involvement in developing values and vision. All staff were involved in developing the vision and values which would underpin a strategic plan. Senior leaders’ consistent and visible modelling of agreed values and behaviour across the college signalled high expectations for staff and students and established them as a support; “buzz the SLT”. Middle leaders, the “engine room” of change, were significant in this new values-led culture. This team needed to change to enable sustained improvements in teaching and learning and a constant focus on progress and achievement. New external appointments, the internal promotion of talented people and some difficult but honest conversations resulted in a strong and dynamic team.

Three transferable “takeaways”:

1. Clarity, honesty, empathy and consigning past mistakes to the “dustbin of history” enabled this principal to enlist the whole college in the improvement journey.
2. Culture change “from the middle” with a combination of external and internal talent can have a powerful impact on the quality of teaching and the culture of learning.
3. The visibility of the leadership team, their support and their role modelling of values and behaviours is essential to the building of trust and respect.

Nottingham College

Key principles:

- establish a culture of accountability for performance, language and behaviour and apply this to every member of the college community
- affirm the core business in leadership language, behaviour, and messaging
- middle leaders can be frontline cultural game-changers

The Context

Nottingham is a very large general further education college with 9 campuses operating from several sites in the city and in Basford, Ruddington and Stapleford. It has had a turbulent history of mergers and financial challenges. Nottingham ranks the 11th most deprived out of 317 districts in England. The college had lost its sense of identity and was not closely tied into its community or place. Local stakeholders had lost trust and respect in the college.

The cultural change issues

The principal's analysis was that the college and its staff had lost sight of the core purpose. There had been little focus on people or students in the previous leadership regime with decision-making in silos. A sense of college identity was lacking, and staff allegiance was to their immediate colleagues, courses and departments. They felt neglected. Compliance was poor with weak processes and structures and little sense of ownership at college level or commitment to doing what is right. There was a lot of anger about senior management and a prevailing sense of "them and us", nobody cares" and a distrust of managers. The college was on the verge of having a dysfunctional culture. Staff were desperate for clear and supportive leadership and direction.

The approach to cultural change

The principal believed it was essential to establish that she was here to stay and committed to the long-term future of the college. Her move to live in the area was a clear message. Communicating with, listening to and meeting as many staff as soon as possible was imperative. She recognised the need to earn trust and show empathy to demonstrate her authenticity as a leader. The tone set from the start was positive and individual's achievements were acknowledged as markers of progress and success. The change in culture was based on clear priorities- students first, always, staff a close second. The groundwork in place, the next stage was ownership of direction and strategy, through whole staff activities led by senior leaders. The analogy of the Golden Thread was used to emphasise the links between processes, people, and outcomes and to clarify this through a new accountability and ownership, in place of blame and fear. In turn, this enabled assessment of the calibre and capacity of middle leaders to drive improvement, and the provision of CPD to support effectiveness and impact.

Three transferable "takeaways":

1. Clear, unapologetic "terms of reference"- students first, staff a close second.

2. Whole staff involvement in strategic planning using the “Golden Thread” to communicate several messages in a single process: accountabilities, students first, middle leader quality, training needs.
3. A staged process, in which the principal established authentic personal values as a starting point for setting strategy, strengthening accountability and evaluating potential.

Riverside College

Key principles:

- achieving culture change sometimes necessitates initial compliance as a means of establishing consistent expectations of standards and behaviour. This platform can then usher in a second stage culture of innovation, autonomy, and creativity
- open, honest, regular communication across the college, is essential, even when the messages are difficult
- turning the biggest priorities into simple, memorable headline goals, communicating and re-affirming them relentlessly can support culture change

The context

Riverside College is an outstanding, medium-sized, £31m general further education college located in Cheshire. The borough served by the college is in the 13th most deprived borough nationally and the third most deprived in the Liverpool City Region. A large proportion of students come from areas of high social and economic deprivation.

The culture change issues

The 2006 merger between the Halton college and Widnes and Runcorn sixth form saw the coming together of 2 relatively weak organisations. The foundations for the college were unstable, with high turnover of staff especially at senior level. This created a perceived disconnection between leadership and operational staff. The college had a strategic plan but did not have the capacity or resource to implement it. Learner recruitment was in decline and staff morale low. The college felt devoid of success and staff were described as “meandering” through the terms.

The approach to culture change

A new Principal in 2009 brought a strong record of positive turnaround. From the outset a combination of high visibility with honest and open dialogue enabled the conditions for transparent communication of challenges, the creation of a shared vision and short-, medium- and long-term targets. As targets were achieved, they were a focal point for celebration and a recognition of progress. Staff bought into these early successes, openly identifying the many differences in the college.

Reward and recognition provided balance for a robust performance management system with the most significant feature being compliance. Most staff appreciated the consistency and fairness in this approach; they wanted to be part of the future success story. Leadership at all levels was restructured to ensure the right people were in the right roles. Strategic external appointments accelerated the pace of improvement and supported a financial strategy providing a solid base for improved quality and leadership.

A change of Principal with a vision for outstanding ushered in the next stage of cultural change. Secure systems, strong leadership and engaged staff were the basis for a new “cultural contract” of listening, learning, and innovating and initiating. Compliance was a given, but alongside was a commitment to nurturing creativity. Middle leaders became

the cornerstone in this shifting culture, providing quick feedback from all areas of the organisation, enabling issues to be quickly dealt with and working with the support of HR to foster a high values culture of mutual trust. Key messaging – Quality, Efficiency, Growth-was simple and clear, used by staff and applied in evaluating strategic situations and making decisions.

Three transferable “takeaways”:

1. Balancing necessary compliance with recognition, reward and celebration using communication and visibility.
2. HR can play a significant part in driving a high values culture, supporting middle leaders in a flat structure and allowing emerging issues to be dealt with quickly.
3. Culture change can be stepped and sequenced; in this case, one principal secured cultural recovery enabling the second principal to take the college to outstanding.

Tameside College Group

Key principles:

- achieving cultural change sometimes involves initial compliance, as a means of establishing baseline standards of work and behaviour
- middle leaders can be frontline cultural game-changers with powerful impact on students and staff
- affirm the core business in leadership language, behaviour and messaging

The context

Tameside College is a medium sized, multi-site Further Education College serving the Metropolitan Borough of Tameside. Unemployment rates are above the Northwest average and educational attainment is lower than national and regional rates. The current college self-assessment is Good and leaders recognise the importance of developing and sustaining a strong positive culture to underpin excellence.

The culture change issues

In depth analysis by the new principal revealed weaknesses in teaching, learning, leadership and planning coupled with low staff morale post inspection (2016). Leadership had become rule based, risk averse, transactional in nature and a major block to creativity. This impacted all levels of the organisation. There was evidence of a culture of low expectations reflected in declining teaching and learning performance indicators, lack of accountability, disappointing learner behaviour and serious staff compliance issues. Staff wanted to do well for learners but didn't have the toolkit to do so.

The approach to culture change

Significant leadership change came at both senior and middle management. A short-term coercive approach was adopted to arrest further decline. Staff compliance with systems was systematically enforced and reinforced through monitoring and a rigorous performance management process. New applicants to leadership roles had to demonstrate that they would not only support and contribute to the improvement agenda but strictly enforce it. The appointments of 2 external senior managers with turnaround skillsets was critical. Leaders recognised that culture change must transform the performance of all staff, not just those who are front-facing with students.

Communication systems became fit for purpose, management training was focussed and relevant. Staff surveys measured progress and provided a forum for "you said, we did". Human Resources provided a method of achieving change as opposed to being primary developers. There was a shift in emphasis towards making the organisation truly outstanding rather than simply meeting Ofsted criteria for outstanding.

The principal is a visible, approachable leader whose decision making is evidence-based. He has appointed leaders with complementary skills to achieve a well-balanced team with the ability to facilitate and sustain change. Accountabilities are clear and

underpinned by training. Excellence in Teaching and Learning is the stated number 1 priority. It is the glue that binds the college together.

The emphasis for all leaders is on the concept and power of the team, horizontally and vertically. Middle management is now the powerhouse of operational business. Power and responsibility is devolved but subject to monitoring with remedial action as required. Fundamental to this approach is clear direction and expectation from senior level and quality assurance systems that measure impact and inform future development.

Three transferable “takeaways”:

1. The introduction of a high expectations agenda through an initial compliance and then agreed values and behaviours.
2. External appointment to curriculum leadership roles. The complementary skills of these leaders transformed performance and introduced good practice models.
3. HR were part of the change and key to achieving it, playing a key role in measuring progress and providing a forum for “you said, we did”.

St Dominic's Catholic Sixth Form College

Key principles:

- affirm the “core business” of education in leadership language, behaviour and messaging
- visible leadership helps change and embed culture
- establish structure, routines, and expectations early. (The Sunday email)

Context

This is a Roman Catholic college situated in the London borough of Harrow. At the time of the most recent Ofsted inspection in May 2022, there were 1308 students enrolled at the college. Most students choose 3 A-level subjects from a wide ranging curriculum offer with a small number studying a level 3 business studies programme.

The culture change issue

The current Principal joined the college 10 years ago, from a career in inner city London schools. St. Dominic's had achieved an Ofsted grading of outstanding in 2008 and continued to enjoy a strong reputation and robust student recruitment year-on-year. However, the new principal believed that the college could go much further to achieve teaching and learning standards which truly maximised learner potential and would enable the college, its students and teachers to exceed expectation. His vision for academic excellence underpinned by spiritual and pastoral support drew on the college's Dominican heritage in which learning, teaching and the development of the intellect are important preparation for adult life.

The approach to culture change

Within 6 months of commencing in post, the principal brought in a team of Ofsted trained professionals to carry out a comprehensive inspection across the college. The outcomes of this thorough review, which focussed on everyday classroom practices, were used to develop pedagogical approaches at the college where being 'student-centred' was a clear expectation. This marked the beginning of the transformation the principal wanted to achieve. His aim was that all aspects of the way the college operated needed to flow from this commitment to realising student potential through the quality of the teaching and learning offered. His role in this was to lead from the front and model expectations for every member of the college community. Leadership of subject heads enabled a direct line of sight to their performance, a structure to involve them in decision making, and active management of a relationship based on mutual trust.

Three transferable “takeaways”:

1. Resetting the teaching and learning culture to take the college to a different level and drawing on external expertise to establish an externally validated baseline.
2. Establishing a vision for academic excellence underpinned by pastoral and spiritual support. All decision making is informed by this triangle of priorities.

3. Leading learning from the front. Visible leadership includes the Sunday 6pm email to all students to set the focus for the coming week, the expectation that every door in college is open, and that the principal will be expected to drop into classrooms and offices.

West Hertfordshire College Group

Key principles:

- open, honest, regular communication is essential, even when the messages are difficult
- recognition and reward are important in challenging times, and significant in building a positive culture
- values can help “bake in” the culture by articulating them in college functions and processes and applying them in decision-making

Context

The West Herts College Group was formed when West Herts College merged with Barnfield College from the 1 February 2019. The Group has 4 campuses, located in Watford, Hemel Hempstead and Luton. Students access the college from a wide geographical area that includes West Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, Luton and parts of North London. Approximately 6,000 young people are enrolled on study programmes, and there are approximately 2700 adult learners, 450 apprentices and around 150 high needs learners. The Group was inspected in December 2021 and achieved an overall effectiveness grade of good, with 5 grades of outstanding for specific aspects.

The culture change issues.

The post-merger period was critical in drawing the 2 colleges together as one. Whilst the strategic fit between them was good the recent history of Barnfield meant that it was a “broken” college in many respects and urgent work would be essential. At West Hertfordshire there were concerns amongst staff that the merger might undermine the successful and sustained progress the college had been making year-on-year.

The approach to culture change

Nurturing and sustaining the culture was already a strong leadership and management priority at West Hertfordshire prior to the merger with Barnfield. In order to move forward as a college group, the principal prioritised the building of trust across the Group, with the embedding of good day-to-day leadership and management practices key to achieving this, alongside clear, open and transparent communication. The changes introduced were more extensive at Barnfield due to the difficulties there, but these changes also brought new opportunities for individuals and teams which helped accelerate the pace of change and build a positive ethos. One example of this is the re-setting of high expectations of student behaviour at Barnfield which supported the development of a culture of high expectations in teachers.

Three transferable “takeaways”

1. The principal prioritised building trust through openness and honesty in all communication. This included frank dialogue about the serious financial challenges that would need to be addressed to ensure viability going forward.

2. Linked to this was the concept of fairness and consistency in implementing effective systems and processes quickly, ensuring staff recognised the need for them and embedding them with strategies for recognition. All this supported the development of a culture of trust.
3. The principal's decision-making and approach to problem-solving were grounded in and aligned to college values. This consistency and integrity fostered trust across the group.

Next steps

We are mindful that the contributing colleges are only a small sample of the scope and success of the work of leaders in challenging poor cultures and bringing about new cultures based on core values, common purpose, and insightful leadership.

There are several sector leaders who have expressed interest in this area and willingness to contribute to any subsequent work.

Acknowledgements

Cultural Change Case Studies

With thanks to sector colleagues for expert contributions:

College	Contributors
Bedford College Group	Ian Pryce Principal/CEO
Bradford College	Chris Webb Principal/CEO
Chichester College Group	Andrew Green Principal/CEO
Cornwall College Group	John Evans Principal/CEO
First College	
Heart of Yorkshire College Group	Sam Wright Principal/CEO
Moulton College	Corrie Harris Principal/CEO
Nottingham College	Janet Smith Principal/CEO
Riverside College	Mary Murphy Principal
Tameside College	Jackie Moores Principal/CEO
St Dominic's Catholic Sixth Form College	Andrew Parkin Principal
West Herts College Group	Gill Worgan Principal/CEO

Table 1: Case study contributors

Project Research Team and Contributors

College	Contributors
Further Education Commissioner Research Team	Meredydd David Pauline Hagen Martin Sim Laraine Smith
Additional FEC Contributions	
Department for Education Project Leads	

Table 2: Project research team and contributors



Department
for Education

© Crown copyright 2023

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3.

Where we have identified any third-party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

About this publication:

enquiries www.education.gov.uk/contactus

download www.gov.uk/government/publications



Follow us on Twitter:
[@educationgovuk](https://twitter.com/educationgovuk)



Like us on Facebook:
facebook.com/educationgovuk