

## CLOSE-UP

# How HR made a difference at work

## *Developing a respected internal career coaching scheme for Oxfordshire council*



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**THE COUNCIL IS ALWAYS** looking for ways to encourage learning and development. Feedback from staff surveys and Investors in People assessment showed that what staff wanted was increased career development support. Our vision was to help staff to manage their own careers effectively, so we could also enhance employee engagement. In 2008, funding for the project was agreed.

**IT WAS IMPORTANT THAT** we improved the perception staff had of career support in the organisation. But we also wanted to increase the flexibility of our workforce, in order to be able to adapt more easily to changing requirements. We aimed to give staff the opportunity to understand better what motivates them in their careers, to review their transferable strengths, and to be aware of the options for career and personal development.

**AFTER RESEARCH, CONSULTATION** and a procurement exercise, it was decided that creating an internal career coaching

service would best help meet these objectives. Using volunteer career coaches was attractive not only because it was a highly efficient model but also because volunteers would have the opportunity for development by training to become a career coach.

**WE WORKED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH** Rob Nathan and Gilly Freedman of Career Counselling Services (CCS) to recruit and train the coaches. After devising a specification for the career coaching role, it was advertised on our intranet pages. People from across the organisation applied, from a wide range of locations and backgrounds. At interview stage we were struck by people's enthusiasm and keenness to help colleagues.

**TWENTY-FOUR PEOPLE WERE SELECTED** to train as career coaches and take part in CCS's five-day accredited career coaching training. Volunteers were asked to commit to giving six to eight hours of their time a month, with the agreement of their manager. Few of those selected had prior experience of career support – instead they were chosen for their interpersonal skills and experience of helping others.

**THE CHALLENGE WAS TO TRANSFORM** a group of keen but inexperienced volunteers into competent and professional career coaches. Participating in the training programme was the first step. CCS advised us of the importance of creating a solid infrastructure to manage the service, but said ongoing case supervision and matching appropriate career coaches to staff would be key to the success of the service.

**THE CAREER COACHING SERVICE** was launched just over a year ago and to date more than 100 staff have either received individual career coaching or attended a career workshop. Feedback on the quality of career coaching is consistently positive and we know that people who have experienced



### LESSONS LEARNT

The success of our career coaching service depended on:

- ◆ It being integral to the organisation's career development support.
- ◆ Support from the top.
- ◆ A member of staff owning and managing the service.
- ◆ Linking it to other key relevant services within the organisation.
- ◆ Clear information about it and access on the intranet.
- ◆ Emphasis on service quality.
- ◆ Ongoing support by line managers.

it have made significant changes in terms of their career management.

**THE CHALLENGES IN SETTING UP** the service included: some managerial reluctance over releasing staff to be involved in coaching, pressure of work on coaches and changing personal or work circumstances of coaches. These have been overcome by creating a network of coaches – where communication is maintained with each coach – to manage the allocation of casework appropriately. Case discussion meetings and an annual networking event have also been vital.

**EARLY FEEDBACK SUGGESTS THAT** staff appreciate the improvement in career development support which will, in turn, have a positive effect on engagement. Evaluation of those coached indicates an increased willingness to be flexible in trying different career options. This is crucial at a time when efficiency is all important and when we can't afford to lose dedicated staff.

**WE ARE ESPECIALLY PROUD** not only that this project had such a positive impact on the organisation but also that we may hopefully be a role model for other organisations in both the public and private sector.

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