# Knowing Me, Knowing You: Professional Development for Support Staff



**By Joy Coulbeck**

**M**eeting the challenges of delivering a 21st-century curriculum and a world-class quality education ultimately depends on the willingness of the staff on the ground to give 100% effort to their jobs. In fact, the most successful schools are the ones where people are giving 110% or even 120%—where people are obviously "going the extra mile." How many members of your staff measure up to this standard?

> Bringing out the best in support staff may not always be about salary.

Although many people in schools work very hard indeed, some staff members are way down on the scale with regard to performance. All too often, a significant number of staff members drag their heels and give only what's expected of them—if that. This attitude poses problems for education leaders charged with providing a high-quality education to all students. Can effective professional development be the answer?

## Beating "Us vs. Them"

Billions of pounds in new funding poured into U.K. schools recently; the vast proportion was earmarked for establishing individualized learning programs. Schools suddenly found themselves hiring teaching assistants in unprecedented numbers, meaning that, for the first time, support staff outnumbers teaching staff in many schools.

Workplace dissatisfaction is higher among these support staff members than it is among teachers, managers, or supervisors because some support staff feel undervalued, have fewer opportunities, and believe their achievements go unrecognized compared with teachers.

Until recently, professional development opportunities in schools have been teacher centered, reinforcing this belief that support staff do not have the same rights as their colleagues. Managers cannot afford disaffection in what may be the largest sector of staff.

Jackie Byrne, a school business manager in Manchester, investigated the role of pay and rewards on motivation for differing groups of staff within her school. (School business managers in the United Kingdom are school based rather than at the district level.) She discovered that although support staff received lower pay and fewer rewards, they "felt that so long as they were paid a reasonable salary, it was more important to them to achieve goals, to be recognized for their contributions they make, to have the same opportunities for development as teachers, and to be given responsibility."

Therefore, bringing out the best in support staff may not always be about salary. Indeed, in this recession, reduced budgets may make salary increases impossible. However dissatisfied support staff are about their pay, trying to deal with that dissatisfaction is a mistake, according to Frederick Herzberg. His work on motivation spans half a century and despite criticism, it is still a favorite with managers. He highlights what he sees as faulty thinking that has dogged managers for many years:

> While . . . industry was trying to solve these insolvable hygiene problems of avoiding interpersonal dissatisfaction, the solvable motivator problems of training and quality production, which lead to long-term job satisfaction and health, were neglected. (Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman, 1993, p. xi)

Herzberg links *training* and *quality production*, which gives us the clues we are looking for: that improving people's skills to achieve better quality outcomes is a powerful strategy for creating and sustaining high-performing teams.

In the past, low-paid staff members in schools have had trouble seeing their jobs as part of a bigger picture, especially if their roles are not classroom based. However, we have seen a growing tendency for schools to view themselves as *learning communities* where everyone, including the principal, is considered a learner.

## It is not just a case of "What can you do for us?" but "What can we do for you?"

A major study conducted in the United Kingdom explored the idea of effective professional learning communities. The authors concluded that the concept is worth pursuing as a means to promote schoolwide and systemwide capacity for building sustainable improvement and pupil learning (Bolam and others 2005). They suggest that although the argument exists that the only professionals in schools are the teachers, everyone in the school can adopt professionalism and *be* professional.

For support staff, this means opportunities to gain new skills in areas that not only are relevant for them individually but are aligned to the school's priorities. They should be part of a schoolwide professional development strategy so they see how their work contributes to the school and to teaching and learning.

## Everyone Learns, Everyone Gains

The idea of the school as a learning community has its roots in learning organization theory. For some schools, this presents a new inclusive approach to the workforce, which is illustrated by Table 1 from the work of Loucks-Horsley (1995).

Moving away from a philosophy that is teacher centered to one that is learner centered is the key. The drive to inspire, to increase aspirations, and to unlock potential for all must be a strategic view.

The school business management students at Manchester Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom found that showing support staff that their development and training are just as important as those of teachers is a highly motivating factor. One student commented: "Before, it was always teachers who were funded on continuing professional development courses. Now it is different; everyone gets the chance to improve themselves and people are much happier."

The British government's Training and Development Agency Website offers valuable approaches to support staff development and includes case studies from across

**Table 1.** A Paradigm for Professional Development in Learner-Centered Schools

| From Too Much | To More |
| --- | --- |
| Focus on teacher needs | Focus on student-learning outcomes |
| Focus on individual development | Focus on individual and system development |
| Transmission of knowledge, skills, and strategies | Inquiry into teaching and learning |
| "Pullout" training | Job-embedded learning |
| Generic teaching skills | Content and content-specific teaching skills |
| Fragmented, piecemeal, one-shot experiences | Experiences driven by clear, coherent long-term strategic plan |
| District direction and decision making | School direction and decision making |
| Professional development as some people's jobs | Professional development as everyone's job |
| Professional development for teachers | Professional development for everyone |
| Professional development as a "frill" | Professional development as essential |

*Sources:* Loucks-Horsley 1995, p. 267. Loucks-Horsley cites Sparks (1994, p. 42) as the originator of some of this table.

the country. For example, one principal in London describes his inclusive approach:

> Giving support staff—or associate staff, as we call them at Ashcroft—the same opportunities to learn and develop as teaching staff sends out a strong signal that all members of the school workforce are of equal value. We reinforce that message by making training and development for all staff part of our performance development cycle and making our resources director, a member of the senior leadership team, responsible for associate staff training and performance management. (www.tda.gov.uk/leaders/supportstaff/staff_development/case_studies/leaders_ss/ashcroft.aspx)

## Wheels within Wheels

Professional development is part of an interconnecting cycle of performance management processes that begins with effective recruitment, selection, and induction; produces an audit of needs and action planning; follows through with appraisal/performance management reviews; and then delivers well-targeted professional development.

It sounds good, but good professional development begins right at the start with induction. The best system for this is a two-way process that not only inducts the new worker to the ways of the school but also looks for the potential in the employee. It is not just a case of "What can you do for us?" but "What can we do for you?" And it is at this point that the seeds of true commitment to the school are sown.

The manager must get to know the support staff member well and make every effort to ensure that he or she understands what the school really aims for and how it intends to meet its goals. This exchange of knowledge begins to cement the working relationship so the support staff member feels included and valued.

Identifying people's development needs and career aspirations is one of the key drivers of this cycle. Just discussing it can be an eye-opener. Support staff shift from seeing their jobs as a means of paying the bills to believing they can improve their skills, aspire to better jobs, and really contribute to the well-being of the school and its students because they have a sense of *loyalty* and belonging to the school.

## Transforming People, Transforming Learning

In the United Kingdom, the school business managers (SBMs) are school based and almost always members of the senior leadership team. Their professional development has grown exponentially since the introduction of the Bursar Development Programme in 2003 by the National College for School Leadership. School business managers now represent support staff at a strategic level and the effect of this change is still building.

The SBM has plenty of scope to initiate a learner-entered approach to support staff teams by first ensuring that the performance management cycle is fit for purpose. Some of the SBM program students at Manchester Metropolitan University have reported a lack of a performance management system for support staff at their schools, and note that some support staff are wary about being involved in professional development. Their questions center on "What's in it for us?" and "Are you telling me I am not doing my job right?" This wariness requires careful and sensitive handling.

The SBM program students chat informally to support staff about their roles in the school in order to gain their trust and confidence before conducting a holistic skills audit that looks at

- Skills and strengths, including talents and experience
- Doubts and weaknesses

- Perception of school priorities: vision, goals, culture
- Career thoughts or aspirations
- Self-generated targets.

The accumulated data from these conversations generate a range of common priorities and individual needs that feed into both team and individual action plans and are prioritized according to the school improvement plan.

Identifying, finding, and funding appropriate professional development for support staff can be difficult in cash-strapped times. However, once the "learning for all" ethos is established, a great deal can be achieved through peer learning, problem solving, and work shadowing, which are all cost-effective ways of building professional development. Business managers are skilled in seeking grant opportunities from central government for longer-term courses wherever this is possible. Some support staff may even fund their own training programs.

SBM students at Manchester also reported that the skills audits in their schools resulted in opportunities for curriculum enrichment that had never before been imagined. For example, discovering that a teaching assistant has hidden talent in a sport or the arts opens up the possibility for him or her to contribute to cocurricular activities. Some support staff eagerly seized the chance to gain qualifications in math that they had previously thought irrelevant to their work. Support staff shared they felt an increased sense of pride and self-worth when they gained skills and qualifications that they missed when they were at school. It's a second chance for many.

"The staff are our greatest resource" is a common statement from school leaders. Maybe the time is long overdue to open up training and development opportunities for all and really find a way to invest in people. Schools can't afford to ignore the potential of support staff to improve all our children's experiences at school.

## References

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