

Assessing for Leadership at Birmingham City University

Diane Allsopp, a consultant at Wickland Westcott, sets out the innovative transitional leadership development programme at BCU

One of the biggest challenges facing people moving into senior management is recognising the need to focus on the broader corporate objectives, not just those relating to their own department or service. This is true both in private and public sectors. This article explores how one progressive university is helping its executives manage the transition into senior leadership positions.

Birmingham City University has launched two groundbreaking initiatives. First is the rigorous, objective assessment of senior recruits to ensure that they are equipped with broader leadership capabilities essential to the university's long-term success. Second is a tailored coaching programme to help the executives move smoothly and effectively into their new roles so that, from the start, they are focusing their energies on achieving the university's corporate objectives, as well as meeting personal performance expectations.

Assessing for leadership

These senior leaders are drawn from the top levels of the university, including members of the vice-chancellor's directorates, executive deans and directors of services. The university is currently reviewing how these leadership initiatives could be cascaded further down the university structure.

Specialist consultancy Wickland Westcott was commissioned by Birmingham City University to research, design and implement a rigorous, systematic one-to-one assessment process. Specifically tailored to the university's activities, ways of working and desired culture, this process consists of a suite of psychometric tools, and an in-depth interview exploring the candidate's personality profile. Together, this combination provides great insight into the candidate's approach, style, how they operate and how they lead. Each candidate receives detailed feedback at the end of the assessment day. The Wickland Westcott consultant then draws together all of the data collected and produces a report for the appointments panel that includes individual strengths and areas for development. A copy of the report is made available to each candidate.

The aim of the assessment is to measure the leadership potential of candidates in areas such as strategic thinking, alignment to broader organisational objectives, openness to change, personal drive, influencing others and managing objectives. These competency areas are vital to deliver the ambitious strategic path that Birmingham City University is following.

The university specifically requested hard-edged, evaluative assessment reports with clear findings and recommendations. The assessment is a mandatory process, even for scarce, highly talented candidates who might otherwise object to undergoing such scrutiny. Angela Pocock, HR director, emphasises however, that a candidate's willingness to participate is a key indicator of their commitment to the role, personal development and their ongoing learning.



The Baker Building at Birmingham City University

“This approach is valuable in helping to bring together a rich source of information about the candidates and contributes to well-founded selection decisions. Some applicants don't like the process, but those that go through it get some useful feedback and we offer them the chance to discuss this in more detail with our consultants Wickland Westcott.”

Currently used at the most senior levels across the university, the assessment process is being cascaded down the organisation. The proof of the pudding, however, is in the eating.

What difference has assessment made to the calibre of the candidates being recruited? Vice-chancellor Professor David Tidmarsh comments:

“The assessment process has made a real contribution to the quality of people in our most critical roles, including the appointment of pro-vice-chancellors, deans and directors of departments. We consider Wickland Westcott to be professional, responsive and a very progressive company.”

Executive coaching

Now that the pipeline of talent coming into the organisation has been qualified and refined, attention has shifted to supporting these senior leaders in their career progression. To this end, and based on the quality of the work done to date, Birmingham City University again retained Wickland Westcott to provide executive coaching to those individuals who request it. This coaching focuses on improving the quality of the leader's existing skills, and supporting the implementation of their personal development plans. More importantly, however, it facilitates their adaptation to organisational culture so that they can move forward quickly in key areas such as strategic planning, forging solid relationships with key stakeholders, understanding performance issues and galvanising the efforts of their teams to deliver the university's corporate objectives.

Driving organisational development

Encouraging executives to step up and look more broadly, take on a corporate perspective and ensure that their actions are aligned with the wider organisational goals is key to success. It is best achieved through selecting senior leaders who have the potential to see the bigger picture, and then providing development support to help them adapt quickly to their new organisation, focusing their efforts on corporate aims. In this way powerful initiatives, such as assessment and coaching, become key levers for driving organisational change, enabling HR to make a meaningful, strategic contribution to organisational success. Angela Pocock, HR director emphasises:

“As an organisation committed to learning, it's paramount that having identified and selected key individuals, we continue to support them and have an expectation that they will do the same for their teams in moving the university forward.” **E**

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