

BUILDING COLLEGIATE RELATIONSHIPS

A GUIDE FOR FURTHER EDUCATION STAFF

WRITTEN BY EDUCATION SUPPORT

Introduction

Creating a collegiate environment is a fundamental pillar for building protective resilience and improving wellbeing across the further education (FE) workforce. Within an FE setting, it can be easy for teams to become fragmented due to delivery across multiple campuses and following a hybrid model of both in-person and remote working.

In this guide we look at how building strong relationships requires trust, respect and self-awareness. And how this in turn can make your role more enjoyable and allow you to be in the best possible place mentally and emotionally to support your learners and colleagues alike.



Workplace relationships: the importance of connection

Post pandemic, we have seen a shift in work patterns among FE staff. These changes are positive for many – such as more flexible working hours, but there are also some downsides as a lack of face-to-face contact can inhibit the building of strong workplace relationships and teams.

Research, including [this study on happiness in workplaces](#) (Nunez 2015), suggests that employees perform better when they feel respected and cared for. This makes sense when considering that organisational culture has been shown to have a bigger influence on employee wellbeing than salary and benefits alone.

Building strong relationships with colleagues can:



Improve collaboration, communication and teamwork, leading to better outcomes for learners and the FE setting



Lead to a more enjoyable and fulfilling work environment, increasing overall job satisfaction



Provide access to valuable information, resources, and insights that may not be available otherwise



Serve as a valuable professional network that can be beneficial throughout your career



Provide opportunities for professional development, networking and growth within the FE setting



Create a positive and supportive work environment that contributes to the overall learner experience



Increase staff retention and make the setting more appealing to future employees

You may notice barriers to connection in your FE setting, for example:

- **Online or remote environments:** these can make it difficult to establish personal connections with colleagues. In-person interaction is often crucial for building connections, and a lack of it can be a significant barrier, especially in FE as there is a higher likelihood of staff being geographically spread out. Remote working could impact new employees in particular, as opportunities to learn from colleagues as well as build relationships is potentially lost in the new environment
- **Balancing workload:** high workloads can make it difficult for FE staff to find the time and energy to engage in activities that foster connections
- **Lack of support:** for example, this might take the form of not having regular check-ins with staff to ensure they understand their role and that they do not have conflicting responsibilities, for example
- **Reliance on technology:** email and video conferencing could detract from face-to-face interaction and hinder the development of personal connections
- **Structural barriers:** working in silos or only your department may prevent staff members from collaborating and connecting with others in the organisation. On the other hand, some teams are doing this well – it's worth looking at how they are integrated and what you can learn from them
- **Communication skills:** lack of communication or different communication styles can impact the ability of staff members to connect and work effectively together
- **Lack of psychological safety:** find out more about psychological safety in [**our guide**](#), or learn more further on.



Tips for building collegiate relationships

Build trust

When colleagues trust each other and their managers, it creates a more positive and supportive work environment, increasing job satisfaction, happiness and cohesiveness as staff can rely on each other to follow through on their commitments and support each other when facing both personal and professional difficulties.

Building trust with colleagues requires effort and consistency over time. Here are some ways to build trust, which may require you to be self-reflective about what you are like as a colleague or manager and how you can grow in this area.

Ways to build trust:



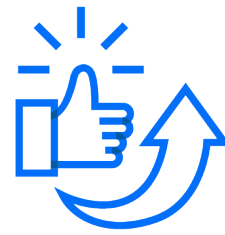
Clear communication

Foster open, transparent and clear communication, actively listen to others and be honest about your own thoughts and actions



Be consistent

Demonstrate dependability and consistency in your actions, words, and decisions



Show respect

for your colleagues and their opinions, even if you disagree with them



Take responsibility

for your actions and mistakes, and work to find solutions to problems



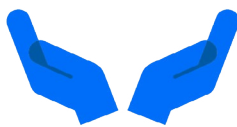
Embrace collaboration

Work together on projects and tasks, and be willing to support each other in achieving common goals



Maintain confidentiality

Respect the privacy of others, particularly in sensitive or confidential matters



Show empathy

Seek to understand your colleagues' perspectives, and show empathy and understanding in your interactions with them



Be Flexible

Be adaptable, and show a willingness to compromise when necessary



Lead by example

Model the behaviour you expect from others, and demonstrate the importance of trust in your own actions and decisions

Give and receive feedback

As with most workplaces, feedback is part of the role that can be challenging. Both giving feedback sensitively as well as receiving feedback gracefully (and challenging effectively if you don't agree!) can be tricky.

Giving feedback respectfully requires a balance of honesty and tact.

Try to:

- **Choose the right time and place** to provide feedback, avoiding times when the recipient is likely to be defensive or distracted
- **Start with the positives** - ideally they should outweigh the things that need work
- **Be specific about the behaviour you are addressing**, rather than making it personal
- **Start feedback with “I” statements**, such as “I noticed that...,” or “I feel that...” This helps to make feedback feel less like a personal attack and more like a collaboration
- **Allow the recipient to respond to your feedback** and be willing to listen to their perspective
- **Provide specific suggestions for improvement** and frame feedback in a positive and constructive manner
- **Refrain from blaming your colleagues** and instead focus on what needs improvement
- **Offer support and resources to help** - be willing to work together to find solutions
- **Show respect for the recipient and their contributions**, even if you disagree with their approach or decisions
- **Follow-up on the feedback provided** and check in with the recipient to see how they are progressing.



Receiving feedback respectfully involves being open to hearing others' perspectives and considering their suggestions for improvement.

Tips for receiving feedback:

- **Approach feedback with an open mind** and be willing to consider others' perspectives and suggestions
- **Pay close attention to what the person is saying**, and avoid interrupting or getting defensive
- **If you are unclear about something, ask questions** to better understand the feedback being provided
- **Welcome feedback and show appreciation** for the effort the person has put into providing it
- **Take responsibility** for your actions and decisions, and be willing to make changes based on the feedback you receive
- **Consider the feedback carefully**, and take time to reflect on it before responding
- **Be honest about your feelings and concerns**, and be willing to discuss any issues that arise from the feedback
- **Follow up on the feedback received** and communicate any changes or improvements you have made in response to it.

Avoid blame or shame

In order to build and maintain psychological safety in FE settings it can help to be solution focused rather than blaming others when things go wrong. For example, instead of: “why did it go wrong?” try asking “how can we make sure this goes better next time?”

Focusing on collaborative language: ‘How can we make sure this goes smoothly next time? What are our collective responsibilities?’ turns the responsibility into a group effort, rather than singling out an individual or allocating blame.

To learn more about psychological safety in FE settings take a look at our guide **‘Psychological safety in Further Education settings: a guide for managers and leaders.’**

Communication skills

Two key communication skills that are worth considering in FE settings include active listening and having tough conversations.

Active Listening

- 1 Give the speaker your full attention and avoid distractions such as your phone or computer
- 2 Ask clarifying questions to better understand what the speaker is saying
- 3 Try to put yourself in the speaker's shoes and understand their perspective
- 4 Repeat what you have heard to show that you understand, and to confirm your understanding
- 5 Provide feedback on what you have heard and be willing to share your own thoughts and feelings.



Find out more about the **BUILD active listening** technique.

Tough conversations



- 1 Prepare for the conversation, and consider what you want to say and how you want to say it
- 2 Choose a time and place where you will have privacy and can have an uninterrupted conversation
- 3 Be honest and straightforward, and avoid beating around the bush or being vague
- 4 Start the conversation with "I" statements, and express your own thoughts and feelings
- 5 Listen to the other person's perspective, and be willing to understand their point of view
- 6 Focus on finding solutions and resolving the issue, rather than simply pointing fingers or blaming others
- 7 Follow-up on the conversation, and make sure that any agreements or commitments made are followed through on.

Tips for leaders and managers

Show appreciation

We all need appreciation for what we do but it can be so easily forgotten in busy FE settings. However, showing appreciation can have huge benefits from boosting morale to enhancing employee retention.

Ways to show appreciation might include:



Listen to your staff

If staff feel listened to and understood, they will feel appreciated



Create a plan

Develop a plan of action that shows you understand staff concerns and are prepared to act



Promote a culture of openness

Create an environment where staff can talk about their challenges and how they're feeling



Invest in your leaders

Make sure that line managers are trained to identify when people are struggling, and to have conversations about mental health and wellbeing.



Support people when they are not at their best

We all face challenges. Ensuring staff feel supported when they are struggling is the clearest way to show your appreciation



Celebrate your staff

Recognise your staff by celebrating their efforts, often. This will look different for every setting but might simply include more feedback during 1-2-1's, verbal praise during group meetings or even awards, time off for volunteering or CPD

Show compassion

Compassion and supporting each other are important aspects of creating a positive and supportive workplace culture. Showing kindness and empathy when trying to understand the experience of others are powerful tools in ensuring that your workplace is supportive and compassionate. Even when you don't fully understand what a colleague is going through.

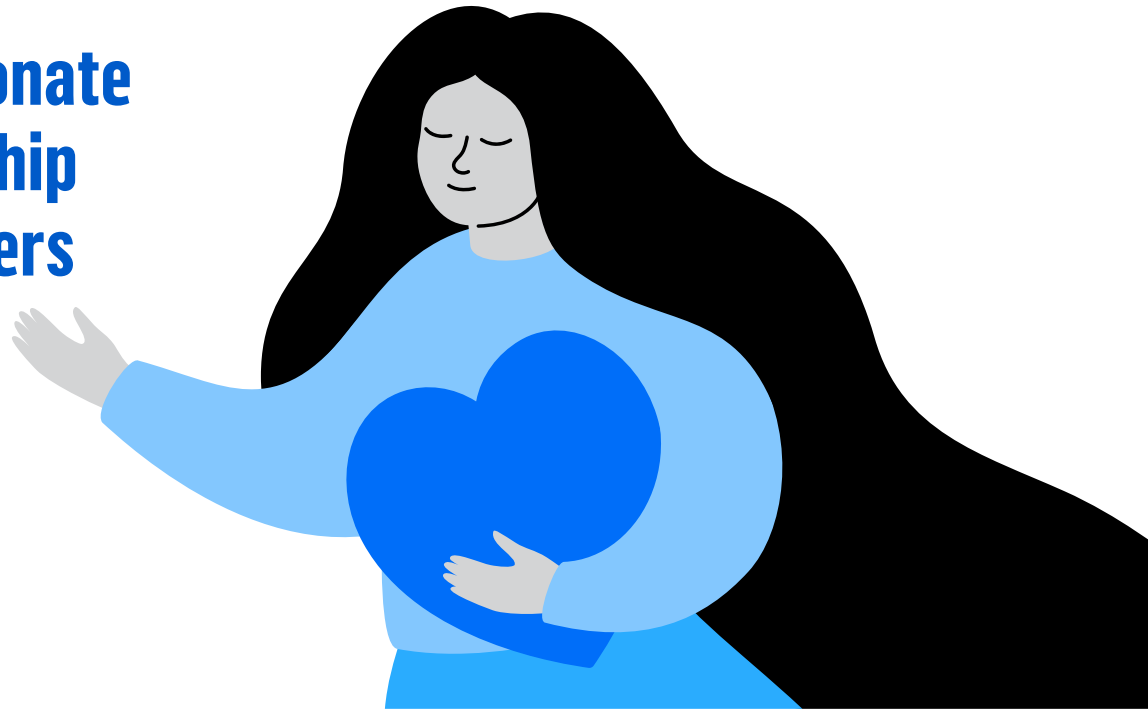
Working together as a team and being willing to help others and share resources are the cornerstones of any successful organisation. Staff will feel encouraged and motivated. They will understand that support and guidance is there when needed, as well as signposting to further help.

Seppälä and McNichols (2022), state that in healthy work relationships, everyone benefits, and everyone experiences moments of authentic happiness and joy. Businesses thrive under such leadership.

Compassion and support can help to create a positive and mentally healthy workplace culture, where individuals feel valued, motivated and can be their best selves.



Compassionate FE leadership myth busters



Myth

Truth

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 Compassionate leadership is fluffy | It is possible to be a kind, caring leader while being respected by your team |
| 2 If others need so much from me all of the time: there's nothing left for me | Being a compassionate leader does not mean neglecting your own needs. It's possible to be compassionate and have boundaries |
| 3 Compassion and high expectations are mutually exclusive | Compassion leads to discretionary effort. You'll get the best out of your colleagues if they are loyal |
| 4 Performing and caring are mutually exclusive | Rigorous systems and procedures will ensure people know where they stand. They will want to perform well because they care |
| 5 I can't let others I know I'm struggling because they'll think I can't cope. | Vulnerability is a crucial attribute for good leadership and it can help school leaders to build trust and inspire their teams. |

Encourage collegiate working: exercises for leaders and managers

Lastly, here are two exercises that can be used by FE leaders and managers to encourage collegiate working within their FE settings. These exercises can be used with teams virtually and in-person.

Exercise 1: Dixit cards

Dixit cards are a set of cards used as a story telling game - and sometimes in coaching and supervisory settings to allow participants to speak more openly about how they feel about a particular topic.

In the context of building collegiate relationships you could:

- Share a selection of dixit card illustrations on a screen for remote staff or on a projector/printed for in-person staff (easily found on google)
- Ask each member of staff to pick 2-3 cards that best describe how they feel the team works or how they are feeling now
- Listen to each team member describe where they are at the moment, using the imagery in the cards (2-3 minutes each)
- Take a moment to reflect on any themes as a group. Did you find any of your colleagues' responses interesting? What is working well? What areas might need improving?

Exercise 2: Reflective exercise

A quick and simple reflective exercise you can try with your team is to rank each question below on a scale of 1-10 (feel free to add your own questions as you wish):

- How satisfied are you in your role?
- Do you feel listened to by team members?
- How well does your team work together?
- How valued do you feel?
- What is your level of motivation?

Once complete, collate the answers together as a group. This provides the opportunity to discuss each colleague's thoughts without directly confronting individuals and can be used as a basis to start making improvements collectively as a team.

Further support

It's important to remember that we don't have to choose between prioritising the mental wellbeing of learners or FE staff. The two are interconnected.

Healthy FE staff are better able to provide high quality education and support for learners who have been through a difficult few years.

Education Support is the only UK charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff in schools, colleges and universities. You don't need to be in crisis to talk with qualified counsellors about anything you are experiencing. You can call their **free and confidential** helpline **24/7** on **08000 562 561**.

Or check out [educationsupport.org.uk](https://www.educationsupport.org.uk) for free resources and tools to help you and your colleagues.

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