

# CASE STUDY

## Combining scientific brilliance with great leadership with BBSRC

The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) is the UK's principal public funder of research and training in the non-clinical life sciences

### Background

As one of the UK's seven Research Councils, BBSRC invests over £400M of public money each year in cutting-edge research and training across a remit that spans from agriculture and food through to basic biomedical science. BBSRC supports researchers working in UK universities and research institutes and in five BBSRC-sponsored Institutes.

BBSRC directly employs approximately 2,000 staff, including a corporate function in Swindon where functions such as policy, communications, peer review and grant administration are located. The majority of staff in the Institutes are supported by scientific and core services staff.

### The challenge

BBSRC was undergoing considerable change, in terms of funding, corporate governance and organisational structure. The management team recognised that to ensure the changes took place smoothly and effectively, there needed to be significant improvements in leadership. The institutions affiliated to BBSRC tended to operate autonomously and key personnel were often more comfortable with scientific concepts than with managing people.

Janet Storey, Performance and Development Manager, BBSRC explains: "Many organisations recognise the world is changing and the traditional image of the lone scientist at the laboratory bench no longer exists. There is now a much greater degree of collaboration within and between organisations meaning management skills are increasingly crucial to successful projects. Internal research indicated that management was inconsistent and in the past we had only invested in piecemeal elements of training. We felt the time was right to initiate a wide scale, coherent training programme to ensure all our senior staff could manage consistently and cope with the demands of changing working practices."

In order to identify a partner that could develop the leadership and management development programme, BBSRC, as a publicly funded body, followed a robust procurement process with strict guidelines for fair and open competition. The European-wide tender provoked over 150 responses from various organisations but BBSRC was very clear on the qualities the winning candidate organisation should possess.

"Our staff are of an extremely high academic calibre," explains Janet Storey, "and as such, do not suffer fools gladly. The most important factor for us was that the facilitators could not only develop and deliver the right programme but that they had the academic credentials on an individual level to conduct robust debates. We fully expected our participants to interrogate the process so we wanted a team of developers with the ability to withstand and respond to such interrogation. The Roffey Park team fitted the bill perfectly. Most consultants were qualified to Masters level or above and had the credibility to engage with the participants on an academic level."

### The Programme

The overarching aim of the programme is to support "excellence in science" focusing on effective leadership, people management and improved performance management. The hook for the scientists participating in the programme was that efficiency in managing people and resources can lead to an individual having to spend less time on people management issues and therefore gaining more time being creative and innovative.

However, before developing the programme, Roffey Park undertook initial groundwork to understand the present and future context of BBSRC and establish current and future requirements of leadership and management competence. This involved asking existing leaders to describe current and future leadership challenges and by running focus groups.



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Using this data, Roffey Park were able to develop a 360 degree framework that was able to provide feedback on the areas identified as good leadership and management competence by BBSRC employees themselves. The programme was then designed to build on the 360 degree framework and incorporate a variety of development activities such as psychometric exercises, skills practice, theoretical input, feedback, coaching and learning sets.

The Programme emerged as a three-stage approach, offered at 5 levels (Executive, Senior, Middle, Supervisory, and Aspiring), to take into account the different behaviours and skill sets required at each level. In total, BBSRC anticipated about 60 programmes (5 senior; 35 middle manager; 13 supervisory; and 7 aspiring managers) for 900 participants in total. So far about 300 participants have attended.

The first stage for executive, senior and middle manager levels is 360 degree self-assessment and feedback, which increases the self-awareness of BBSRC employees in leadership positions through a process of seeking assessments of their managerial effectiveness against a framework of behavioural indicators. Ongoing evaluation suggests that this is one of the most powerful aspects of the programme with participants reporting that they have increased self-awareness and are thinking about how their style impacts on others.

Stage two comprises residential modules at Roffey Park covering theory and practice. The theoretical input for each level of the programme has been tailored to the requirements of the role at the various levels of leadership and management. In addition, participants have the opportunity to undergo a psychometric exercise which is correlated with their 360 degree feedback to produce a holistic picture of individual strengths and areas for improvement.

For the senior and executive levels the final stage comprises follow-up courses either using learning sets or 1-2-1 coaching. Many participants are finding the learning sets a useful mechanism to review their learning and to reflect on and share with their colleagues new ways of working.

## Results

BBSRC and Roffey Park are committed to ensuring that the programme continues to meet the leadership and management needs of the organisation and that the investment made in the programme is making a positive difference to the leadership and management culture. To this end, both organisations undertake regular evaluation events using best practice principles as well as end-of-course feedback

forms and one-to-one interviews. The data collected gives vital clues about the culture of BBSRC and is fed back into the organisation at a senior level so that there is greater awareness of what each individual's development needs are and the changes they are making to the leadership and management.

It also makes clear that the programme is a resounding success. Key findings suggest there is increased self-awareness through the 360° feedback and diagnostic exercises, and participants are returning to work with a different set of tools to use when managing people. Furthermore, there is a recognition by participants that they can 'flex' their style to meet the different needs of those they manage to achieve a better outcome. Overall, there is both an awareness and greater appreciation of the many different roles in BBSRC, which contribute to the success of the whole organisation.

"Roffey Park really got under our skin to understand what makes us tick and where they can help," concludes Janet Storey. "The evaluation shows what a positive contribution the programme is making and demonstrates that it is fulfilling the objectives we set out in the brief. Roffey Park's flexible, proactive and academic approach, combined with its ideal residential facilities, make it the perfect partner for developing management skills and we certainly intend to extend our relationship as we look at other areas for development."

