

Effective MAT governance

Unit 2 Transcript

Hi, I'm Jay.

I've been a trustee for some time now but the move from one school to several is a whole different ball game. The journey has been pretty bumpy but we are beginning to feel like we are on the right track now. I'm still incredibly wary of being over-confident. I know quite a lot about risk management from my day job and this tends to make me super cautious – which may not be a good thing. Also, I feel that for a long time we shied away from really nailing what it is that our MAT stands for and truly represents, and so any conversations about where we went next felt rudderless.

Thanks to our chair, Viv, and our CEO, Chris, who has just completed some executive training, we are much clearer now. This is welcome as we are under pressure to stretch and expand into the wider Airton B-y area. This feels a bit daunting. But I have to remind myself that the schools we are being asked to take on are not all giving the kids a good education and if we can help then we should consider this carefully. So I'll be sharing with you how we have come to a decision about how ABCAT will evolve in the future.

As I mentioned before, it took us a while to realise that we needed to create a trust-wide identity. To start with we just changed from being a single academy trust named after its school, to using that name for the MAT.

But when we started to speak to the two schools who were looking to join, it became clear that they didn't want to feel as if they were being subsumed by the founding school. Our chair, Viv had been to a community MAT networking event and had been impressed at how another embryonic trust had approached this issue. We arranged a video-conference with them which was really helpful.

From this we decided we needed to consult with stakeholders – pupils, staff, parents and even some local businesses – about what a group of local schools meant to them. The bay is a clearly defined community which stretches along the coast, although our schools are in the main town in the centre.

Because the bay is quite isolated we are a close-knit community and people like it this way. So we determined on using the geographical feature to define our trust – hence Airton Bay Community Academies Trust!

One of the parents at one of the schools joining us is a graphic designer and volunteered to create some ideas for logos. Pupils from all three schools voted on a short list which decided the winner. It really promoted a sense of ownership of the new trust. I'm going to hand over to Viv now to tell you about our next steps.

Working together strategically

When Chris became CEO, we arranged to meet for a one-to-one each month. This is a real opportunity for us to keep up to date with what is happening and also to share some of our thinking.

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Growing the trust in the right way

It was at one of these meetings that the issue of North Bay Secondary came up. It had been struggling as the head had been on long-term sick leave, then had retired, and recruiting a new head has proved to be hugely problematic. They had decided the answer was to join a MAT and Chris wanted to seriously consider taking it on. But this meant growing our MAT to include a school 12 miles up the coast, albeit still in the bay, and we all know how tortuous the coast road can be. There are risks that this would dilute our community ethos and maybe even jeopardise the close collaborative relationships we have built. However, two of their feeder primaries were also exploring forming or joining a MAT, but they wouldn't be in a position to support the secondary. However, if all three joined, this would create an instant North Bay community hub which would include North Bay Secondary. Chris therefore decided that she would like to re-visit our vision and strategy and I agreed that it would be a good time to do this.

Taking the time to review the vision

In order to make sure that this happened in a well thought out and systematic way, we proposed an away day type session on a Saturday morning to sort out what we really wanted ABCAT to look like in three to five years' time. We decided to invest in a facilitator for this, which proved extremely worthwhile as she helped us develop a suitable agenda for the day and pushed our thinking, while keeping us on track.

Taking the time to review the vision

You can also find a copy of the agenda that we produced for the away day, in Resources and on the link on this page when you select the close button.

Agreeing a new statement of mission, values and vision

After the away day, a number of us got together with Chris to draft a refreshed mission, values and vision statement. We asked our existing academy committees for their input, which was largely positive and supportive. They then helped us to share it with stakeholders – our staff, pupils, parents, and any community links they had. We also shared it with the chairs and heads of the schools looking to join our trust. We didn't take on everyone's feedback, but we re-drafted the document (and this included shortening it to two sides of A4) and it was subsequently approved by the board. You can take a look at the document by following the link you can find on this page.

Developing strategic priorities to achieve the vision

From this, we were able to work out our key priorities for developing our schools whilst growing the organisation. It was no easy task but really focused our minds on the measures we would use, and the milestones we needed. We also looked at whether risks were being correctly identified and well managed.

Monitoring implementation of the strategy

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Finally, these priorities and measures became the starting point for a revised CEO's termly report to the trust board so we are able to track progress far more robustly.

Developing a trust-wide culture

Keeping our focus at such a strategic level has meant we do not lose sight of the ambitious vision we are aiming to achieve. And we feel quite proud that everyone involved has bought into it wholeheartedly so that there is ownership of our strategy right across the trust. This has helped to build a healthy trust-wide culture in our schools, which has been important, given the changes we have all been through together. It hasn't always been an easy ride and we couldn't have done it without the loyalty people have shown.

Listening with stakeholders - surveys

Being so clear about the importance of community has meant that we have always placed a lot of importance on listening to our stakeholders. We do this by surveying staff and parents annually. The data we get from these surveys is becoming more valuable year by year as some of the questions stay the same so we are building a longitudinal view. Other questions are more specific to what is happening now. For example, we asked staff for their views on a change to our term time leave policy and we asked parents for their views on the cost of the residential trips.

Reaching more stakeholders - focus groups

We also have used focus groups. This was invaluable when we were looking at our attendance policy. We got together groups of pupils and parents to talk about their understanding of the rationale behind the policy and for their views on rewards and sanctions. This gave us the chance to engage with the harder to reach pupils and parents.

Consulting with parents - information and consultation evenings

We also hold information and consultation evenings. When we were considering growing the trust, which meant risking compromising our community ethos, we arranged meetings for our current and prospective parents to explain our thinking and to get their views. One point that was made that took me by surprise is that some parents are concerned that our community is too close, too closed. They want their children to have the confidence to leave the community and to explore the world. In other words, extending the MAT was seen as very much a positive.

Staying in touch - developing an alumni network

Looking forwards, we are exploring setting up alumni with an organisation such as Future First guiding us along the way. One aspect of this will be tracking our pupils' progress beyond our schools so we can see if we really have prepared them for adult life. I've added a link to Future First on the page.