Case study

Leadership programmes: SSAT's are "more hands-on, more genuine"

James Heale,
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Headteacher of Vyners School*

"I had already completed the NPQH (National Professional Qualification for Headship) when I started on SSAT's Aspiring Headteachers (now the Next Generation Headteachers programme) course," says James Heale, executive headteacher of the Vyners Learning Trust and headteacher of Vyners School, Hillingdon. "A fellow deputy head who had completed the programme spoke very highly of it. I realised it was a great opportunity to continue to develop my skills and knowledge of headship. The programme was excellent. I had been rather disheartened by the structure of NPQH by contrast, this was really hands-on and practical.

"As the course went on, I became more and more inspired. Listening to current heads gave me confidence – good heads with practical advice about the issues I was likely to encounter, for example, in my first 100 days of headship. There's no doubt it gave me excellent support, and motivated me to apply for headships.

"There's so much value in learning from people with experience of maybe 20 years in the job you're aspiring to. And by contrast there were other speakers who were in their first year in post, and that was great, too. It made the step up to headship seem less daunting. There is no doubt that the Aspiring Headteacher programme helped me get my first headship."

Once in post James also undertook SSAT's New Headteachers and Executive Headteachers programmes, and found great value in those too. Other leadership courses, he has found, involve presenters "standing up and proclaiming, 'this is the way to do it' – they tend to be prescriptive. Instead, presenters in SSAT programmes will say, 'this is my experience'; the advice is more hands-on and genuine.

"I'm collecting all the badges!," he adds, "I have been fortunate that my previous headteacher and my current governors have been so supportive by investing in my professional development. SSAT are exploring a new, broader leadership programme (High Performance Leadership programme, new for 2016) which certainly intrigues me. As I understand it, it will be looking at more wide-ranging views of

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leadership, looking at examples from leading companies such as Philips and Apple. It would be really eye-opening to see how leadership works in other high performing contexts."

For the last two years James has presented at the launch of the Aspiring Headteachers programmes and has hosted the New Headteacher programme at Vyners which, he says, he really enjoys. "I benefited so much from listening to other people, so it's nice to give something back. It's really important that people like me encourage others to apply for headship, to show it is doable. They hopefully see a presenter who seems human – has a young family and still manages to have a life outside school.

"Presenting also encourages me to reflect on my own school, and to evaluate what is important. I have really benefited from meeting other people in school leadership. Over these five-six years, I've made lasting relationships with fellow delegates, speakers and those delivering sessions on the programmes. And now I have been able to reciprocate by sharing good practice."

"You're constantly seeing some of the best practice that's out there. SSAT is very good at identifying outstanding headteachers and outstanding schools to present. On the executive heads course I'm doing now, I'm really impressed how they're showing you a range of models among academies, multi-academy trusts, etc. This is important as it's easy to think there is only one model out there."

His final comment was about the value of networking among delegates: "I still bump into people from my Aspiring Headteachers course who, like me, are now headteachers and executive heads. And that's so good: it's having someone you can email or pick up the phone to, knowing they will find the time to give you a bit of advice. This is great, especially as headship can be such a lonely job."