

Professional Growth at Dixons

Guiding Principles

Continuous feedback to fuel performance

- At Dixons, Aligned Autonomy is the foundation of our success so far: we are aligned on our mission and values – these are our non-negotiables. If we are determined to create a healthy organisation, the people who work for us must also have agency and self-determination.
- Out of Aligned Autonomy comes a central principle of agility. By committing to agility rather than leaning into the old, tired myths of slow school leadership, we can transform our ability to be highly responsive, to remove blockages and enable talent to flourish.
- Traditional performance management strongly contradicts our agile approach. It is too ritualistic and too infrequent – building a bureaucracy and elaborate rituals around measuring performance usually doesn't improve it.
- Therefore, we have jettisoned appraisal at Dixons. Instead, we want our associate staff, teachers and leaders to have conversations about performance as an organic part of their work – focusing on fuelling performance in the future rather than evaluating the past (for example, problem solving, goal setting and coaching for improved performance rather than emphasis on formal self-review, written reflections of the past, lengthy descriptions of performance or cumbersome record keeping).
- It is fairly obvious how well people are doing – if you talk simply and honestly about performance on a regular basis, we believe you can get great results. Over time, every employee learns to give as well as receive feedback.
- This agile approach to growing our people has four pillars: continuous learning, frequent coaching check-ins, building trust, and connection to our Trust community.
- Our staff are supported to keep getting better through a continuous cycle of positive interactions. These interactions are based on caring personally, interacting with humility and respect, but not avoiding challenge:
 - coaching and collaboration between line manager and colleague and peer-to-peer (through professional growth planning)
 - observing and highlighting the right behaviours
 - recognising the best actions, values and attitudes immediately, specifically and publicly – in all directions and at any time
 - building community and belonging

All these interactions require trusted two-way human connections; pretty much the opposite of the old command-and-control idea in which a manager writes a yearly, backward-looking assessment of how the employee is doing.¹

- Academy and functional leaders are responsible for ensuring that these continuous interactions are meaningful and happen consistently for all colleagues. They provide the structure, processes, training, and sustained support to give space for, and to ensure the quality of, professional dialogue and recognition. Every cycle, leaders should also harness feedback from colleagues to quality assure and further refine our approach, and to keep professional growth at the forefront.

Coaching check-ins

- A Harvard study found that frequent, regular check-ins with managers improved performance, which is no surprise. The study's truly amazing finding was that the conversation did not have to focus on a particular task or skill. Just having any interaction – an informal conversation about family or the weather — lifted performance. That's the power of interaction.¹
- Feedback used to inform the coaching check-in can come from a range of formative observation methods and from multiple sources – anyone who interacts with a colleague. The coach can't be everywhere; the community can – a platform like Powerful Action Steps (PAS) can support this 'crowdsourced' peer-to-peer process.
- Therefore, everyone at Dixons is supported to keep getting better through regular and intensive coaching check-ins:
 - Associate staff (fortnightly or monthly)
 - Teachers (weekly or fortnightly)
 - Middle and senior leaders (weekly)
- At its most simple, coaching helps colleagues to get better at their work – it usually involves colleagues focussing on embedding a weekly, actionable and specific step, or goal setting and problem solving, with the help of a coach.

¹ Mosley, E., 2021. This Year, Performance Management Must Become Agile. [online] Forbes. Available at: <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/ericmosley/2021/03/25/this-year-performance-management-must-become-agile/?sh=551775c66031>> [Accessed Sep 2021].

- When coaching staff more expert in a domain, the coaching approach is likely to be problem-based and mechanism-light, while for staff at early or developing stages of expertise, a more directive mechanism-rich approach (which has the widest and strongest evidence base) will be more effective.^{2 3} This is represented, but not exclusively, by Bambrick-Santoyo's 6-step model. Our coaches will utilise different coaching approaches, often within the same conversation, to have greatest impact according to the expertise and needs of the coachee. *See guidance on different methods of coaching from our Teaching Institute.*
- Deliberate practice forms an important active ingredient of coaching at Dixons. Colleagues, particularly those with less expertise in a domain, spend less time discussing and more time reviewing a model, enacting, co-planning, rehearsing and responding to bespoke feedback that's both kind and clear, specific and sincere.
- When coaching staff more expert in a domain, reflection and learning will be facilitated using tools and techniques such as active listening, powerful questions and presence. These will support the design of goals, actions and accountability measures that integrate new learning to allow forward movement.

Professional growth plan (PGP)

- Successes and next steps agreed during the coaching check-in should be recorded on the coachee's professional growth plan (preferably, growth planning should use an online platform, like PAS, linked to our Intranet).
- The growth plan should also include a longer-term goal that acts as a compass for every check-in – it should look three cycles ahead, be reviewed at least once every cycle (by the line manager) and it can change at any time; growth planning is a continuous process, not an event (as no plan ever goes according to plan).
- At Dixons, we are influenced by self-determination theory. We believe that all people have inherent growth tendencies and three basic innate psychological needs. We need to feel:
 - competence in the sense of demonstrating and improving our abilities (mastery)
 - relatedness in the sense of being valued, respected and desired by others (purpose)
 - autonomous in the sense that we are the authors of our own actions (autonomy)
- Professional growth planning should boost self-determination. Goals and next steps should be challenging and purposefully stretching (mastery), they should be rooted in our mission and values (purpose) and driven by the coachee with guidance and support from the coach (autonomy). Goals may support specific career progression but will always accelerate growth.
- Offering unexpected positive encouragement and feedback on a colleague's performance during the cycle can also increase intrinsic motivation. This type of feedback helps people to feel more competent, which is one of the key needs for personal growth.

Performance and pay progression

- Performance-related pay for teachers was introduced in September 2014. Pay progression for all teachers in maintained schools depends on appraisal outcomes and meeting standards set by schools. However, academies are free to set their own pay and conditions for teachers, including criteria for pay progression.
- Many different analyses have shown that, overall, performance pay has negligible effect on teacher performance, if any. Even the OECD's top-down survey of different countries' systems concluded that unless base pay for teachers was very low (and therefore making financial worries greater) then the effect of performance-related pay was either negligible or negative.⁴
- We also know that repeated use of external motivators (such as pay) will suppress intrinsic and altruistic motivation in the long run – negating our commitment to self-determination.
- Therefore, given that we have jettisoned traditional appraisal, we have also decided to end the link between pay progression and performance management. There is strong evidence that our attentions would be much better directed elsewhere.
- As performance and pay are decoupled, the only reason a member of staff would not progress is if they are in pre-capability or formal capability, as detailed in our Capability policy.
- Our (pre-)capability procedures comply with the relevant legislation, reflect the ACAS Code of Practice, and apply only to staff about whose performance there are serious concerns that our approach to professional growth has been unable to address.
- Coaching should be pivoted to support (pre-)capability procedures. Additionally, seeking extra support to keep getting better will always be viewed positively.

² Notes.steplab.co. 2021. How can we tailor our instructional coaching approach for both novices and experts? | Steplab: Lab notes. [online] Available at: <<https://notes.steplab.co/post/BPre9-a7/How-can-we-tailor-our-instructional-coaching-approach-for-both-novices-and-experts>> [Accessed Sep 2021].

³ ResearchGate. 2021. (PDF) Expert Teachers: Their Characteristics, Development and Accomplishments. [online] Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255666969_Expert_Teachers_Their_Characteristics_Development_and_Accomplishments> [Accessed 23 September 2021].

⁴ Teacher Development Trust. 2021. The dangers of performance-related pay - Teacher Development Trust. [online] Available at: <<https://tdtrust.org/2013/04/17/the-dangers-of-performance-related-pay/>> [Accessed 14 September 2021].

