

Performance reviews of school trust executive leaders

Continuing the conversation

Produced in association with



**Browne
Jacobson**

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**Confederation
of School Trusts**

The voice of school trusts



The Confederation of School Trusts is the national organisation and sector body for school trusts in England, advocating for, connecting, and supporting executive and governance leaders. Our members are responsible for the education of more than three million young people.

Bringing together trusts from every region and of every size, CST has a strong, strategic presence with access to government and policy makers to drive real change for education on the big issues that matter most.

Browne Jacobson

Independently recognised as one of the best education law practices in the country, Browne Jacobson has a wealth of sector-specific knowledge and experience to assist School Trusts, managing estate and construction projects, employment/HR issues and funding matters, to intellectual property, health and safety, defamation and disputes. The firm has bases in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Exeter, Nottingham, Cardiff, and Dublin.



BlueSky's multi-award-winning solutions enable schools and trusts to empower and develop staff, in line with organisation priorities. Our dedicated features help trusts implement a consistent appraisal, performance review and feedback process for all staff, including 360° feedback through Opal Review, to identify and support professional development needs. BlueSky's holistic intelligence allows trust leaders to evaluate the impact of strategic decision-making at the touch of a button while putting staff at the centre of discussions around school improvement.

Introduction

The performance review of the chief executive of a school trust is one of a trust board's most significant responsibilities. It is key to the board's leadership of strategy and values, its accountability for educational outcomes and financial health, and supports the development and well-being of the trust's most senior employee.

School trusts have the freedom to define their own appraisal process for chief executives in line with their trust's ethos and values and approach to performance management. This guidance offers advice on how you can ensure effective processes.

Trusts leaders have a range of job titles for their most senior employee, including chief executive, executive leader, and executive head. For brevity, we use chief executive throughout this guidance.

About this guidance

Continuing the conversation is the third in a series of three guidance notes on the performance review of chief executives. The series provides robust sector- and role-specific guidance on the principles and practices of executive performance review to support your trust's process from end-to-end, whatever its size or stage of development.

The guidance has been developed by the Confederation of School Trusts in partnership with BlueSky Education, experts in appraisal and professional learning, and Browne Jacobson, experts in education HR and law.

Together, these guides aim to help trustees to deliver effective executive performance review as part of their strategic governance practice:

- *Understanding the challenge: winning hearts and minds* sets out the purpose of executive performance review and helps trustees to prepare for it by understanding the challenge, identifying the right resources – people, tools, and technology – and building the strong relationships required.
- *Process planning and delivery* provides a step-by-step guide to preparing and delivering an effective, purposeful, and developmental performance review for your trust's chief executive.
- *Continuing the conversation* explores the benefits of interim reviews and looks at how to increase the impact of your trust's review process by maintaining focus on performance in the relationship between the chief executive and the chair across the year.

This series does not support board decision-making about pay and reward. Further reading on this can be found in CST's guidance on executive remuneration.

Who is it for?

This guidance is for chairs of trustee boards and trustees with a role in the chief executive review process, such as serving on the appraisal panel, nominations or pay committee. It will also be of interest to the governance and human resources professionals in school trusts who support board and leadership development.

Conversations with purpose

In the earlier parts of this guidance piece we demonstrated that it is helpful when setting objectives to consider milestones that can be useful to indicate progress towards the agreed goals. This works best when these milestones are linked to planned and agreed outcomes so that conversations around progress have helpful anchors.

This document will explore the very best ways to maintain these conversations, ensure they are positive, and lead to effective outcomes. In doing so we will also consider the theoretical framework that sits behind this approach.

It is important to take a moment to remind ourselves of the purpose of the performance review process: to help the trust deliver its vision, by supporting the employee to be as effective as they can be. Sharing a common language that puts school trust improvement at the heart of the conversation is key. That shared understanding of needs and direction of travel is invaluable to a leader when working across a team to drive their shared agenda.

For the chief executive role, it is also vital that the opportunity is taken through this process to build and enhance a positive and constructive relationship between the chair (and through them the board) and arguably the trust's most vital employee. It is through the relationships and the working practices of your chief executive that momentum will be created and change will happen, ensuring progress towards agreed trust goals and objectives will progress.

Leadership roles in education take a considerable amount of emotional commitment. That kind of leadership can be challenging and isolating and so support from the chair (and board) will provide impetus and energy.

The expectation that performance reviews or appraisals are seen as a developmental and supportive process is also reflected in the changes in business attitude to the annual review process set out by Cappelli and Tavis:

“...the biggest limitation of annual reviews—and, we have observed, the main reason more and more companies are dropping them—is this: With their heavy emphasis on financial rewards and punishments and their end-of-year structure, they hold people accountable for past behaviour at the expense of improving current performance and grooming talent for the future, both of which are critical for organizations' long-term survival.

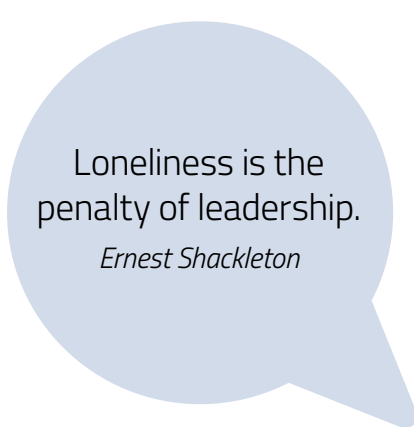
In contrast, regular conversations about performance and development change the focus to building the workforce your organization needs to be competitive both today and years from now.”¹

So to achieve progress for the trust and to ensure a positive and trusted relationship between the chair and the chief executive let's consider what are regarded today as the very best methods for managing these conversations and ensuring progress to agreed outcomes.

The need for appreciative inquiry

We will begin by exploring the theoretical backdrop to these current practices and explain why they are considered so effective.

For a very long time business has focused heavily on a deficit approach to business growth. The principle that it is important to identify what doesn't work, and then to focus on what can be done to improve the situation or solve the problem has



Loneliness is the
penalty of leadership.

Ernest Shackleton

¹ Cappelli, P and Anna Tavis, A (2016) *The Performance Management Revolution: The focus is shifting from accountability to learning*, Harvard Business Review.

been the process applied in many business improvement planning practices. This is a model that not only operates in business but can also be seen in education. This deficit model focuses heavily on outcomes that need to demonstrate an improvement or enhancement, and in so doing create considerable pressure on those accountable for those outcomes.

In 1987 David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva proposed a new approach to envisaging and managing organisational and social change that was to have a dramatic impact, not only at organisational level but also fundamentally on how review and feedback conversations could be effectively facilitated.²

The principle is called 'appreciative inquiry' and focuses on the strengths of an organisation and what is working, rather than what isn't and it uses strategies and techniques which support its people to work together to design what a successful future might look like. This model then creates outcomes that aren't a result necessarily of designing a solution to a problem, but changing the perception of the outcomes.

In simple terms the appreciative inquiry model focuses on what is already working and builds on it. This model has evolved into what is today called the strength based approach to the performance conversation and ongoing conversations. This is very different to a model that focuses on what isn't working and sees the priority as solving the problem in hand.

The first step in moving to such a process is to accept that the main purposes of a performance review are to support professional growth and the achievement of improvement targets or objectives. They may also inform pay, bonuses, promotions or redundancies but these should not be the primary drivers.

Some of the biggest concerns about the role of the performance review is that they are far too infrequent; they focus on prior achievements; and they only take feedback from a single source, usually the manager. Many organisations are moving away from this methodology and recognise that evidence clearly indicates that

reviews should be frequent, and feedback should be as immediate as practicable with a clear focus on strengths and on developments. This keeps the review process focused firmly on the future, and means that conversations are low stakes with immediate interventions or resolution conversations able to take place in the moment. Praise is received quicker, building confidence, and any difficulties are identified earlier on and not left to compound over time.

Some organisations are going a step further and looking very closely at the style and nature of the ongoing conversations that are taking place more routinely.

Applying principles of practice such as the GROW model or operating a strength-based approach to these ongoing conversations.

When defining the milestones or objectives and key results

² Cooperrider, D L & Srivastva, S (1987), *Appreciative inquiry in organizational life*, Research in Organizational Change and Development, Vol.1, pages 129-169.



(OKRs) that you are agreeing with your chief executive it is very important to consider carefully the evidence you agree to share at each stage in advance of your developmental conversation. The achievement of the agreed milestones and the generation of evidence around which the conversations will happen should be simple and not time consuming; they should be part and parcel of the focused working practices of the chief executive and their team. If milestone conversation can be arranged so that they fall as closely as possible to, for instance a critical meeting or event, or the summation of a key process then this will help the conversation be low stakes, and supportive and resolution focused.

Regular conversations that involve the reviewing of OKRs and conversations about the progress with these will support motivation and inform any necessary review of next steps or flag learning and development.

The actual nature of these conversations, the timing and the way in which they are conducted will play a very significant role in their success and the resulting outcomes.

'Performance conversations' can be a helpful shift in language from 'performance reviews' or 'appraisals' because the implication here is that this is an equal exchange between two adults, with a mind on achieving the same outcomes. Part of this process involves giving feedback; it is critical this is managed in a manner that is supportive and empathetic to help keep the chief executive positive and engaged. Being able to ask good questions and to actively listen, by noticing body language for instance, helps the chair or reviewer 'read' the chief executive's response. This can then be paired with constructively given feedback, focusing on agreed evidence, to maintain objectivity, trust and integrity.

Many organisations today are beginning to adopt a strength-based approach to performance conversations and the nature of questions asked.

What might a strength-based model look like?

This approach principally recognises that your opportunities for growth and development don't come so much from fixing your weaknesses and what you're not good at, but more from understanding what it is that has worked well and what you can do to replicate or broaden that in other areas. It is about coaching someone from their current or recent successes, and using this knowledge to achieving positive outcomes as they progress through the next phase of their development.

Kluger and Nir talk about three critical steps in this process that can be applied in the context of any performance conversation:³

- Stage 1: 'Eliciting a success story' – begin by asking the chief executive what has been working well for them over this last period. Encourage them to be very specific and to expand in detail, referencing actions and the ensuing evidence.
- Stage 2: 'Discovering your personal success code' – Ask your chief executive to explain what they feel their contribution was to this success and what support they were given or needed and where this did or might have come from.
- Stage 3: 'The feed-forward question' – thinking forward to their next steps and possibly their next milestone, how can they replicate this 'success code' and what support might be needed here

This keeps a very forward-focused conversation on success and achievement and builds confidence resilience and trust.

Stage 1:
Eliciting a success
story

Stage 2: Discovering
your personal success
code

Stage 3: The feed-
forward question

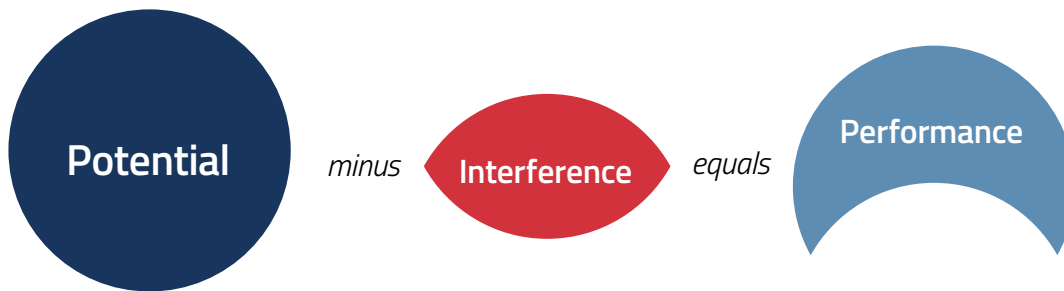
³ Kluger A N & Nir D (2010), *The Feedforward Interview*, Human Resource Management 20 235-246

Using strength-based models

If developmental conversations are to be built into regular interactions then it is useful to keep in mind some of the well known models used today to help do that. The GROW model is one of those models which is relatively easy to remember and follow.⁴

Underpinning GROW is Gallwey's Inner Game, which is a theory on how we can support people to step into their natural gifts without the inner dialogue that takes place and which prevents high performance from happening.⁵ The Inner Game began with sports coaching, in particular tennis but it can translate into far more than sporting situations.

The Inner Game is demonstrated with the following formulae:



The GROW model comes in to help explore 'what gets in the way' of high performance, which is referred to as the 'interference'.

Bringing this back to a situation with chair and chief executive, the idea is that the performance conversation focuses on exploring the interference and the potential, with the key aim of supporting the chief executive to achieve their goals and those of the trust, ensuring high performance.

The GROW model explained

The GROW model starts with a Topic, and then splits off into four elements: Goal, Reality, Options, and Will. But the model is not linear. It doesn't have to flow from G to R to O to W. The conversation could start at Reality and then move to Goal, then to Options and possibly back to Reality and so on. Don't get hung up on having to follow the model in a straight line. The conversation doesn't have to include all four elements of GROW in one conversation. There might be several conversations to cover all four elements.



⁴ Whitmore J (1992), *Coaching for Performance*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing

⁵ Gallwey, T (1974), *The Inner Game*, Pan

The chief executive may start with lots of questions because they aren't yet clear on the Goal. This is healthy, and is an important step in ensuring you are using mutually agreed vocabulary and have a shared understanding of the desired outcomes.

Questions for the chair to ask:

Conversation starters

- What was the best thing that happened this month/week in your sphere of influence? What one thing would you like to change?
- What is bringing you 80% of your joy as a leader? What is bringing you 80% of your stress?
- How does this job bring out the best in you?
- How are you today? [When they answer "Fine" or "Good"] What makes today a [fine] day?
- Aside from the day-to-day frustrations, what is it about your work that gives you the most dissatisfaction?
- What is the concern that lies behind the dissatisfaction?
- What sort of thing could meet that concern?
- What else? Tell me more?

Options

- What could you do about this? What else? Anything else?
- If you had unlimited resources and knew you couldn't fail, what would you try?
- What if this obstacle was removed? What would you do then?
- What could you do to overcome that obstacle? What are your options?
- Who can help you?
- Who else could you ask for creative ideas?
- What have you seen others do that might work for you?

A powerful question alters all thinking and behaving that occurs afterwards.

Marilee Goldberg, The Art of the Question

Goal

- How could you rephrase that goal so that it depends only what you do and not on others?
- What specifically do you want to accomplish?
- What will be different as a result of working on this?
- How important is each of these to you, on a scale of 1 to 10?
- If that seems like a stretch from where you are now, give me a couple of stepping stones along the way.
- From where you are now, what would be a first step that you could feel good about?

Reality

- What have you actually accomplished on this today? How about this week?
- Have you tried already? What difference did those actions make?
- What events or choices led you to this place?
- How much of this situation do you feel is within your control?
- Which options are you going to pursue?
- What step could you take this week that would move you toward your goal?
- You mentioned that you could do _____. What will you commit to doing?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how likely is it that this step will get done in the timeframe you have set?
- How can we increase that likelihood from a 6 to an 8?

As you get more familiar with the process, you will find it easier to ask questions that help guide and support in each individual situation. The book *Coaching Questions – a Coach's Guide to Powerful Asking Skills* contains more example questions that can be built into developmental conversations to help you progress your approach.

Exploring challenge

A developmental conversation should contain an element of challenge. The chair should be challenging the chief executive to commit to high performance so whilst GROW will enable that there may also be times where specific questioning is needed to challenge thinking more directly.

Below we explore some example scenarios, and potential approaches.

- *The chair doesn't think that the goal that the chief executive wants to work on will deliver for the trust.* Instead of saying: "That goal isn't going to get the trust where we need it to be." change it to: "Take a minute to envision the future we really want for the trust. Is this goal going to get us there, or is there a better way?"
- *The chair is feeling frustrated with the way that the chief executive is responding/ reacting to a problem.* Instead of saying: "I don't think you are responding very well to the problem." change it to: "If you were going to treat this conflict in a way that you could look back on later in life with absolutely no regrets, what would you do?"
- *The chair is concerned that the chief executive is ignoring the strategy and shared vision that has been developed between the executive team and the board and is instead pursuing their own, differing, priorities.* Instead of saying: "You don't seem to care about the work that the executive team and Board has worked on together. This is an idea that you want to pursue that sits outside of our strategy." change it to: "How does that connect to our shared vision/strategy? I believe that there is more in you. I want to see your absolute best delivery against that shared vision/strategy. What will you do?"

Encouraging the chief executive to access their own resourcefulness

There are times when the developmental conversation becomes challenging because there is a need to unlock the potential from within the chief executive by enabling them to access their own resourcefulness. Jackson and McKergow have created the OSKAR model to help keep coaching conversations solutions focused.⁶

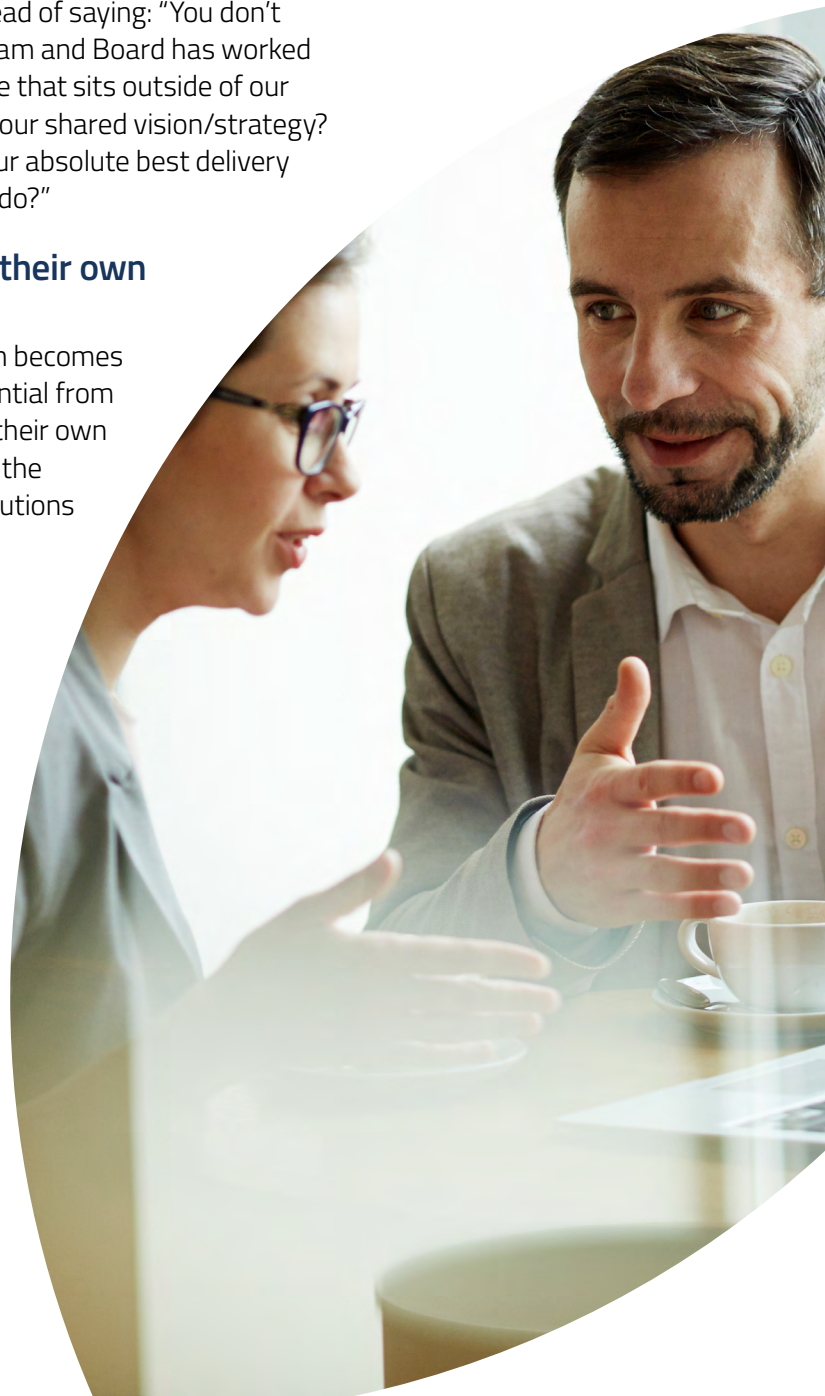
OSKAR stands for:

- O – Outcome
- S – Scaling
- K – Know how and resources
- A – Affirm and action
- R – Review

Focusing on one element of OSKAR – "Know How and Resources" – this quadrant could help chairs to facilitate the chief executive to find their own know how and resources in order to tackle some of the goals that they want to achieve.

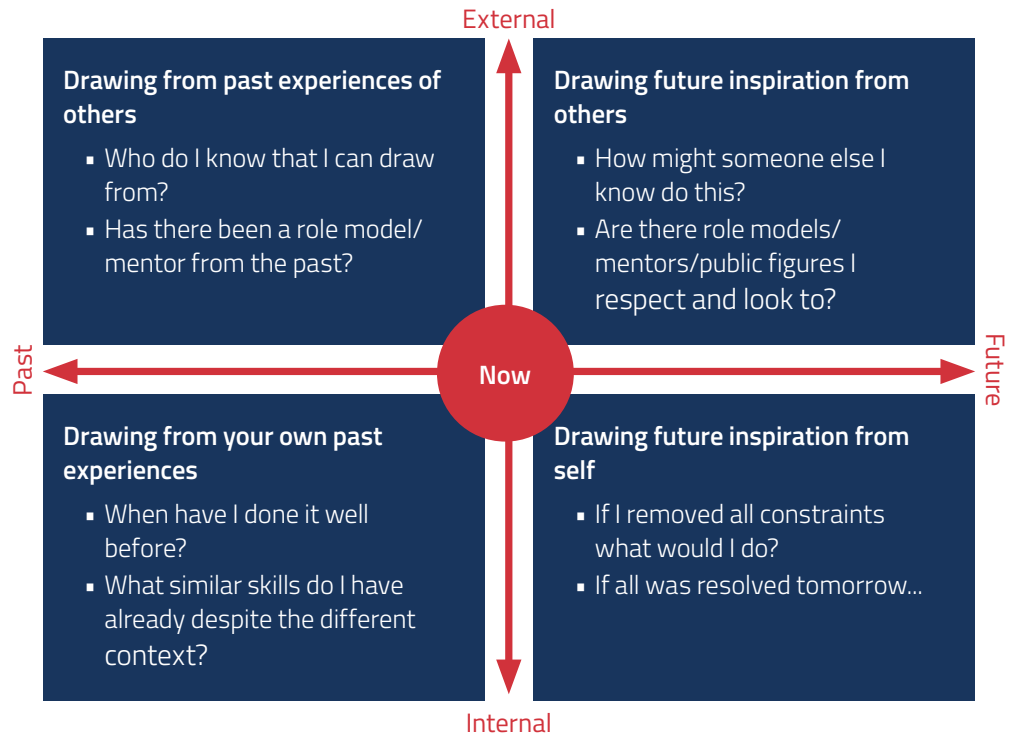
The OSKAR model will enable the chair and the chief executive to spend time visioning the goal or the wider future position, and develop ideas on how to get to that mutually desired outcome.

⁶ Jackson P & McKergow M (2006), *The solutions focus – making coaching and change simple*, Nicholas Brealey International



Example solutions focused questions:

- When you have faced tough situations before, how have you handled them?
- When you've faced tough situations like this one before, what did you do?
- What are your particular ways of getting through challenges like this?
- What do you want to have happen? And how will you know when it has?



The importance of listening

This guidance document is the third and final part of this series and it wouldn't be complete without a piece on listening, especially in this part which is focused on continuing the conversation.

According to Kimsey-House et al in their book *Co-active Coaching*: "To be truly listened to is a striking experience, partly because it is so rare. When another person is totally with you – leaning in, interested in every word, eager to empathise – you feel seen and understood. People open up when they know they're being listened to; they expand, they have more presence."⁷

The book goes on to say that listening is a talent each of us is given in some measure, but that most people do not listen at a very deep level. Given the pace of daily life, most conversations just skim along the surface: "The best listeners know how to maximise the listening interaction. Interaction is the right word, too, because listening is not simply passively hearing. There is action in listening."

Types of listening

It is therefore important to recognise that listening can be divided into three different levels of depth:

- Level 1 – Internal listening: Listening to the other person's words but our attention is on what it means to us personally.
- Level 2 – Focussed listening: Totally focussed on the speaker, listening to their words, tone of voice and body language.
- Level 3 – Global listening: As a listener you are receiving everything you observe through your senses – what you see, hear, smell and feel. It includes the action, inaction and interaction.

The management consultant Peter Drucker once said "The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said" – this is Level 3 global listening. Clearly there is an obvious benefit to doing this, yet we all struggle to commit to this level of listening all the time, especially if we are not used to practicing it. Just like developing a new sports skill, listening needs practice in order for it to become well honed.

In her book *Radical Candor*, Kim Scott provides examples of practical exercises that leaders can do and one is on "listening with the intent to understand, not to reply".⁸

The example in the book starts with finding a partner to practice with. One person speaks for three minutes and then you switch roles and listen to the other person speak, uninterrupted. The topic can be about anything that is important to the speaker.

As a listener, Scott says that you are "giving the speaker the gift of your full attention" so you can nod, say "I see" or "I understand" but that it is not the time for questions, or for the listener to relate to the speaker's story.

We find out that in just three minutes we learn things about each other that we never knew, even when we have known the person for many years. It's an incredibly efficient way to get to know each other and build trust.

⁷ Kimsey-House, K, Kimsey-House H, Whitworth, L, and Sandahl, P (2018), *Co-active coaching – the proven framework for transformative conversations at work and in life*, Aladdin

⁸ Scott, K (2017), *Radical Candor*, St Martins Press

Putting it into practice

Helping an chief executive focus on their strengths in a situation, and then use these to repeat them in future anticipated situations, provides support and reinforces areas of strength and confidence helping to build resilience.

A very effective part of this process is to work this across a leadership team and eventually beyond. Being able to help your core team to identify their strengths and recognise one another's positive contributions helps to build a robust team that is able to draw on their collective resources when needed.

A 360 degree feedback tool can work very effectively to support this profiling of strengths and in the right culture sharing these outcomes can reinforce the resilience and robustness of your lead education team.

This is often best done with the assistance of an external consultant, such as [CST's consultancy service](#), who can provide a trusted, objective ear and build an approach around a considered framework, targeted at the school trust environment. The consultant coordinates and guides the process, and produces the final outcome that can be presented directly to the chief executive, generally without being shared in detail with the board. This removes any perception of the process as being about 'catching out' those involved, and instead positions it as a genuine, positive, personal experience.

BlueSky's [Opal Review](#) is an example of a facilitated 360° feedback tool which supports a developmental approach to performance reviews for all staff in a trust. The tool is designed to support a forward-focused performance review strategy. Trusts can use the global competency frameworks or create bespoke review frameworks that align with their culture and strategy, with a framework developed in partnership with CST specifically for school trusts.

Programmes such as CST's [chief executive mentoring service](#) can extend this, supporting the executive lead over a sustained period. This does not replace the crucial relationship between chair and chief executive, but supports it through contact with experienced former trust chief executives.

Browne Jacobson's qualified coaching team offers an [executive coaching service for education](#). Coaching can help leaders to find the space and time to prioritise, re-energise and to reflect on what they have learnt, how they see the future for their organisation and the opportunities and risks the broader landscape presents.

The Browne Jacobson service is aimed at chief executives, trust leaders, and designates; new trustees experienced in other sectors but new to education; and trust chairs looking to develop their relationships with leaders and the board.

Documenting and managing conversations

Traditional appraisal processes often revolve around forms and paperwork provided by HR teams, which in the worse cases are filed away after meetings and not consulted again until the next appraisal in twelve months time.



Having regular performance conversations may make the process seem less formal, but it remains important to track the conversations and be able to demonstrate support, success, and intervention. Online tools like those offered by [BlueSky Education](#) help manage this, by allowing continual access for chair and chief executive. This allows for easy updates without constant back and forth with documents, and all involved can get instant clarity on agreed goals and objectives.

However you document and manage the approach, a key thing to remember is that the purpose is to get the best outcomes for the organisation and the individuals that make it up. No one is perfect, or never makes a mistake; accepting that and focusing on where we can do well reaps the best rewards.

Ring the bells that still can ring,
Forget your perfect offering,
There is a crack, a crack in everything (there is a crack in everything);
That's how the light gets in...

— *Anthem*, Leonard Cohen

Questions to ask of your trust's approach

Each trust will need to form its own review process to fit its unique circumstances. The process may need to evolve over time.

Good questions to ask when reviewing your process include:

- ☐ What is the main goal of incorporating coaching in executive performance reviews at your trust?
- ☐ Is the leadership open to a coaching approach?
- ☐ How well do coaching methodologies align with the trust's values and culture?
- ☐ Do you have the necessary resources - such as tools, training, and appropriate independent input - to implement coaching effectively?
- ☐ How will feedback be collected and utilised to improve the effectiveness of conversations?
- ☐ How can you seamlessly integrate the key learnings of this guidance into existing performance review processes?
- ☐ Taking into account the different leadership styles and individual needs that exist in the trust executive and board, what needs careful consideration and adjustment to get the best out of performance conversations?

Exploring further

Training and advice

CST's virtual seminar for trustees, [Executive performance review explained](#) offers the chance to explore and discuss this topic in depth with experts and fellow trustees. Trustees of CST member trusts can join our [Trustees and Governance Professional Community](#) to network and share first-hand experience.

CST can provide independent advisors for executive performance review through our governance advisory service, including the 360° Opal Review in partnership with [BlueSky Education](#) - contact governance@cstuk.org.uk for more details. Browne Jacobson have a range of [coaching consultancy options](#).

Professional coaching organisations like the Association for Coaching and the Association of Executive Coaches can offer access to resources, networking opportunities, and webinar events.

Guidance documents

CST members can access a range of related guidance documents from our website:

- [Assurance framework for trust governance](#)
- [Core responsibilities of a school trust chief executive](#)
- [Role description for the chair of the trust board](#)
- [The role of the accounting officer in a school trust](#)
- [What is a strong trust?](#)

Further reading

Related books you may find useful include:

- Aguilar, E (2013), *The Art of Coaching: Effective strategies for school transformation*, Jossey-Bass
- Bungay Stanier, M (2016) *The Coaching Habit*, Page Two
- Josphe, I (2017) *You Got This: Mastering the Skill of Self-Confidence*, Calypso Grove Press
- Whitmore, J (1992) *Coaching for Performance*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing

There are many podcasts on coaching and leadership development, such as:

- [Browne Jacobson's #EdInfluence](#)
- [CEO School](#)
- [Dare to Lead](#)
- [Harvard Business Review's IdeaCast](#)
- [How Leaders Lead](#)
- [Let's Take This Offline: The Podcast for Everyday Leaders](#)
- [The Unburdened Leader](#)

Suggested recorded [TED talks on leadership](#) include:

- [Simon Sinek: Why Good Leaders Make You Feel Safe](#)
- [Brené Brown: The Power of Vulnerability](#)
- [Sheryl Sandberg: Why We Have Too Few Women Leaders](#)



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