

West Midlands Fire Service – making a splash

Case Study





West Midlands Fire Service's role has changed markedly in recent years and that's placed new demands on its workforce. Through the West Midlands Coaching and Mentoring Pool, it's enabling staff to rise to the challenge.

In a fast-paced organisation where the nature of your work involves life and death decisions on a daily basis, there's a risk that workforce development will become sidelined.

West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS) helps keep the region's 2.9 million residents safe and in 2020-21 it responded to more than 45,000 calls and attended in excess of 25,000 incidents.

But that's just part of the picture. England's second largest fire and rescue service has seen its role evolve over the last 20 years and it's now at the vanguard of the prevention agenda.

For example, during the same period its staff carried out 18,422 Safe & Well visits to protect vulnerable people at home and provided fire and road safety education in hundreds of schools and colleges.

All of which bring new challenges for its 1,900 operational and support staff.

Despite the hefty workload – heightened during the pandemic response – WMFS places strong emphasis on supporting firefighters and non-operational staff in their personal development. Over the last three years, coaching has become an increasingly important part of the organisation's learning and development offer.

WMFS is a member of West Midlands Coaching and Mentoring Pool, run by West Midlands Employers. Kerry Evans, the fire service's Learning and Development coordinator, says it has opened the door to an invaluable two-way relationship in terms of developing their own coaches and accessing external coaches from a wide range of organisations.

"I think the beauty of this is we can match someone with a person who is at a similar management level but not working in a fire and rescue service. It tends to be middle managers and above that use external coaches and it can really help them to get a different perspective and to develop the way they manage strategically."

WMFS also has a growing pool of internal coaches – trained by WME – who are paired with more junior staff using the Pool's Matching Hub.

"The training programme for new firefighters is really hard and very demanding. Some have come to us, perhaps because they haven't passed the first assessment, and our internal coaches have worked with them to help get them up to that level. Often they feel overwhelmed and need a bit of confidence building – the coaches are able to support them to break down their development areas into more manageable chunks, and to identify and reduce their anxiety levels and raise their confidence in themselves."



Whereas in the past staff may have been reluctant to ask for help, Kerry says the culture is changing.

“There’s a growing awareness across the organisation of the benefits that coaching brings. It can be a difficult thing to explain so I tend to use scenarios when I’m marketing the coaches, such as: ‘Are you looking to develop your performance and leadership capabilities?’”

“The role of a firefighter is ever-evolving and we are seeing more staff come forward for support with developing their communication and interpersonal skills, as well as to raise their self-awareness.”

She adds: “The feedback I get – whether it’s from people who’ve used internal or external coaches – is that they enjoyed the sessions with their coach, they proved to be more useful than they expected them to be and the sessions widened their perspectives and supported them to overcome previous areas of difficulty.”

As it stands, WMFS has provided and received a combined total of 84 sessions of external coaching so far since April 2019 and a managed a further 125 internal coaching sessions via the Pool’s Matching Hub.

Kerry believes the Pool has become a valuable resource for her organisation.

“The access to external coaches is particularly important for our middle managers and above. It allows people to be really honest and open about the issues they are dealing with, which they might be unlikely to want to discuss with an internal coach.”

WMFS is now planning to expand its internal coaching pool while supporting existing coaches to gain higher qualifications so they can join the external pool.

Manny Sandhu, Director of Leadership, OD & Resourcing at WME, says:

“West Midlands Fire Service has really embraced the ethos of Coaching. It’s a win-win: their coaches are gaining experience, new skills and qualifications while helping to guide and inspire people across the wider West Midlands workforce. Equally, their own staff are able to develop, grow and benefit from different perspectives thanks to external and internal coaching, which will benefit the organisation as a whole.”

Feedback from coachees...



“Primarily, the respect towards my own development and the way my sessions were handled have been a positive experience and one I will continue to draw on. It has changed the way I perceive my own development and I will ensure this momentum is maintained. It’s reassuring to know that when faced with a challenge I have difficulty with, coaching is an option to seek development guidance to overcome it. This is much much better than fixating, stressing or digging a hole over it.”



“I expected to be told what to do. Instead I was pleasantly surprised to find this was not the case. My coach guided me through clarifying my goals and finding my own solutions. She helped me reflect on my communication style and prompted me on where to seek out the development tools to improve on this. Some aspects I learned were how to understand my team as individuals much better through quality discussions. I learned to reflect on who I am as a manager and as a person – to understand Me better. I also found I must be mindful that how others perceive me can be different to how I think I come across. Most importantly, I learned that it is OK to not know the answer to everything and to seek help and guidance. The whole experience was positive and supportive.”

West Midlands Coaching and Mentoring Pool (WMCMP)

Launched in 2007, West Midlands Coaching and Mentoring Pool is a practitioner-led initiative managed by West Midlands Employers and currently involving 37 organisations from across the public sector, from local authorities to emergency services.

Members can both provide and access more than 100 coaches and mentors in the external pool and host an internal pool via the WMCMP online Matching Hub. All external coaches are qualified to Level 5 work based Coaching and Mentoring Certificate or above.

www.coachmentormatchingwme.org

About WME

West Midlands Employers is a not for profit, public sector organisation collectively owned by 32 councils in the West Midlands. We’re one of 9 Regional Employers’ Organisations in England. Our vision is to advocate, build and champion a resilient and diverse public sector workforce for an ambitious West Midlands region. Our wide range of services supports this vision.

Visit www.wmemployers.org.uk

Find out more

If you’d like your organisation to join West Midlands Coaching and Mentoring Pool, contact info@wmemployers.org.uk

