

CASE STUDY: PARKVILLE COLLEGE



Transformative leadership benefits disadvantaged students

When Parkville College grew extremely quickly, a green and surprised leadership team needed help to bond and build confidence and trust; in each other and themselves. They called People Measures.

I've always said that People Measures is the best PD I've ever done. Other courses can tend to rely on research and often implement this in surface ways, almost ignoring the complexity of the human beings involved in the work. In contrast, People Measures focuses on the people doing the work as pivotal to driving outcomes and encourage participants to sit honestly with themselves in order to solve problems and drive change.

This comment came from a staff member at Parkville College, a unique institution within the Victorian education system. With seven campuses across the state, it is a school dedicated to young Victorians who are, or have been detained in custody. It operates 52 weeks a year and accommodates students who attend school in a transient manner, depending on their circumstances. *Our students represent some of the most disadvantaged in the state, with most being victims of abuse, trauma or neglect, the school's website explains. Parkville College is registered as a specialist school, and caters for students with disabilities, as well as social, emotional, learning and behavioural difficulties.*

The college is relatively new but has expanded rapidly; both geographically and in terms of staffing. Founded in 2012 with only six employees, by 2017 the school had 189 staff. The growth was fast and, according to those involved, painful. One staff member from the time said, *I think we were really inexperienced and new as a leadership group. Personally, I was really inexperienced and doubted myself a lot as a leader.* Another admitted that there was a lack of *collaboration and collegiality* at the time between Parkville College and the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), which oversees the college.

The college staff needed help.

People Measures was recommended to Parkville College by the Director of Secure Services back in 2014, explained Rachel Carlyon, the college's director of business services and human relations.

There had been no prior relationship but as soon as People Measures arrived and got to work, the staff said the impact was profound. Working as pro-bono consultants, People Measures dramatically changed the staff's outlook on their world, their relationships with government agencies and their students.

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It was quite a challenging process but one within which I was incredibly invested and engaged, recalled a College staffer. I personally love to sit within discomfort and enjoy active reflection, so I welcomed the challenges that the program posed and felt that I developed significantly as a result.

People Measures helped in giving us the space to think about problems and see these as challenges to overcome rather than permanent obstacles that were going to doom our progress.

The result was that we had a good hard look at our internal processes and ideas and have continued that conversation for years since.

Another staffer reflected that People Measures enabled the college leadership to think through how they worked together and, vitally, *to frame our mission.*

I was able to explore what leadership could look like and practise skills like speaking in front of a group, listening to learn, formulating my opinions, honing in on my values and drivers, all within a space that built my confidence and expertise, said another. People Measures provided an open forum for participating leaders to honestly discuss issues.

The problem that my group addressed was the lack of collaboration and collegiality between PC and DHHS at the time, staff member Emily Hurley recalled. People Measures helped us to shift our thinking away from 'blaming' DHHS and forced us to start looking at what we can do as leaders and as a school to improve the relationship. It pushed us to take greater responsibility for what we were contributing to the issues. It also helped me to think more about what we share, rather than what divides us.

Emily, like other staffers, was deeply challenged by the People Measures work, yet enjoyed being pushed beyond her comfort levels.

People Measures was a hugely positive experience for me, she said. I loved it. It was definitely challenging and uncomfortable at times but in a way that made us reflect a lot on ourselves as individual leaders and also as a group. I learned that leadership is not a position or a role, it is something that can be exercised by anyone. The program brought to the surface issues and conflict that existed in the group and in the school system more broadly and challenged us to work through it productively.

I also learned a lot about group dynamics in the program, including the roles I tend to play within different groups. The coaching part of the program was hugely valuable – I am actually still working with my leadership coach from four years ago. The People Measures program had a huge effect on me as a leader and the way I look at my work, my colleagues and the systems we work within.

This enthusiasm is reflected among the staff. I loved the focus on communication, perspective, the exposure to theory, group activities, the involvement of experts and leaders from other industries, said one. I also loved the relevance to our work and the consistent checking in that we were never straying from how to get better at what we're doing.

Emily's only wish is that People Measures' involvement continues. I think we should do everything we can to keep the People Measures programs running, she said. In particular, I think it would be incredibly valuable for the Executive groups from Parkville College and DJR (Department of Justice and Regulation Victoria) to participate in a program together. I know the PC exec is doing one now and I think that is really exciting, but to do one together would have a huge impact.

For Parkville College staff, the learning continues, in the class room and within themselves.

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