

The University of Southampton is facing up to a future where students are more like customers

The University of Southampton

"It's Alcoholics Anonymous for leaders"

How the University of Southampton discovered that it's positive to unburden yourself at the office

University academics were once stereotyped as pondering abstract theories with little regard for pragmatism. But things have changed: thanks to reduced government funding and rising student fees, today's universities have to think commercially and challenge their attitudes towards people management.

At the University of Southampton, HR director Janice Donaldson and her team have overhauled the organisation's leadership strategies. After joining in 2011, Donaldson discovered scholars sometimes need a different approach. "I came from financial services, where it

was all 'show me the money!' It's not like that here," she says.

Southampton's answer has been to bring people together using the concept of 'leadership circles', originally developed by Donaldson and dubbed the 'Alcoholics Anonymous of leadership'. At Southampton, this has been enhanced using Nancy Kline's 'Time To Think' process. "Senior managers come together to discuss their careers, and the leadership problems they're facing, in a confidential environment," explains Donaldson.

Members are encouraged to focus on actively listening to each other, ensuring everyone has a chance to contribute and achieve practical outcomes.

"Our people are leaders in their own fields, but the circles give them a broader leadership role at a cross-organisational level," says Peter Smith, associate pro vice-chancellor.

The circles are now in their second generation, with nine of the 11 members of the first circle forming their own groups. Seven circles are currently operating, and Donaldson hopes this will double or even treble soon.

The effects of these gatherings have trickled down to the wider institution. Academics who once shouted across each other in unproductive meetings now raise their hand to speak. The HR team has used the circles' core principles to solve a data integrity problem, while the university's English faculty uses circles as the basis of its meetings.

"The results you can get if you just give everyone a chance to have a proper, honest conversation – without interruption – are absolutely remarkable," says Donaldson.

Smith adds: "It changes the way people are thinking and behaving. It slightly shocks them. It moves them out of their regular habits."

Succession planning has also been shaken up, resulting in the creation of the Jubilee Group, a 15-strong group of future leaders who have been picked by senior staff as suitable replacements. Two high-level vacancies have already been filled by group members, and the group has recently taken on a new cohort.

"The group looks at real business issues such as the surplus we make, the profit we generate, why our student satisfaction isn't as good as it should be – tangible business things," says Donaldson. "This prepares people to take on leadership roles."

And Donaldson has recently been given the go-ahead for a talent-management programme that will help staff develop leadership skills. She's hoping to work with the university's business school to develop it. "We're working in an institution where you have almost every skill at the highest possible standard," she says. "Why we wouldn't use that?"