



CLIENT SUCCESS STORY

# BAIRNSDALE SECONDARY COLLEGE

## SITUATION

The main issue among the staff of Bairnsdale College was a lack of communication. They avoided hard conversations and did not challenge one another. The leadership team did not always work together as a unit. The students also struggled to challenge their peers in the classroom.

## SOLUTION

The Leading Teams program introduced a culture of feedback and genuine conversations. Students went through a modified program.

## RESULT

The staff of the school achieved high performers and the students' behaviour also improved. Parents noticed a big change in the culture of the school.

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**Principal, Jim Rowley got an introduction to Leading Teams when they ran a session at a regional principals meeting. He was impressed with what they did, so he invited them into the school.**

*"I met with two of their facilitators and they were very upfront. They said, 'You've seen what we do. If we come down are you prepared, as the principal, to sit in the chair and take some hard feedback from your staff?' I said I was, and they told me later that if I'd said no at that point then they would have walked away. I knew they didn't just want to get the job to earn some money, they wanted the program to be a success and they said if there was no support for the program at leadership level then it was not worth doing. That was a pretty straight-down-the-line introduction" says Jim.*

Leading Teams facilitator, Martine Harkin, worked with the leadership team, which included the principal, five assistant principals and twelve leading teachers. The main issue within the school was a lack of communication. Leading Teams encourages people to have hard conversations and challenge each other, not just gloss over things and roll along as usual. The aim of this program was to get the leadership team working together as a more tight-knit unit so that some diversity issues could be addressed.

The initial sessions with the staff worked on giving open and honest feedback to one another and were quite confronting. Jim said, *"I think it was probably more confronting for my staff than it was for me, as I'd already had a taste of the process at the regional principals meeting. It really gave me the impetus to make some changes in my own behaviour"*.

After those early sessions, a couple of people said they did not want to be associated with the program. There were some who misused the process as a way of settling scores.

Two employees' feedback led them to relinquish their positions in the leadership team, and that was 'an absolutely appropriate outcome' according to Jim. If they couldn't do the team things then they could not be part of the team. Later, when the program was rolled out across the entire staff, one member moved on and once again that was an entirely appropriate outcome according to the principal.

The program continued, and within twelve months the leadership team was working together very well. Every meeting began with a Leading Teams activity and reached the point where robust feedback was given to each other, and it was accepted and acted upon because that was the expectation. With the entire staff it took almost two years to make such significant progress, but that was because the program was less intensive.

Martine says, *"Even the students at the school had come up with their own trademark and list of acceptable behaviours. The reason our program worked so well at Bairnsdale is that the whole school community bought into it,*

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*and the teachers, especially, really supported it. We've done work with students in the past who have come up with their own trademark, but the whole thing has been undone by teachers who have not provided the level of support required. In one of those situations, we had to tell the principal that there was no point working with the kids if the staff were not going to set an example and help drive change."*

Some teachers loved the process so much that they actively sought feedback from students without being prompted to do so. The transformation at Bairnsdale was significant. Before one session, one of the assistant principals said to Martine, *'We need a bit of a rev up'*. During that session, she asked the teachers to rank each other against their trademark. At the end of the session a few of them admitted they'd found the exercise a bit too challenging, but they still got through it. This sort of feedback is very effective because it is face-to-face.

A senior-student leadership group was developed out of the program. Sessions were held with all of the senior students (150 of them) and they were asked, *'Who in this group displays our trademark behaviours?'* Between ten and fifteen people were nominated and that process gave everyone an idea about how the program could develop.

The biggest hurdle for teachers was to challenge peers whose behaviour had fallen outside the agreed trademark.

In general, teachers are very relationship-focused. They can find it difficult to have open and honest conversations as they don't want to hurt people's feelings. There are still people at Bairnsdale and other schools who struggle with the concept. But the reason the program works at Bairnsdale is that the weight of numbers is pushing towards the trademark and those taking part will naturally bring the others along with them.

Jim said, *"If I'm honest, we've had the full spectrum of results. At one end there is a very small number of people who haven't changed but there's been pressure on them and some have gone elsewhere. At the other end of the spectrum are the people who have really come into their own. I can think of a couple of members of our leadership team who were very good teachers, but just wouldn't have the tough conversations. They would put up with difficulties, rather than go through a bit of confrontation. The program has really made these two stand up in their roles, and has kicked along their leadership skills enormously."*

Initially, every student in the school was included in a trademark development process, however, given there were around 1200 enrolled, that proved to be too big a group. A lot of the teachers have taken the Leading Teams model into individual classes and the classes have developed their own trademark. *"We've now got students who would once have sat silently through the misbehaviour of their fellow students,*

*but who now no longer do so. They are prepared to challenge their peers' behaviour to support the teaching. I guess it's similar to what happened with the staff. We used to have some pretty inappropriate behaviour at staff meetings, and now that just doesn't occur. Education tends to be emotional and to confront things in this way is pretty powerful"* states Jim.

*"At each leadership meeting we continue to put someone in the chair and each year the teachers all go through the process of receiving feedback – it's built into our culture and our annual performance review. We still get Leading Teams back occasionally to maintain the program and to make sure we're doing the right thing, that were still challenging each other, so that we can fine tune any issues. Even the parents of our students have a real awareness of the things that have been happening through the program. People have looked at us and said, 'Gee, there's something different happening in the school that wasn't there before.' We have really changed the perception of the school within the community."*