Sharing what works for women in academia: Career Coaching - a video protocol

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1. Introduction

The objective of this project was to develop an innovative way of sharing knowledge to set up a successful career coaching programme in an academic department. The project was undertaken in line with themes on successful, positive organisational change in support of women’s careers, set out by Advance HE’s ‘What Works’ initiative, and funded by the Small Development Projects (SDP) scheme.

The School of Biological Science (SBS) has a much higher proportion of women at PhD and post doctoral level (50%) than at professorial level (25%). Focus group discussions within SBS indicated that women at post doctoral level and in the early stage of an independent academic career find it particularly difficult to balance the demands of their career and their family life. To support women’s career development, SBS launched a career coaching programme in 2015 offering five individual coaching sessions to twelve coachees per year. We were supported for our first two programmes by Equate Scotland in their ‘Coaching for success’ partnership programme. Equate Scotland facilitated the setup and running of the programme and introduced the coaches.

The scheme has been a resounding success: feedback from the coachees indicates that 90% of them feel more confident about their skills and qualities, 80% are more confident about their career and 60% have already engaged in new career development activities. Initially piloted as a women only programme, the scheme was subsequently opened to everyone. However, a large majority of female applicants suggests that this scheme is addressing a specific need.

The impact of the programme goes beyond supporting individual coachees; the coaches give feedback to the SBS management team on key themes that arise through the coaching, giving insight to School wide issues that may need to be addressed. Our aim was to share this knowledge more widely and to make it easy for other organisations to adopt a similar programme.

2. Approach

We chose to produce a short two minute video explaining in a simple and easy-to-share way the implementation of such a scheme. We chose Dr Barry Gibb to produce and direct the video as he is a former academic and specialises in videos for academic organisations. During discussions with the videographer, we developed the message we wanted the video to portray. We modified our original idea of a ‘recipe’ to a ‘protocol’ as we thought it would be more in tune with the scientific community – our target audience. We decided not to target the video explicitly towards women because we did not want to give the impression that this is a programme that ‘fixes the women’ as opposed to creating institutional change. We thought this would be counterproductive and instead chose to feature many women in the video and to discuss work-life balance which is particularly challenging for and important to women.

Furthermore, the message conveyed in the video was limited to a few key points, with most of the practical details described in an accompanying, detailed, written protocol. This allowed us to stick to a short format which is most suitable for social media dissemination.

The video showcases the effectiveness of career coaching for an individual’s continuing professional development and for the development of cultural change within departments, focusing on inclusivity. The accompanying protocol (see Appendix A) gives more detailed information, making it easy for other organisations to adopt a similar programme.
3. Key learning points and challenges

When preparing the script for the video, we realised we had to stick to a very simple message, with not too much detail to avoid overwhelming people with information and to make sure that we stayed in the short format that we thought would be most effective for communication through social media. To make sure we also give enough information to help other organisations set-up a similar program we added the necessary details in the written protocol.

Portraying a message through video rather than text was challenging for us as it is very different to what we are used to as academics. We had little experience of scripting for a video and with help from the videographer, we learned how important visual images are to convey a message.

We also learned that sharing personal experience in the video is crucial so that the audience can relate to it. This is unusual in academia and pushed Meriem outside of her comfort zone. As a result, we believe that the personal aspect came across very well in the video.

4. Next steps and dissemination

Our main target audience are leaders in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) across UK higher education institutions (HEIs). Dr Caroline Wallace, the University of Edinburgh’s senior HR partner for equality, is part of a wide network of EDI initiatives and has put us in contact with the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU, now Advance HE) Scottish liaison group to gain engagement from nearby HEIs as well as the Russell group equality forum and the Athena SWAN JiscMail list. Several members of the School of Biological Sciences have attended the Aurora programme and Claire has been selected to attend this year; the video will be posted to their Aurora network and Claire will share her experience in person. Advance HE has also agreed to showcase our video and protocol on their EDI ‘Resources and Guidance/ Case studies’ webpage and an accompanying blog post. To expand beyond the UK, we are in contact with Women in Science officer at EMBO with whom we have had previous interactions.

We purposefully decided to produce a short video so that it can be easily disseminated through social media. The video has been put on the School of Biological Science’s web pages and YouTube channel. In the next few months, we will measure page and video views using google analytics and YouTube analytics information. Early September, the video will also be posted on twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn where we will encourage sharing and measure retweets and likes.

The written protocol is available to download on the same page as the video and we have provided a dedicated email address for contact which will give us an easy way to count follow up requests.
5. Project outputs

The film can be accessed at https://www.ed.ac.uk/biology/equality-and-diversity/career-development/career-coaching. Please see Appendix A for the accompanying Protocol

6. Appendix A: Protocol for success

The School of Biological Science (SBS) at the University of Edinburgh has a much higher proportion of women at PhD and post doctoral level (50%) than at professorial level (25%). Focus group discussions within SBS indicated that women at post doctoral level and in the early stage of an independent academic career find it particularly difficult to balance the demands of their career and their family life. To support women’s career development, SBS launched an annual career coaching programme in 2015 offering five individual coaching sessions to twelve coachees per year.

Initially piloted as a ‘women-only’ programme, in partnership with Equate Scotland, the scheme was subsequently open to everyone. However, there is a majority of female applicants, suggesting that this scheme is addressing a specific need.

The career coaching programme has proven to be effective for an individual's continuing professional development and for the development of cultural change within departments, focusing on inclusivity.

Materials

+ Money
+ Coach(es) who know academia.
+ Staff member open to being coached.
+ Supportive line manager.
+ Independent person to make decisions.

Methods

Programme initiation

+ Decide on your budget.
+ Decide on your criteria for selection of coachees; data collected for Athena SWAN submission can help you determine which cohorts of staff you would like to support eg women only, certain grades, academic and/or professional services staff.
+ Contact coaches with experience of work in academia.
+ Carefully set up the application process to identify which applicants would benefit most from coaching.
+ Choose an administrator for the programme.
Launch event

+ Make sure the date does not coincide with school holidays or regular lunchtime seminar series.
+ Invite head of department or chair of your equality and diversity committee to introduce the event and show support for the programme.
+ Email your cohort of potential applicants/coachees with a link to a sign up form.
+ Compile a document presenting the coaches: a photo of each coach and description of who they are, what their experience is and how they work is useful.
+ Invite the coaches to present themselves at the launch event.
+ Invite a previous coachee to talk about their experience of coaching.
+ Organise a networking lunch immediately after the presentations so that prospective applicants can chat to the coaches and previous coachees.

Application process

+ Set up a web based application form for applicants to submit online.
+ The main question should help determine why the applicant would like a place on the programme; also ask which coach they would like to be matched with.
+ State that accepting a place on the programme is dependent on confirmation that they will complete a feedback survey on completion of their coaching.
+ Match successful applicants to coach taking into account the coachee’s preference.
+ Agree a start and end date for the coaching process.

Coaching phase

+ Email each coach with the names and contact details of their allocated coachees; It is up to the coach to contact the individual and set up the initial and subsequent meetings.
+ Each coach invoices the department’s finance team.
+ Contact the coaches after three months to ensure process is running smoothly.

Feedback

+ Set up a web based survey to obtain feedback from the coachees. Ask eg if their objectives on starting the programme have been met; have there been any positive outcomes and can they link these to the programme; any planned next steps; how they think the department has benefitted from their coaching; the coaching’s overall usefulness to them.
+ Coaches meet to discuss any themes that have arisen during the programme – a theme is a matter that has been mentioned by at least three coachees; they produce a short report on the programme that includes any themes that have arisen and their recommendations.
Results

+ Evaluate the programme’s effectiveness from the coachee survey and the coaches’ report.
+ Discuss the themes and the evaluation report with the department’s management team.
+ Keep a lessons learned log.

Our career coaching programme has been a resounding success: feedback from the coachees indicate that 90% feel more confident about their skills and qualities, 80% are more confident about their career and 60% have already engaged in new career development activities. The coaches gave feedback to our management team giving insight to department-wide issues to be addressed.

Tips

+ Keep a lessons learned log.
+ Ask an independent person to make decisions on who will be allocated a place on the programme – eg ask an EDI lead in another department.
+ You may want to change criteria annually to target different groups of staff.

7. Appendix B: Example of programme for career coaching launch event

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Head of department</th>
<th>Welcome and introduction of coaches</th>
<th>5 minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic lead for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)</td>
<td>Introduction to coaching programme</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach 1</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach 2</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach 3</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coachee</td>
<td>Personal experience of coaching</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDI administrator</td>
<td>Application procedure</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Networking lunch</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>