



# Reimagining educational leadership



## Insights from leaders at Manor Hall Trust following a 12-week experiential ‘unlearning journey’

Over the past three years, more than 130 education leaders have engaged with Pure Potential's immersive leadership and development programme.

In October 2025, 11 leaders formed the second cohort from Manor Hall Academy Trust to engage in a 12-week hybrid in-person and online programme, which marked a departure from traditional continuous professional development approaches.

### An aligned approach

The commitment to Pure Potential's approach is intrinsic to the Trust's leadership culture, which recognises the value of embracing inherent leadership styles rather than prescriptive, performative ways of being:

***“From the outset, our intention in partnering with Pure Potential was to create the conditions for leaders to reconnect with who they are at their best - not to mould them into a single leadership archetype, but to help them discover and express their own natural style. What we witnessed throughout this cohort's journey was a profound affirmation of that choice.*”**


***Pure Potential's philosophy - that transformational leadership comes from understanding the “inner and outer landscape” and revealing what is already possible within us - resonated deeply with our group. Leaders began to recognise that authentic leadership is not something they perform, but something they inhabit. They learned to see their own thinking more clearly, to access their judgement with greater confidence, and to experiment with approaches that felt true to who they are.”***

Phil Harrison, CEO, Manor Hall Academy Trust

## **An unexpected trajectory**

The journey began with a research period to gather an understanding of the landscape and the reality experienced both individually and collectively in participants' respective educational settings across the Trust. This process set the scene by drawing on candid reflections, observations and challenges shared through comprehensive 1-1 interviews and a questionnaire, highlighting key themes to inform the programme content, including; workload, wellbeing, state of mind, clarity & communication and staff relationships.

The architecture of the programme intentionally moved leaders from the familiar territory of skills acquisition, external KPIs and learning objectives to a less tangible yet far more profound excavation of beliefs around the human design. This invited self-reflection at a deep level to enquire about the ways we operate as leaders and our assumptions around the source of potential, clarity and creativity. This switch into a different mode of discovery and realisation is likened to an 'unlearning curve' and prompted resistance and challenge in the initial sessions, as participants found themselves in a new domain. Honest feedback included comments such as 'I found the first day exhausting' to 'at the beginning it felt like the unknown.'



**The blend of in-person workshops, online sessions and a series of 1-1 coaching opportunities enabled the cohort to move from a foundational understanding of the human design, our 'inner climate' and innate capacity to settle into more embodied ways to bring this to life through practical realities of the demands of educational leadership – from staff dynamics to Ofsted inspections and workload management.**

## Making the invisible visible

Pure Potential draws on a shared language to name what we struggle to articulate from an internal perspective, which creates a sense of collective understanding and awareness. The approach also uses a breadth of practical tools and metaphors to embed ways of being that are more aligned with reducing cognitive load and simplifying what can be unnecessarily complex.

***“The capacity to label feelings – like in situations when the ‘chatter teeth’ are in your ear has really helped me. We teach our children this around emotional regulation but don’t always apply it to ourselves.”***

Jane Mackin, Headteacher, Rocklands School

***“I really like the use of metaphors, and the vocabulary has become part of my personal and professional life.”***

Sarah Barlow, Headteacher, Adelaide School

***“One of the biggest things for me has been the snow globe. When I feel overwhelmed, I know I can just let it all naturally settle.”***

Sarah Latham, Education/Business Improvement Officer, Manor Hall Trust

***“I’m noticing how I’m feeling and then pausing and not reacting. This intentionally slows down the whole process.”***

Anna Latos, Headteacher, Springfield School

***“The ‘overthinking balloon’ helped me to see that overthinking something doesn’t change the outcome – it just gives it more energy.”***

Charlotte Cartlidge, Headteacher, Adelaide Heath Academy



## **The relational dynamic**

A key aspect of this experiential approach to development is being together as a group to explore themes, invite healthy challenge and sit with discomfort at times. The foundations of the process lie in psychological safety and the capacity to hold conflicting opinions while also being curious and open about each of our lenses of perception.

Initially this prompted some discomfort around being vulnerable with people who participants didn't know well, though organically new relationships formed over the course of the four-month period.

***“I've gained a lot from relationships and people in the room and, the facilitators leading the course have been accommodating and nurturing to support these relationships.”***

John Alcock, Head of School, Loxley Hall School

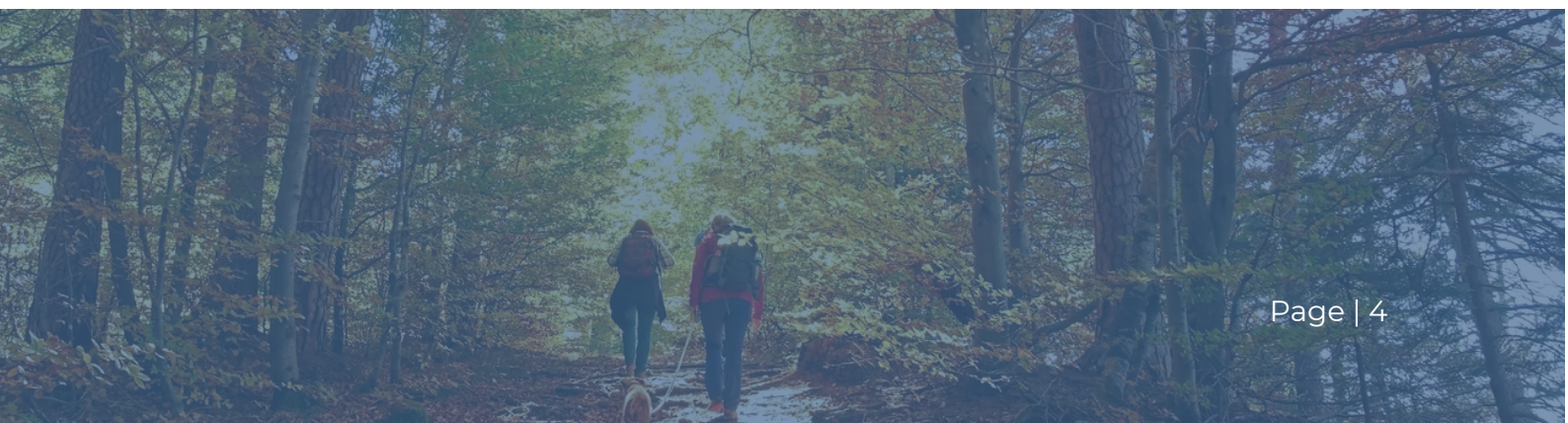
***“Being able to share this with people around me and the development of relationships with people I didn't know has been lovely.”***

Carol Shaw, Headteacher, Sherbrook Primary School

***“Crucially, this group embraced the idea that leadership growth does not happen in isolation. One of the most striking impacts has been watching them learn in community - drawing on one another's stories, strengths and lived realities.***

***The most significant shift has been their courage; courage to rethink old assumptions, courage to be vulnerable, and courage to see themselves not just as operational leaders, but as people capable of shaping culture, influencing systems and unlocking potential in others.”***

Phil Harrison, CEO, Manor Hall Academy Trust



## **Beyond labels, roles and identity**

In the fourth workshop of the journey, the cohort hit the deepest part of the developmental experience, which invited them to look more closely at the nature of thought and the assumptions we make around roles and labels which so often limit our sense of self and have us feeling like imposters.

While quite emotionally demanding to get curious about who we are, this session prompted some powerful realisations for members of the group.

***“I had a lightbulb moment when I realised that I’m not just my job title – I’m myself. I can bring my personality and my strengths to the role without being too wedded to the title itself.”***

Jackie Plant, Head of Governance, Manor Hall Academy Trust

***“I really struggled with imposter syndrome and that has shifted massively. I now see that it’s OK to just be Alex.”***

Alex Povey, Research and Development Officer, Manor Hall Academy Trust

***“What I’ve found useful about the subtractive approach is that it’s given me better clarity of mind. I let myself ‘be’ and find I’m leading with a lot more compassion and understanding. People respond to that really well.”***

Kathryn Taylor, Headteacher, The Meadows School

***“I observed a significant shift in self confidence in a number of participants. Some individuals have benefitted hugely in understanding themselves better. They appear to be more comfortable in being good people doing a good job as opposed to defining themselves against their job title or job description.”***

Chris Best, Deputy CEO, Manor Hall Academy Trust

## Leading from a space of deeper understanding

Many of the explorers on this leadership journey shared that the understanding really began to mesh together after the midway point, when there was a marked shift from introspection and 'understanding the design' to living this in a very practical and embodied way.

In this way it feels far less transactional as a means of growing and developing and more profound, cumulative and steady.

***“You come, you do the day and then you let it grow and process. It’s not a ‘boxed up’ approach – you have to create the space and invest in it. It’s very thought provoking and you can apply it over time to so many different scenarios.”***

Jane Mackin, Headteacher, Rocklands School

***“It’s not really about learning – it’s more unlearning. It’s very liberating to see beyond our personal thoughts and let go of what was limiting us.”***

Sarah Latham, Education/Business Improvement Officer, Manor Hall Academy Trust

The approach straddles the profound and practical, which enables strategic shifts that arise from greater clarity and self-awareness. This manifested in some leaders feeling more at ease in their personal leadership styles and a natural confidence in their capacity to embrace this.

***“Rather than teaching you how to ‘do’ leadership better, it helps you to understand who you are ‘being’ as a leader.”***

Anna Latos, Headteacher, Springfield School

***“I can be more telescopic and step back as a leader to consider the organisational perspective as well as the individual one. I find myself surveying the landscape much more broadly rather than looking out for the rocks that are going to trip me up.”***

Kathryn Taylor, Headteacher, The Meadows School



# Tangible Outcomes

Participants translated their understanding of the programme content in their day-to-day contexts, including:

Greater recognition of their capacity as leaders, beyond prescriptive labels and role descriptions

Being able to communicate with more clarity and impact

Feeling more able to switch off and engage in their home lives

The ability to listen more attentively and overcome the need to multitask, therefore giving others more focused attention

Greater access to natural confidence and resilience that is 'baked in' to the system

## Implications of sharing this understanding

By the Closing Ceremony in February 2026, many explorers had already begun embedding the Pure Potential understanding and sharing it with family members and wider teams in their educational settings.

***"I've shared the snow globe with our SLT and we've seen that simply saying it out loud can help you realise your mind is in a daze. From a wellbeing point of view, it's been valuable as we haven't felt the need to go into major detail in discussion if we're in a 'blizzard' – knowing this just gives people space to settle in their own time."***

***“I feel like the programme has made me a better mum, a better wife and a better leader. This understanding has limitless potential and needs sharing across the sector as a whole.”***

Kathryn Taylor, Headteacher, The Meadows School



***“All of my SLT now have snow globes on their desks.”***

Sarah Barlow, Headteacher, Adelaide School

***“If this was shared more widely imposter syndrome wouldn’t exist, people would listen more and not apologise for being themselves – and we’d gently let our ‘superpowers’ shine.”***

Alex Povey, Research and Development Officer, Manor Hall Academy Trust

***“After experiencing a number of courses, I feel this experience has had the most impact on my leadership. It has made me pause and reflect on my journey and for once not think about everyone else.”***

Jane Mackin, Headteacher, Rocklands School



***The words participants used to describe the programme***

## Reflections from a Trust perspective

The congruence of the Pure Potential approach with the Trust's wider commitment to cultural alignment is an important consideration. Some learning was taken with regards to expectations from the second cohort following effusive feedback from the first cohort, which completed in July 2025. Some participants felt a pressure to have a particular experience, which was an interesting theme to be discussed in the group. The 1-1 coaching was particularly valued by explorers:

***“This cohort led to some interesting learning and reflections. The coaching has without doubt been warmly received by all participants. There is something about meeting people where they are at, rather than coaching them to improve performance, which mirrors what we do for children.”***

Chris Best, Deputy CEO, Manor Hall Academy Trust

***“The emotional connection with the course has been particularly strong and the different ways that each individual has internalised it. They've all expressed a way of continuing the journey beyond the course, which is great to see.”***

John Fitchett, Chair of Trustees, Manor Hall Academy Trust

***“The Pure Potential experience has amplified the culture we are intentionally building across Manor Hall Academy Trust: one where clarity, compassion, curiosity and connection shape our way of being.***

***Our Trust's core belief - that everyone belongs, learns and grows - was reinforced and expanded through this programme. Leaders learned to create belonging by being present; they deepened their commitment to learning by engaging in reflective practice and they embraced growth as an ongoing discipline, not a destination.***

***The Pure Potential approach feels particularly important in special schools and alternative provision. Our sector is navigating complexity, change and rising expectations. What the programme offered our leaders is the capacity to lead with greater resilience, greater clarity, and a deeper sense of groundedness - essential qualities for those advocating for some of the most disadvantaged and complex young people.***

***As the Schools White Paper signals the growing influence of specialist and AP settings in shaping an inclusive national system, there has never been a more important time for leaders in this sector to have the self-awareness, courage and emotional dexterity that Pure Potential cultivates. This programme has strengthened our ability not only to lead our own schools but to contribute meaningfully to the system as a whole.”***

Phil Harrison, CEO, Manor Hall Academy Trust



When you come curious, with  
your eyes open, ready to  
transform your inner and outer  
landscape, who knows what  
could be possible for you and  
*your world?*

*March 2026*

**For more information visit** [pure-potential.org](http://pure-potential.org)  
**or email** [sarah@pure-potential.org](mailto:sarah@pure-potential.org)

