

Empowering the Heart of the School: How Our Middle Leaders' Programme is Driving Excellence for Your Children

At Blundell's, we believe that true educational excellence is not achieved by chance, it is cultivated through vision, commitment, and collaboration. As a community dedicated to nurturing the potential of every child, we know that the key to delivering consistent high-quality learning experiences lies not only in what happens in classrooms, but in the strength and clarity of the supporting leadership. To this end, we have launched a new initiative this year: our Middle Leaders' Programme.

Middle leaders include those who run academic departments, lead pastoral care, organise Year groups, or take responsibility for other areas of school life. They are, simply put, the engine room of the school: the daily decision-makers, the motivators, the listeners, the organisers. They shape the school culture through everything they do. They are the bridge between strategy and practice, and their influence on a child's school experience cannot be overstated.

As these roles are key to excellence at Blundell's we need to ask some questions:

- How do we ensure that our middle leaders are not just effective, but inspirational?
- How do we continue to improve what we offer by supporting those who lead from the middle?

The answer is straightforward: we invest in them, intentionally, strategically, and wholeheartedly.

Why Focus on Middle Leadership?

We know from both research and experience that middle leaders are uniquely placed to shape the quality of day-to-day education. They are often the most visible leaders in a parent and pupil's school life. Whether it is the House Parent guiding pupils through challenges, the Head of Sixth Form helping make important A-Level choices, or the Head of Chemistry inspiring a love of learning, middle leaders create the culture and expectations that drive progress.

They are the:

- Biggest direct influence on staff performance and morale.
- Most important motivators within Departments and Houses.
- Strongest role models for the school's values and ethos.
- Vital link between senior leadership and frontline teaching.
- Culture builders who shape the ethical tone of their teams.
- Guides and mentors for early-career teachers who will shape classrooms for years to come.

Whether intentionally or accidentally, every leader leaves a legacy. Because middle leaders interact so frequently and closely with pupils and parents, their impact is both deep and lasting. Our programme aims to ensure that this legacy is intentional, meaningful, and positive.

Our Vision: Growing Leadership to Strengthen Learning

The Middle Leaders' Programme was born out of conversations between key senior leaders, who asked a simple but powerful question: *What do our middle leaders need to thrive?* From there, Vicki Gill, as Head of Staff Development, and the Staff Development Committee, took this vision and shaped it into a structured, six-term training programme that would deliver lasting impact.

We recognise that our middle leaders have their own unique skill sets and therefore any training should reflect this, and that developing leadership should not be reduced to one-off workshops or tick-box training. Instead, we needed something embedded, thoughtful, bespoke and strategic. The result is a rich blend of internally and externally led sessions, combining reflection, practical skills, and real-world application.

Each session is carefully designed to develop eight core competencies we believe are fundamental to outstanding middle leadership:

- Communication
- Organisation
- Empathy
- Problem Solving
- Mentoring and Motivation
- Planning
- Difficult Conversations
- Prioritisation and Well-being

These themes are explored across a structured six-term plan, and sessions are run ensuring that the busy lives of our teachers are respected, making use of INSET days, focused lunchtimes, and strategically timed training blocks.

The Programme in Action

Term 1: Reflecting on Who We Are

We began in Summer 2024 with a focus on *self-awareness*. Every participant completed the Clifton Strengths for Managers diagnostic, a powerful tool used worldwide to help professionals identify and build upon their innate leadership strengths. The results were personal, insightful, confidential, and designed to guide reflection and professional conversations between staff and their line managers.

Later in the term, Middle Leaders attended a 'How to have a great development conversation', led by an externally recruited company – Peopletopia. This helped Middle Leaders consider how to conduct truly meaningful PDR (Professional Development Review) conversations; our PDR process is part of our annual process for reflecting on staff progress and supporting professional growth. These sessions emphasised empathy, active listening, and empowering colleagues to take ownership of their own development. These skills not only strengthen individual conversations but also contribute to a culture of trust, motivation, and professional fulfilment across the school.

Term 2: Setting the Scene for Authentic Leadership

During INSET in September 2024, Bart Wielenga spoke on authentic leadership. His message was powerful: real leadership comes not from title or authority, but from integrity, self-awareness, and a willingness to be vulnerable and brave.

This was followed by an in-house session outlining the school's evolving expectations of middle leaders. Key leaders led staff through a series of discussions to explore how we 'manage down' (leading our teams), 'manage up' (working with our line managers), and 'manage ourselves'. These themes were developed into practical frameworks that staff could apply in their departments and houses, and the collaborative process encouraged a sense of ownership and shared purpose.

Term 3: Practical Tools for Leading with Confidence

The programme in Spring 2025 focussed on what often gets overlooked in leadership: *well-being and prioritisation*. We invited Peopletopia back for this training session to explore how leaders can make purposeful choices about where to focus their energy, time, and attention. Our middle leaders give so much to our school, and it is vital they also feel empowered to look after themselves.

This session explored how to manage workload without burnout, how to delegate effectively, and how to maintain energy and joy in leadership. Leadership is not just about being effective - it is also about being sustainable.

Term 4: Navigating the Tough Stuff

During Summer 2025 we will focus on an area that every leader must face at some point; *difficult conversations with colleagues*. Whether addressing concerns, offering constructive feedback, or managing sensitive discussions, our middle leaders must be equipped to approach these moments with clarity, compassion, and professionalism.

Matt Radley, Second Master, and a highly experienced leader within the school, will lead these sessions. Delivered in small, reflective groups during the quieter post-exam period, the training will provide not only strategies but also the space to explore real challenges and gain peer support.

Term 5: Leading Through Challenge and Change

In Autumn 2025, we plan to explore two essential leadership skills: problem solving and mentoring. These are not just managerial tasks; they are acts of trust and transformation. Whether supporting a new teacher or navigating a complex departmental issue, our middle leaders will be equipped with tools to lead with calm clarity and positive energy.

An external expert will guide the session, bringing insights from education and industry to help our team build confidence and capability in these core areas.

Term 6: Looking After What Matters Most

To conclude the programme in Spring 2026, our focus will shift to equipping Middle Leaders with the practical tools of leadership. They will take part in workshops on how to run effective meetings, and conduct interviews with confidence and professionalism. Led by external experts, these sessions will cover everything from setting a purposeful agenda to framing insightful interview questions. These skills are vital not only for successful recruitment, but also for fostering a culture in which staff feel empowered to contribute meaningfully to discussions and decisions.

Building a Culture of Intentional Leadership

Throughout the programme, we have been gathering ideas, reflecting on practice, and encouraging feedback. One powerful part of this has been the stakeholder lunches and discussion forums. Heads of Department, Houseparents, Heads of Year, and Prep colleagues have all taken part in shaping the expectations we hold of ourselves and each other. Together, we are building a shared language and a shared standard for leadership.

Key themes have emerged from these sessions; trust, communication, empathy, clarity, role modelling, and a sense that *children are always the priority*. These ideas are not just posters on a wall, they are the lived reality of what it means to be a leader at our school.

Every leader is encouraged to ask:

- How am I supporting and trusting my team?
- Am I managing my own time and energy wisely?
- Do I feel confident to speak up and contribute ideas?
- How does my leadership benefit pupils?

This reflective approach ensures that leadership development is not only for the benefit of staff, but also fundamentally about enhancing the pupil experience.

Why This Matters for Your Child

You may be wondering; what does all this mean for my child?

It means that:

- Their teachers are being led by people who feel valued, supported, and inspired.
- Their learning environment is shaped by leaders who are thoughtful, organised, and empathetic.

- Their school is constantly striving to get better, not through guesswork, but through evidence-informed, strategically planned development.
- Their role models, the adults they see every day, are leading with kindness, strength, and purpose.

This programme is not about theory. It is about action. It is about making sure that every aspect of our school runs with intention and heart. Because when staff are supported to be their best, pupils thrive.

What Comes Next?

The first full cycle of the Middle Leaders' Programme will be completed in Spring 2026. After that, we plan to continue developing and refining the offer. New middle leaders will be welcomed into the programme, and optional "masterclass" sessions will be run each term for those who have already completed the core training. These sessions will be responsive to current needs and challenges, ensuring our leaders stay sharp and inspired.

We are also exploring how to align this programme with wider professional qualifications, and how to use the insight gained to feed into our wider school development priorities, as well as feeding into our ongoing training of Senior Leaders.

A Shared Commitment to Excellence

Our aim is this programme is simple, and echoes a theme that runs through many of our *Thoughtful Thursdays* essays: we are not standing still. We are constantly asking ourselves what more we can do to offer your children the best possible education; not just academically, but emotionally, socially, and morally.

Our investment in middle leadership is one of the most powerful ways we can do this. We are proud of the work that is already underway, and we are excited about the legacy it will create. As we grow our leaders, we grow our school and most importantly, we grow the potential of every child in our care.