



Why good HR practices are not an overhead

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An HR team has helped save Leeds mental health teaching trust £1.8m in a year - and believes another £1.8m could be saved. This has resulted from, among other things, focusing on outcomes, changing a culture of blame to one of support - and encouraging staff to take responsibility for the trust's success

Leeds mental health trust saved £1.8m in the space of 12 months, after its HR team led a project to reduce agency spend. The momentum of that early success from 2004-05 has been maintained and attitudes to using agency staff have changed considerably.

For this and other significant contributions to the business of the trust, Leeds won the HR team of the year category at the Healthcare People Management Association and NHS Partners' Excellence in HRM Awards 2006.

The achievement has encouraged the enthusiasm of Jane Burtoft, HR director with the trust since 2002, who has been instrumental in developing new policies to challenge the established culture.

'I still think there is another £1.8m that can be saved,' says Jane 'and it will come from increased efficiencies and reduced waste, looking at the way our teams perform and the impact that has on outcomes for service users.'

Two pilot schemes, based on research done by Dr Michael West at Aston University, are under way to examine these issues within the trust's learning disability supported living units. The aim is to get each team to enhance clients' experiences of care by keeping the focus on outcomes. Team members work together more effectively under this process, do not like to let each other down and take fewer sick days.

The principles that inform this approach are closely mirrored in Jane's work with her team, which supports the development of staff while improving the value that they offer to an organisation itself going through change.

'You can't isolate these things - they have to grow in tandem,' says Jane. Focusing on

outcomes has helped keep the HR team clear about where they are going and how we work together. They have developed, the support they give is better and so are their outcomes.

'The bottom-line differences that they are making are reduced spend and increased productivity. We are, ultimately, an overhead and, if we don't add that sort of value, we will be faced with having to make reductions of our own.'

Stopping the blame game

When Jane arrived at Leeds, one of the first things she did was gauge the prevailing climate. What she found being played out was an all-too-familiar blame game, determined by the rules of overly prescriptive policies. Too much time was being spent dealing with disciplinary cases and not on the underlying issues.

It was against this background that she developed the personal responsibility framework. Set out to create a culture of support and mutuality, this aims to do pretty much what it says: 'share responsibility for the trust, its success and room for improvement 50:50 between organisation and employee'. Staff can now come forward and tell managers when they have got things wrong without fear of discipline. Equally, they can bring the potential for breaches of safety and systems failures to the attention of supervisors. Within one year of the framework being up and running, disciplinary hearings were down 90 per cent.

Line managers - 'executive, administrative and clinical' - attend workshops run by Jane to learn about the framework, to plan to make sure its principles are passed on throughout their teams and to measure how it has permeated throughout the trust.

'I am a realist,' says Jane. *'I don't expect everybody to read it. What they need to know is what it does, what support is available and where to get it. Partnership work with staff-side organisations is vital in this respect because it is often professional and trade union reps who support the employees in seeking to put things right.'*

The supporting staff at work framework follows in the footsteps of the personal responsibility framework by empowering managers to respond to situations with good sense and sensitivity. A recently bereaved employee can, for example, talk with their manager about a graduated and flexible return to work over a period of weeks. Traditional policies would all too often cause further distress under such circumstances. This second framework has helped reduce sickness absence by more than 1 per cent to 4.6 per cent, within a staffing budget of more than £85m.

Leeds is one of the next wave of foundation trust status applicants. *'Our focus has been on business for some time now,'* says Jane, *'and foundation trust application has sharpened that focus. It raises the bar for HR, and the ability of the team to welcome the experience as a learning opportunity is a measure of just how much they have grown.'*



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