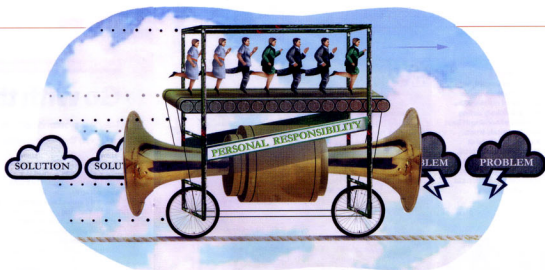


Low morale, poor staff relations and a blame culture – too common a problem in many trusts. Until last year, all these terms could have applied to Leeds Mental Health Teaching trust. But a radical solution has begun to make a difference.

The brainchild of human resources director Jane Burtoft, a framework for personal responsibility was introduced and has succeeded in turning around staff relationships by providing managers and staff with guidance on taking responsibility for their own actions.

Ms Burtoft inherited a difficult situation when she took over as HR manager in January 2002. Over 30 disciplinary cases were in progress, pointing to a blame



Wind of change

Jody Raynsford describes a radical framework that encourages individuals to take responsibility for their own actions in the workplace

culture 'using the disciplinary as a reflex response'. The sheer number of very difficult cases and the fact these were taking up all of the department's time meant that relationships were being negatively affected and morale was low. 'Coming into the organisation I felt there was a language of blame, rather than a culture of openness and transparency', she says.

While working in her previous role as deputy HR director at Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals trust Ms Burtoft had been considering this issue, partially in response to the Bristol inquiry and in relation to previous experience. 'While studying for my Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development qualification, one of the things I learned was that a disciplinary is about changing behaviour, and I felt that wasn't happening.'

Once she became an HR director, she was able to put these ideas into practice. 'When you become a director it is easier to do these things. The position we were in demanded something radical, so the timing was good.'

'Unless we did something positive, how were we going to get people to identify what

needed to change? Otherwise, people are going to carry on covering problems up, allowing mistakes to keep happening.'

'We never were going to feel like we were learning from our errors if we just forgot them.'

For Ms Burtoft, the objectives were straightforward – to develop a culture of openness and reduce disciplinary cases while changing behaviour and attitudes in the organisation.

The first step was to bring together a group of individuals in the trust who had experience of disciplinary issues, including managers, audit, staff support and the chaplains. The group talked with the executive team and discussed ways of trying to achieve the agreed objectives. A drug policy operated by the trust was the starting point for developing the framework.

'For the last two or three years, the drug policy had worked quite well in that we didn't automatically discipline people for making drug errors. Many organisations have those policies, but we were trying to put a framework together with this was something on which to base what I was thinking.'

'We spent a lot of time trying to

pull together the guidance document, which was hard because even when you've got it in your head, getting it down on paper is another matter', she continues.

'In some cases, managers were already using a similar approach, but this was limited by the lack of a written policy. The principles of the personal responsibility framework are about empowering people to take personal responsibility and ownership of their own issues. People have done something wrong, but need to feel they can move forward.'

'When an individual feels an error has been made or their actions were inappropriate, they initially discuss this with their manager and agree the remedial options. The range of actions that an individual may take to rectify things range from a letter of apology to mentoring and support – or even a piece of research. This is closely monitored by HR.'

Ms Burtoft cites a recent example where two employees had a public disagreement. Rather than go down the formal disciplinary route, the two individuals came forward to their manager and acknowledged the inappropriate nature of their actions.

After discussion, it was revealed that the root of the problem was a disagreement about the amount

of work each undertook.

As remedial action, the individuals apologised to other employees in their departments and also agreed to a revised allocation of work, thereby tackling the cause.

The key to success in achieving staff buy-in derives from an emphasis on the outcome of

'They'll say to staff that if you're honest and open, we can help you do things differently.'

taking personal responsibility. As described in the framework document, 'a person coming forward in recognition of his or her own shortcomings is not working fearfully in anticipation of being blamed for a situation or outcome.'

'They are able to take responsibility and change it.'

The framework was finalised at the end of summer 2002 and Ms Burtoft was keen to ensure implementation was driven by the managers, rather than HR.

She explains: 'It was up to the managers how they would implement the framework. They are given the responsibility for changing the culture because at the end of the day staff have got to feel able to come forward to them, not to me.'

Instituting a change in culture in an organisation the size of Leeds Mental Health Teaching

trust, with 2,500 employees in multiple sites, may have been a long and arduous process fraught with obstacles, yet Ms Burtoft says she was amazed at the enthusiasm towards the framework.

One of the reasons why buy-in has been so successful may be the breadth of discussions with staff.

'They'll say to staff that you need to be open, and if you're open and honest we can help you do things differently. Instead of going through the formal process, we can look at how to change behaviour and do something positive.'

Managers now feel empowered to deal with issues head-on, as Ms Burtoft notes: 'I've personally held workshops with all our senior managers and there has been a great amount of enthusiasm. I've even had to put more days on for them – I feel like Robbie Williams!'

The tangible measures of the success of the framework are clear. Since putting the framework in place, disciplinary cases have been reduced by an impressive 75 per cent, with the more difficult attitudinal complaints dropping from 55 per cent to 27 per cent.

Ms Burtoft also identifies an improvement in staff relationships and morale. Yet she believes that behind this, a more fundamental shift in thinking has occurred: 'There really has been a change in the language of the organisation, where the words "taking personal responsibility" relate to so many areas of people's work.'