

The challenge of creating positive working environments

by Marilyn Tyzack

What is that intangible factor in UK workplaces that persuades staff to attend work on a cold Monday morning when they would rather be in bed?

What are the key differences between those workplaces where labour turnover is low and those where many staff hardly stay beyond the induction phase, and why do some organisations have numerous bullying and harassment complaints whilst others are complaint free?

For the lucky few who are so deeply absorbed in their work, their working environment is of secondary importance. But for most, coming to work is a social experience and they cannot perform effectively when there is disharmony or tension in the workplace.

Evidence shows that the conventional response of organisations that are experiencing these problems is either to ignore the situation, particularly if the bottom line has not yet been affected, or to focus on the policies, procedures and new management initiatives using a carrot or stick approach. The more advanced organisations concentrate on equipping their managers and leaders with the skills necessary to manage more effectively.

There are a few organisations who do take a holistic approach which not only reviews policies and procedures, management and leadership styles but also looks closely at the culture and climate in the various departments in their organisation. It is this last factor that tends to be the missing link.

There is though a 50 year history of scholarly research on the importance of organisational climate. Numerous studies have examined how climate impacts on a wide range of outcomes including psychological wellbeing, workers' compensation claims, absenteeism and turnover, harassment and violence, safety behaviours, and company financial performance.

A meta-analytic review (i.e., where different studies are adjusted with statistical procedures so that they can be added together) of 51 climate studies conducted over the past 20 years found that organisational climate exerts robust effects over a range of people performance-related outcomes, across a wide range of work environments (Carr, Schmidt, Ford & DeShon, 2003).

Many staff report that they are able to identify the climate within a workplace in the first 20 minutes of being in that environment. There are also reports of climates changing when a new manager or a powerful member of staff is introduced into an area.

Warm cultures are usually characterised by:

- ◆ Individual differences being encouraged, valued and recognised
- ◆ An active endorsement and commitment from senior management to diversity and valuing difference
- ◆ Informal networking and support taking place amongst people who are not part of the majority.

Cold cultures tend to have the following characteristics in place.

- ◆ Lip service is paid to diversity, but minority groups, or those who do not fit in for a number of reasons, are excluded in a subtle way from social networking
- ◆ Employees hide their cultural and personal backgrounds for fear of what people may think or do
- ◆ Employees who do not 'fit in' are harassed or bullied.

In a recent case study, the top management of a department in a large private sector company were not even speaking to each other let alone communicating effectively. There had been three allegations of bullying and harassment in the last year. Four members of staff were absent on long term sick leave and the turnover rate of that department was high at over 35%. Just as worryingly, productivity had fallen. The response of staff was to form cliques and they were often seen whispering in small groups in the corridor.

An approach was used that started from the belief that it was necessary to understand the existing culture and climate in order to improve the working environment. This was carried out, not by carrying out the usual diagnostic exercise, but by initially working with a nominated steering group from the team to create a vision on the characteristics of a positive work place. This then became a positive

exercise rather than one focused on the negative experiences of staff. The checklist created became the vision and the benchmark. This was then analysed using the traffic light system and short, medium and long term actions were developed. See an example in Figure 1 below.

Whilst it is normally expected that culture change takes at least 4 years, we were surprised to find enormous change in just one year. This was also confirmed by the staff survey. On being interviewed one year later, one commented **“It’s better now. Just before Christmas, I would have walked out. That is not like me. I don’t like things to beat me. From the end of January to February things really changed. People had been patronising. You were expected to know everything from day one.”**

A key factor in the success of this project was that senior managers took the issue seriously and gave a commitment to provide the resources necessary to ensure the action plan was a living document. Many of the solutions were not resource intensive. They required minor changes in work organisation. An important element in the success was that the team also created their own charter of behaviours that everyone subscribed to. This was seen as vital in the improved working environment. Previously, managers had raised their voices when under stress. This no longer happens.

A recent European study asked a sample of workers in 5 European countries what were the factors that created a happy workplace. The top 4 in all countries were

- ◆ Respect
- ◆ Good work life balance
- ◆ An opportunity to learn and a
- ◆ Pride in the organisation

One of the difficulties in understanding the culture and climate is that there is often a covert culture that counters the preferred culture. Gerard Egan¹ points out the difference between the preferred culture which serves this aim and the covert culture where the beliefs, values and norms are not publicly named and are quite often hidden. The covert culture drives patterns of organisational behaviour.

¹ Dr Gerard Egan Working the Shadow Side: A Guide to Positive Behind-the-Scenes Management – October/1994

Figure 1: Example of an analysed checklist

Needs immediate attention	
Needs improvement	
Considered good, but could improve	
Considered excellent	
Number of delegates	16
Number of returned evaluation sheets	16
% of completed forms	100

Questions

Respondents were asked to rate their organisation against the following questions

	Whole org.	Own area
A high level of trust and support exists at all levels in the organisation	53	56
The pursuit of organisational goals is a common aim and individual targets and performance are no longer the drivers	53	65
Unhealthy stress levels are low and occupational health hazards are minimal	53	69
There is a genuine concern for the quality of working life	53	74
Creativity springs from teamwork and individual/departmental competition does not jeopardise this approach	63	79
The climate is warm and friendly and allows for free expression of diversity	63	64
There are opportunities for personal development and career progression	71	63
The behaviour of managers and leaders is appropriate and reflects best practice	59	58
Conflict is discussed openly and resolved speedily	50	61
Empowerment dominates over individual power politics	50	66
Exclusive clubs and informal cliques do not exist	55	74
There are equitable systems of rewards and there is justice in treatment in employee relations and HR practices	60	66
There is a strong sense of loyalty to the organisation with the feeling of being integral to the organisation and a valued member	65	74
Overall Average Response	57	67

Although challenging, employers cannot afford to continue to bury these issues.

According to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) the estimated cost of sickness absence for UK businesses in 2004 was at least £12.2 billion. The same survey indicated that 168 million working days were lost through absence. The rate in the public sector is 10.3 days per employee and 6.8 days in the private sector.

The *Recruitment, retention and turnover survey 2005*¹ reports that the overall employee turnover rate for the UK is 15.7%. Turnover levels vary considerably from industry to industry. The highest levels of turnover (21.4%) are found in private sector organisations. Successive CIPD surveys of labour turnover show that the highest levels (commonly in excess of 50% per annum) are found in retailing, hotels and restaurants, call centres and among other lower paid private sector services groups. The public sector has an average turnover rate of 11.5%.

Staff turnover poses the greatest challenge for the health sector, with a rate of 14.1%. The lowest levels are found among civil servants, fire fighters, the police and other public sector staff groups who are relatively highly skilled and well paid.

Recent research strongly suggests that push factors are a great deal more significant in most resignations than most managers appreciate. It is relatively rare for people to leave jobs in which they are happy, even when offered higher pay elsewhere. Most staff have a preference for stability.

The Andrea Adams Trust, the charity that campaigns for bullying free working environments, states that the statistics for people alleging bullying at work are as high as 1 in 4. Bullying can make employees lives a misery, affect their performance and damage their careers. It can also have a serious impact on organisations: Indeed, statistics show that each year as many as 18.9 million working days are lost to bullying and up to a half of all stress-related illnesses are a direct result of bullying.

It is essential that a piecemeal response to these challenging issues is not used. A holistic response that focuses on changing leadership behaviours, reviewing policies and procedures along with understanding and changing the culture will be essential for real change to take place.

Written by Marilyn Tyzack

Director, IRIS Consulting

The Green Building, 50-54 Beak Street, London W1F 9RN
tel 0207-575-7681 **e-mail** marilyn.tyzack@irisconsulting.co.uk