The challenge of creating positive working environments

The missing link…

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? Why do some organisations have numerous bullying and harassment complaints whilst others are complaint-free?

For most people, 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 an holistic approach, which not only reviews policies and procedures, management and leadership styles, but also looks closely at the culture and climate. It is this last factor that tends to be the missing link.

Things are changing though and health trusts are expected to comply with core standards described in Standards for Better Health. Standard D7 requires healthcare organisations to show that they are continuously working to enhance patient care by adopting Best Practice HR management and are continuously improving staff satisfaction.

This means that, over the next six months or so, trusts will need to start thinking about ways to develop and improve their culture, as well as their policies and procedures, to be ready for assessment by 2007/08.

Regulatory assessment should not, though, be the only driver. There is 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.

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.

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.

IRIS Consulting were asked to assist, and used a tool that started from the belief that it was necessary for staff to be clear about the characteristics of the culture and climate that they wanted to work in. We did not start with the usual diagnostic exercise but worked with a nominated steering group from the team to create a vision for the team. This then became a positive exercise, rather than one focusing on the negative experiences of staff. The checklist created became the vision and the benchmark. Each of the identified characteristics were then analysed using the traffic light system, and short-, medium- and long-term actions were developed.

Whilst it is normally expected that culture change takes at least four years, we were surprised to find enormous improvements in just one year. This was also confirmed by the staff survey.

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 that 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. The benefits for all stakeholders have been enormous.

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