

Establishing a culture of openness

IES Perspectives on HR 2014

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The problem

'I don't understand why it's so difficult in the NHS - why there seems to be a lot of bullying and harassment, why people are afraid to speak out. In the nuclear industry, safety was drummed into us from Day 1. We had an absolute duty to challenge bad practice, no matter who was doing it. If you went downstairs without holding the handrail, even if you were the CEO, you'd be challenged by everyone you met.'

These words, spoken at a recent NHS conference, were spoken with genuine bewilderment by an HR manager who had recently transferred to an NHS trust from an energy company in the private sector. In this company, safety was so paramount that it was built into the values and from there into every training event, policy, framework, process and system.

It seems so obvious that a culture of openness and transparency is a 'good thing'. If people are encouraged to speak out, they will prevent harm; make suggestions for improvement leading to a better quality product or service; come up with creative ideas – and this will lead to better organisational performance.

Openness: The perceived benefits



Source: IES, 2013

And yet...scandals keep happening, in every sector, and it often seems to be the people we should be able to trust most who let us down hardest. Even organisations that have so far escaped public scrutiny know they are not immune; there could be a hidden ticking time-bomb about to explode. A commonly-expressed lament is that no matter how many systems and processes are put into place, the desired open culture is not there. Employees are reluctant to use whistle-blowing policies, suggestion schemes, confidential telephone lines, staff forums etc. They acknowledge the behavioural competences, quality standards and codes of conduct, and may indeed do their best to abide by them – but they stop short of reporting those who do not. Employee survey responses show that they do not believe that their good ideas will be listened to, or that there will not be adverse consequences if they speak out.

Diversity at senior team and board level

‘This must never happen again’

Cynics could be forgiven for thinking, ‘but it will’. A quick glance at the evidence shows that similar arguments have been repeated by academics and politicians over the years. It also reveals very similar proposed solutions every time an investigation reports after a scandal.

- Back in 1997, Larry Hirschhorn argued that it had become necessary *‘to create a new culture of authority – one in which superiors acknowledge their dependence on subordinates, subordinates can challenge superiors, and both are able to show vulnerability’*.
- This excerpt, from a government White Paper, sounds as if it could refer to the recent scandals around Mid Staffs and the resulting enquiries and Francis Report, yet it was written in 1998, shortly after the Labour government came to power, *‘...achieving meaningful and sustainable quality improvements in the NHS requires a fundamental shift in culture, to focus effort where it is needed and to enable and empower those who work in the NHS to improve quality locally...’* (paragraph 5.6).
- The much more recent Mid Staffs public enquiry (2013) is more specific about the required culture, *‘For a common culture to be shared throughout the system, these three characteristics are required’*:
 - *‘Openness: enabling concerns to be raised and disclosed freely without fear, and for questions to be answered.’*
 - *‘Transparency: allowing true information about performance and outcomes to be shared with staff, patients and the public.’*
 - *‘Candour: ensuring that patients harmed by a healthcare service are informed of the fact and that an appropriate remedy is offered, whether or not a complaint has been made or a question asked about it.’* (paragraph 1.176).

What are the drivers for openness?

Published research (notably Davies et al, 2000, which draws heavily on earlier work: Robbins, 1996, Newman, 1996 and Martin, 1992) suggests that the openness (or otherwise) of an organisation’s culture is driven by the extent to which:

- the organisation *encourages* and *rewards* innovation, risk-taking, and new ways of doing things, rather than taking a traditional approach
- decision-making is *devolved* rather than centralised
- communication is *informal* rather than hierarchical

- there is a focus on *outcomes* rather than processes
- the focus is *external* (on customers and the wider community) rather than internal
- the organisation values *diversity* rather than uniformity
- people feel *valued* and *supported*
- the organisation fosters *teamwork* rather than *individualism*
- the organisation is *competitive* rather than *collaborative* in relation to other organisations
- there is *consensus* throughout the organisation about values and appropriate behaviours
- the organisation is not excessively *differentiated* or *fragmented* in terms of employee groups and their norms and beliefs.

Can social media help?

Many organisations have now adopted internal social media, enabling employees to talk to each other across the whole business. In some, this is working well: the CEO is delighted at being able to pose a problem, and getting a flood of suggestions. Employees in different departments and locations are getting to know each other and starting to find common problems and solutions. However, organisations that do not already have a fairly open culture are finding that their social media conversations are limited to fairly trivial issues and/or are dominated by a few individuals; many are still reluctant to voice their views. There is also anxiety about what to do to if inaccurate, misguided or malicious information starts to be circulated. The debate around managing the flow of ideas, without stifling them, is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

What does this mean in practice?

The reality, for many organisations, is that it is very difficult to reconcile competing priorities and persuade very different groups of people to collaborate in an open, consensual way. The bigger and more complicated an organisation is, the harder it gets to see the big picture – and the addition of widespread mistrust of senior leaders' motives makes it impossible. There is also an understandable fear that a more open culture may lead to a flood of employee demands that cannot be met or – worse – false accusations that might damage reputations.

Changing culture is very hard, and requires concerted effort. Areas for attention are relatively easy to identify, not so easy to tackle:

- Although systems, processes and policies are not enough on their own, they do need to be there, and they need to be firstly visible, accessible and clear to all, and secondly implemented appropriately (for example, when an issue has been raised by a whistleblower).
- There should be a much greater emphasis on values and behaviour, with regard to recruitment and financial reward (promotion, bonuses, performance-related pay etc).
- The importance of openness should be emphasised at induction, and repeated at every opportunity.
- Individual employees should be acknowledged and recognised for their suggestions, and responded to regardless of whether or not their ideas are to be implemented.
- Organisation-wide consultations should be honest and genuine listening events.

Individual initiatives are unlikely to succeed on their own, so a high degree of 'joined-upness' is needed. Finally, as with just about every people-related issue, it will not work unless it is modelled by the people at the top.

- Are they genuinely interested in people and their ideas?
- Do they listen and respond?
- Do they receive criticism openly?
- Do they acknowledge and celebrate the contribution others have made?
- Are they willing to admit that their cherished projects might be the wrong ones?

If not, even the very best efforts of HR are unlikely to succeed.

References

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IES Seminar: Establishing a culture of openness

29 May 2014, London

with Dilys Robinson

Many organisations struggle with fostering an environment in which employees feel they can speak out openly: to make suggestions for improvement, point out potential risks, and blow the whistle on malpractice. Often, the processes and policies are in place, yet employees are uncomfortable about using them in case of repercussions. If people avoid speaking out, recent scandals show that the consequences can be disastrous. How can organisations establish and foster a more open culture, to capitalise on employees' ideas and manage risk more effectively?

To find out more and book a place visit www.employment-studies.co.uk/network/events



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