

Seminar: Establishing a culture of openness

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What is openness and how can it be encouraged?

Dilys Robinson opened the session by introducing the concept of openness in organisations, what that might mean and the benefits of operating in an open culture.

She presented an overview of formal ways in which employee voice could be encouraged in organisations and identified that, in addition to these channels, it was important to show what had happened as a result. It wasn't enough to enable feedback to occur, to become engaged in the system and have any faith in it, staff also needed to understand that their views had been heard, that some progress was made and even if it wasn't possible for ideas to be taken forward, an understanding of why their suggestion was a 'no' was necessary.

Dilys shared information about what policy makers have done to aid openness – specifically the Public Interest Disclosure Act of 1998. Despite this legislation the numbers that she shared showing how many people are aware of wrongdoing in their workplaces but choose to stay silent was high. Dilys also shared a list of drivers for openness in organisations based on the work of Davies, Nutley and Manion (2000).

There was much discussion amongst the participants about the ease of encouraging openness in the workplace. It was recognised that the recent and current economic climate was not conducive to people feeling the perceived necessary confidence to speak out or whistle blow as many people had concerns around job security.

Katherine Cowell from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills told the event about a project she's been leading there around organisational culture and working towards greater openness. She explained there was nothing wrong in the organisation, no burning platform from which they were working, but that a culture of openness was considered a vital component for a successful organisation. Katherine's input provided a really interesting case study and provoked a good deal of conversation and thought.

Barriers to creating a culture of openness

Following a short break, Dilys then led a discussion that examined the barriers to creating a culture of openness in organisations. There were a number of these and it was highlighted that an unwillingness to speak out wasn't always indicative of a lack of engagement, but at times, people just assumed that someone else was doing something about the issue.

'Is it safe?'

Building on the earlier point about the external environment influencing how readily people in organisations would speak out, the discussion in the room focused on how often people felt that it wasn't safe to speak out and that would often be a question to some HR colleagues in the room, 'is it safe?'. This sense of mistrust was reported as being evident at all levels but most worryingly perhaps in terms of what staff saw role

modelled by senior managers in their organisations. There was conversation that there was a perceived do/say gap which led to the sense that it wasn't really OK to speak up.

Legacy influence

In many cases there was also a legacy influence – members of staff had organisational memory of where openness had received a negative reaction in the past. Historically, there was also a feeling of 'what's the point?' where the perception that nothing had happened as a result of concerns being raised in the past. Staff surveys were flagged as an example of where this was a common perception.

Values

There was also a discussion based around the importance of values. It was felt that the clearer the organisational values the more likely people were to feel that there was something worth protecting and so became more likely to speak up if they saw wrongdoing.

What does success look like?

Event participants took part in discussion on their tables which looked at where there had been success in terms of creating a culture of openness, as well as whether they thought sufficient openness existed to prevent a crisis in their own organisation. This prompted a conversation that it wasn't always that people were choosing to not

speak out, but that the culture had become so unhelpful as to a 'new norm' becoming the case – an acceptance of the unacceptable because it had become the way that something got done.

One participant shared that a success had occurred in her organisation when an issue that could well have resulted in a misconduct intervention was instead viewed in terms of learning and debrief. Not only did this result in helping to create a culture where whistle blowing would not be punished, but it brought about improved training in that area, investment in that training, and in available resources. A benefit was clearly recognised in that the organisation was better equipped to ensure something similar wouldn't happen in the future. A big problem would undoubtedly have followed had the situation been allowed to play out.

Another participant talked about how a proactive approach to engagement of new partners had resulted in success and a greater feeling of openness amongst the parties in the relationship. One way in which this was achieved was that it was established that this approach was not a 'one off' approach at the start of the project, but would be the way they would conduct themselves.

Participants agreed it had been a thought-provoking session – research, case studies and practical applications had all been discussed. It prompted some attendees to think about their influence in their organisations beyond their HR remit.

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- design and deliver bespoke development programmes for HR people
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