

The Best Workplace

How staff involvement can transform health care

The Best Workplace is a model of workplace partnership between managers, professionals and other staff in health and social care services. Its general principles apply to other services too, but it has been developed specifically in the health and social care environments.

Its purpose is to improve standards of service quality, productivity and job satisfaction for the benefit of all stakeholders -- with the focus firmly on the patient, the client and other service users, such as carers and relatives of patients and clients.

Unlike other Employee Engagement approaches, it does not pretend that all stakeholders have identical interests. On the contrary, starting from the reality that there are inevitable and unavoidable tensions between different interests, and personalities, The Best Workplace develops relationships to enable mutual understanding and maximise collaboration for the benefit of all.

We believe that this approach has particular relevance in the aftermath of the Francis, Keogh and Berwick reports, which showed the importance of effective staff engagement to improve care standards. At a time when NHS trusts are also under unprecedented pressure to cut costs, the Best Workplace approach can help to ensure that productivity improvements are achieved in ways that also improve care and job quality.

The Francis inquiry heard evidence that in some NHS Trusts there is a culture of blame and fear, and in some cases even of bullying, and Berwick emphasised that mistakes cannot be acknowledged and rectified in such an environment. We believe that The Best Workplace approach can help to build a culture of trust and openness, and thus help to enable the transformation required in such circumstances.

Building common purpose from different interests

What do we want from health care services? Sometimes it can depend on which hat we are wearing. The patient or carer wants high standards of care delivered safely and consistently in compassionate ways that respect human dignity. The taxpayer wants

Public World and Alamanco are social enterprises based in London and Stockholm respectively.

Following a successful workshop with NHS Employers, we are now offering training programmes for NHS leaders, managers and staff in our unique approach to staff involvement, **The Best Workplace**.

Based on 20 years of Swedish experience, it builds team work and creative leadership to improve quality, resource use and employee engagement sustainably.

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that done at costs no higher than they need to be. Employees want to be supported and treated with fairness and respect, and involved in decisions that affect them.

There is no reason why those aspirations cannot be reconciled, but it doesn't just happen. Moreover, generalisations about what we want can all too easily conceal the differences that make each one of us a unique human being. The Best Workplace approach aims for unity of purpose but starts with the reality that we don't all have exactly the same interests, attitudes or personalities.

The aim is to improve resource use and care standards in ways that also improve employee engagement, everyday job satisfaction and staff wellbeing. The route is to build a culture of mutual respect for the legitimacy of other points of view and to identify and build on shared values to overcome differences of perspective and achieve collectively agreed goals.

A healthy organisation

The results of an organisation's work depend a great deal on its health and the health of its workers. The staff are the most important resource of the organisation. That is said so often that it can sound trite -- but we have to keep coming back to the fact that it is true and fundamentally important.

If the organisation suffers from a lot of frustration, powerlessness, unhappiness and many unresolved conflicts, this will undermine its efficiency and effectiveness. In an effective and healthy organisation, staff are able to develop as individuals while working in teams. Good cooperation comes from respect for each other's differences and understanding that we all produce each other's working environment.

The Best Workplace approach helps to build a climate of open communication in which everyone learns to resolve conflict constructively and to focus on how to resolve concrete problems in daily work. Raising challenging issues is welcomed, and processes are developed for resolving them in collegiate ways.

In an effective organisation there is alignment between management and other staff about division of responsibility between the individual, the team and the rest of the organisation, and how each and every member of staff relates to the patient or client. That is what the Best Workplace approach strives to achieve by enabling processes of dialogue that lead to decisions about action, and by enabling organisations to learn from that action and deliberate about how to make continuous improvement.

Building trust and cooperation

As Alamanco chief executive Lars-Åke Almqvist puts it:

“Managers and workers, workers and other workers, and we as human beings feel, think and act in a variety of ways. This can be seen as a problem but it is natural -- in fact, it is a great asset if we learn to use our differences in the right ways.

“We need to reach beyond our own opinions -- we can learn to listen to others and cooperate to create common solutions. You don't have to lose face simply

“It's been really fun, really exciting. It changes how you behave as a manager and leader. The staff have shown that it is possible to come up with a really good solutions in different ways -- my solution is not necessarily the best.”

*Angela Plambeck,
Operations Manager,
Bergkälla nursing home,
Sweden*

because you accept that a fellow worker -- including a more junior worker -- has a better idea of how to solve a problem!

“An important aim of this approach is to develop better cooperation and in order to cooperate you have to develop a common view about the task and what is needed to succeed.

“We need to be trained in ways of cooperation and many research projects have shown that there are basically the same factors that make us cooperate in a better way that makes us happy, healthy and effective at work.”

The effectiveness of an organisation is determined by how leadership enables and supports workers to co-operate at a group level. The importance of team work increases the more complex the task -- but the challenge of making it work grows in the same proportion! It doesn't just happen -- it has to be learned.

Building efficient effective organisations

The words 'efficiency', 'effectiveness' and 'productivity' are used in many different ways. The Best Workplace doesn't get bogged down in those definitions. It aims simply to produce the very best levels of service in financially sustainable ways that enable staff to gain maximum job satisfaction by honouring their duty of care.

Some things cannot be resolved or changed at workplace level -- if, for example, they are the result of political decisions or collective bargaining at a wider organisational level. But none of that changes the day-to-day responsibility public service workers have to the people they care for, or the inner meaning of their vocation. Their duty of care is what makes public service workers tick.

The Best Workplace approach builds team work to enable each and every employee, no matter what their grade, to take responsibility for their role and to support others as they would want to be supported themselves.

No healthcare worker can spend every minute with a patient, because improving value for the patient systematically and sustainably demands the personal development of the worker herself. So some of each worker's time has to be spent in other ways -- but that is very different from wasting time.

Using time more effectively

The Best Workplace approach helps all staff to analyse how they use time and to make better use of it by dividing it into three categories:

GREEN: delivering service to the patient or client.

YELLOW: learning, preparing, planning, researching, evaluating, thinking, developing.

RED: wasting time on doing the wrong things or doing them in the wrong way.

The method has evolved through scores of workplaces projects that have shown that the effective use of working time is determined by five factors:

- Alignment of values, attitudes, purpose and mission among all staff.

“Resolving conflicts constructively is a way of growing together and increasing trust in each other.”

- Alignment between management and workers about the tasks of the organisation and the benefits to be provided by services.
- Alignment between management and workers about staffing levels, timing and use of working time.
- Managers in the organisation working purposefully to enable involvement and develop cooperation to reach common goals.
- Management and workers have the skills they need to carry out the tasks for which they are responsible.

The key elements of The Best Workplace model

The Best Workplace model has five key elements:

To create confidence and trust: Feeling vulnerable is normal, but there are different ways of dealing with it. Some are defensive or cautious, while others can be aggressive or complacent. Accepting our own vulnerabilities and those of others means putting personal conflicts aside and learning to listen to each other.

To focus on common results: Effective teams have clear common goals and these goals are built on a holistic view that cover finances and the quality of both services and the working environment. They put the service user first but in a way that enables quality standards to be maintained in the most cost-effective way.

To dare to resolve conflicts: Resolving conflicts constructively is a way of growing together and increasing trust in each other. There is no purpose in chasing after scapegoats or focusing on who is at fault. Instead what is needed is to face the reality of problems, focus on solutions and plan how to achieve them.

To carry out the decisions that have been made: Groups that are good at cooperating manage both to take decisions and to carry them out promptly, and to learn from both success and failure. They have open processes so that everyone is heard -- but once a plan is reached all agree to carry it out and learn together from that how to improve it.

To take responsibility and demand it of others: Effective teams work systematically with feedback. It is a natural part of their cooperation to challenge each other supportively about how decisions that have been made are actually carried out and how goals are followed up. They learn, they act, and they learn more.

The Best Workplace process -- how it works

The Best Workplace approach is realised through a series of workplace meetings in which groups of around eight workers meet five times over a six month period:

1. Where we are now: The group talks about expectations and worries with The Best Workplace project; agree how to behave towards each other during

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the process; talk about the tasks of the process and the benefits it is to produce for service users; and analyse the strengths and weaknesses of their current situation.

2. Where we want to get to: The group creates a vision about what they want their future to be, what improvements are needed, what the obstacles are, what should not change and what does need to change.

3. How to get there: The group tackles the questions: Which areas need to be improved most urgently? How can we make better use of existing resources? How are we using our working time? How could we use it better? What resources are needed that we don't have?

4. Developing an Action Plan: The group formulates goals and determines activities, decides on responsibilities, time limits and evaluation; sets priorities; assesses what would happen if nothing was done and what success would look like.

5. Evaluation and follow up: About four months after developing the action plan the group follows it up by talking about how the work has developed, whether the action plan needs to be added to or changed, and what lessons can be learnt.

The Best Workplace method -- Visual Dialogue

The process uses the method of Visual Dialogue to facilitate deliberation as a group in a way that enables it to arrive at a common way forward while accepting the validity of the viewpoint of each member of the group and that differences are healthy and inevitable.

It is a methodology that helps the group to see things together and understand more than any one person can do individually.

It helps to create confidence and trust as the participants are trained in putting open questions to each other and listening to each other's thoughts and feelings. The participants are trained through this process in resolving conflicts.

It doesn't mean that all the underlying conflicts and differences of view are settled, although it can improve the climate for resolving them. It does mean that the group works through them to arrive at an action plan all can accept.

Good cooperation is based on being trained at giving and receiving feedback. When this becomes a natural part of cooperation a culture is developed in which you make demands of each other that decisions should be implemented and goals reached.

So working with the Visual Dialogue method creates a clear direction of travel for development work by setting clear common goals.

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The Best Workplace process -- step-by-step

First meeting

Led by a trained facilitator, the Visual Dialogue method is used to work through a step-by-step approach to produce a common understanding of where we are now.

This goes through seven steps:

- 1: Each person must have the opportunity to first think on their own about the question without interference or influence from other members of the group.
- 2: The group then has an open and frank conversation in which an honest exchange of ideas is encouraged.
- 3: Each idea is then visualised by each member of the group taking it in turns to represent theirs on a post-it note and putting it on the board.
- 4: The other group members listen to the person speaking to their picture without evaluating or questioning what they say -- questions can be asked but only for clarification rather than challenge.
- 5: To create a structure, the notes are placed in 'families' with similar content -- the person who has written it decides which family each belongs to.
- 6: When all notes have been presented and positioned the group decides together how to summarise the content of each family by creating a heading for it.
- 7: Finally the group produces an 'alignment picture' that acts as common basis for the next step in the process on the way to developing an action plan.

Second meeting

Having produced a joint view of the current situation in the workplace in the first meeting, the group starts from there to jointly arrive at the view of the future workplace, including the improvements they agree are needed. Again the visual dialogue techniques are used.

At this stage, the group has to confront any worries about change -- some members will be more worried than others, and different members may have different worries. They work to decide what needs to be continued and what needs to be changed -- both are equally important so that change doesn't 'throw the baby out with the bathwater'.

Third meeting

Now the group analyses the strengths and weaknesses of their current capacity to realise the vision developed at the second meeting, exploring how the workplace and group members operate in terms of 'green', 'yellow' and 'red' time.

If the goal is to create benefits and value for those they serve (through 'green' time), they also have to think about what they can do to create good conditions to enable it ('yellow' time) and how to reduce 'red' time. By analysing how resources are used, the group can identify how to make better use of them to realise the vision outlined in the second meeting.

“The staff need to know their role and always have the mindset of asking themselves if what they are doing adds value for the people they are there for. And I think that creates a very good quality of care.”

This doesn't mean they pretend that the resources available are sufficient if they are insufficient, and it can be important to identify these gaps. But it means that the two sets of issues are distinguished from each other, so that responsibility for each is clarified and neither is used as an excuse for the other.

Fourth meeting

Building on the work done in the first three meetings the fourth meeting's role is to produce an agreed Action Plan. This is done by going through all the work already done and writing action suggestions on post-it notes, which are then all put on a board.

Again, the Visual Dialogue methodology is used, and the group produces an agreed set of ideas about what to do to realise its vision, taking into account the time analysis used in the third meeting.

Having drawn up a list of proposals, the group moves to setting priorities.

Experience has shown that three criteria should inform the decision about the first things to be done: that they are important, that the workers concerned are in a position to do them, and that the results will be seen fairly quickly.

This can establish momentum for moving on to the next priorities as soon as possible.

Fifth meeting

This follows a few months after the fourth, but must be scheduled before the end of the fourth, and has the purpose of seeing how the action plan has been carried out, what lessons can be drawn and what additions or adjustments need to be made.

The whole process can then begin again, to enable the organisation to learn consistently and systematically and continually, and to build its internal capacity to manage The Best Workplace approach with increasing independence from external facilitators.

Conclusion

We do not pretend that The Best Workplace or any other approach to staff involvement to improve employee engagement holds all the answers to the problems of health and social care -- far from it. But we do think it can help in cost-effective ways.

If you would like further information, or to undertake a project with us, please contact Brendan Martin, managing director of Public World, at bmartin@publicworld.org. Our first step in developing a project with you will be to meet with you to discuss your needs.

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