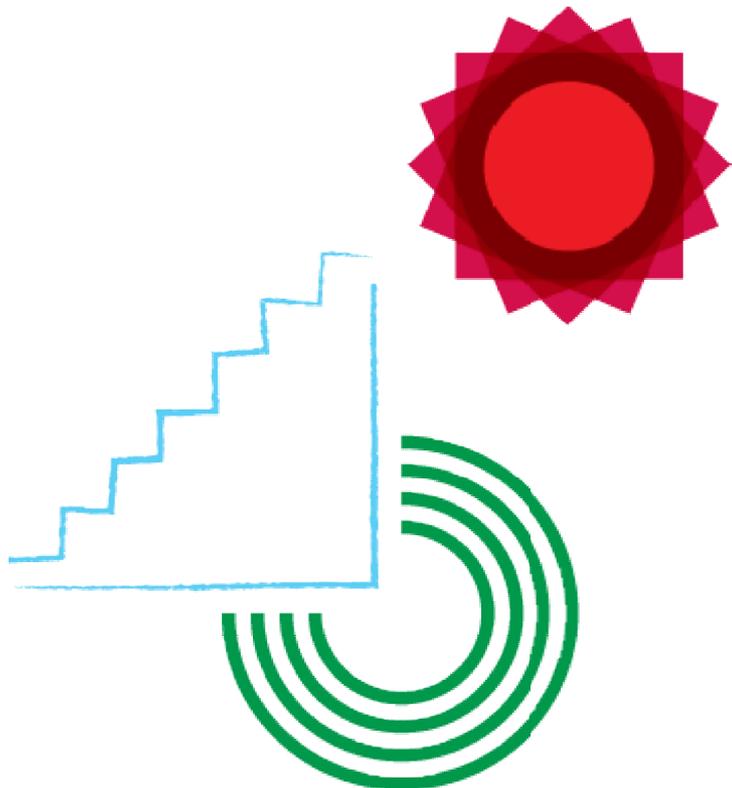


ENGAGE
FOR
SUCCESS

Essex County Council

Case Study – written by IDS HR in Practice



ESSEX COUNTY COUNCIL

Essex County Council has undergone significant transformation at organisational level since 2008. Recognising the importance of engaging its people through periods of change, the council set up an employee communications and engagement team made up of internal communications and HR professionals. The department supports the council in improving engagement at an organisational level and at team level, with a focus on manager's skills and behaviours aimed at ensuring they are effective and engaging people managers. The team has also involved staff in the change process through the use of an employee panel, forums and employee engagement champion volunteers.



Engaging people through transition

The council has undergone a huge amount of transition over the last four years. Even before the financial crash, the council began a large-scale change programme to help it operate more effectively. As a result, there has been a 16 per cent cut in headcount since 2008 and there are currently over 60 active transformation projects running.

With such a large amount of flux, the council's senior management realised it could not deliver on its change programme successfully without having its employees onboard. In 2008, the then new HR Director decided to create an employee communications and engagement department. This was achieved by merging the internal communications department into HR.

Lisa Sibley, who had previously worked in the council's learning and development team, was appointed as the employee engagement manager 3½ years ago. 'The role is a mix of HR and internal comms,' she says. 'I think it's difficult to separate the two as a lot of the education around employee engagement is dependent on internal communication.'

The engagement team now comprises Sibley, who is a full-time employee, and two part-time staff. The team also works alongside ten employee communications colleagues within an HR department of around 100 staff. While there is a limited budget, Sibley says the team has made great progress. 'There was nothing in place when I started except for an engagement survey, so it was a bit scary,' Sibley explains. 'But I feel lucky to have been given such a blank canvas, which was great as I'm passionate about employee engagement.'

Defining employee engagement

Sibley describes employee engagement as 'going the extra mile'. 'I know that sounds like a cliché, but employee engagement is about turning up and turning on and giving the very best that you can,' she says. She emphasises that the responsibility for making engagement work rests with

both the organisation and the employee. 'If the organisation wants the best out of its people and to be the best, it needs to create the right conditions. And employees need to do their bit to understand where they fit into that organisation and the part they have to play,' she says.

Improving the employee survey

The council had used an employee engagement survey for a number of years before the engagement team was set up. However, Sibley could see plenty of scope for improving the way it operated. 'We had a solid paperbased and online product that was managed externally by ORC International, but I'm not sure we did enough with the results, as we only had scores broken down by directorates and not teams,' she says. 'Like anything, it's about learning to make it work, so it was my role to try and maximise the investment and use it as a lever to elevate awareness of employee engagement.'

Sibley has made a number of changes to tune the survey more closely to the needs of the organisation. Although many of the survey's 75 statements have stayed the same to allow for year-to-year comparisons, it now includes questions relating to how well the council has managed its change programme. This year a new section, 'my involvement', has been included with statements relating directly to self-engagement such as: 'I take the opportunity to get involved in employee events' and 'I feel motivated to do more than is normally required in my job', which employees rate on a five-point scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'.

Survey champions

The council introduced the role of 'survey champion' in 2009 in an effort to improve employee involvement and survey participation rates. There are now around 65 survey champions, whose role is to encourage colleagues to complete the annual engagement survey.

The group – members of the council's 'Our Voice' Forum (see below) – meets quarterly. The most recent briefing focused on the latest changes to the survey and included group work to share good practice and tips on how to obtain the best possible response to the 2012 survey. 'People want to be there,' says Sibley. 'What's helped is having these sessions sponsored by the deputy CEO who chairs every meeting.'

Focusing on middle managers

Over the last three years there has been a deliberate effort to reposition the survey. The aim is that, rather than being considered something that is owned by HR, the survey should be recognised as a tool for line managers

Profile: Essex County Council

Essex County Council is the second-largest local authority in the UK, employing around 9,000 people (not including those in schools) and providing services to 1.3 million residents across 1,300 square miles. Support services such as IT and HR are based at the corporate centre in Chelmsford, while frontline employees, such as social workers and highway engineers, work throughout the county.

to help them in improving engagement levels. Now survey reports are broken down to team level so that line managers are better placed to explain and act on the results. ‘We recognised that managers are one of the biggest influences on engagement, so it makes sense that they should be more responsible for the action taken,’ says Sibley. ‘Four years ago engagement was something that HR “did” but now our role is more focused on supporting managers and holding managers to account.’

Aligning objectives with engagement

All managers are now set a mandatory performance management objective as part of the appraisal process that measures their effectiveness against an engagement index score for their team, and whether these results have improved from year to year. The index score is based on ORC International’s ‘Say, Stay, Strive’ principle that engaged employees speak positively about their organisation (say); have the desire to be part of the organisation with an alignment to the organisation’s goals (stay); and go above the call of duty to achieve success (strive).

The council has moved its employee survey from June to November this year so that results are available before year-end appraisals in March. ‘The employee survey score is just one measure,’ says Sibley. ‘If the score is low, that is not ideal but I would be more concerned if a manager’s team didn’t take part in the survey at all. I’m more interested in what the manager is doing with the results. If he or she is doing nothing, there would have to be a discussion as I would say that they are not meeting their objectives.’

Manager training sessions

The council has developed training sessions for managers to help them find the best ways of using their survey results. The sessions are not mandatory, but if a manager scores less than 50 per cent on the employee index score for his or her team, he or she is strongly encouraged to attend.

Staff feedback for managers

Below are some examples of feedback that staff have provided managers via Essex County Council’s Our Voice Forum and employee panel

Essex Works.
For a better quality of life

OUR VOICE
talk
listen
connect
engage

“Be visible and approachable”

“Live the values”

“Trust us”

“Show an interest”

“Lead from the front”

“Look beyond where we want to be”

“Make time to talk”

“Do what’s right”

“Listen and learn”

“Be open, honest and transparent”

“Spend a day with us”

“Communicate, consult, deliver”

Essex County Council

'It's usually managers who are most in need of the training who are the least likely to come,' admits Sibley. 'Working with our HR business partners and senior leadership teams helps to ensure that we are targeting the right managers. In some cases, bespoke sessions for specific service areas have been provided so that common areas of concern can be shared.'

The training sessions focus on the behaviours required to be an effective engaging people manager. 'At the end of the session, I sometimes ask the managers to make a pledge on what they will do differently back in the workplace – for example, they'll propose to listen more or be more visible by not sitting in a separate office,' says Sibley. 'It's not rocket science; it's basic stuff, such as having regular team meetings, not relying on e-mail too much to communicate, making sure you're accessible, and using reward vouchers for our recognition scheme in a consistent way.'



Improving two-way feedback

One of the main themes to come out of engagement surveys is employees' desire for more involvement and to influence council-wide initiatives. In response, the council introduced an employee panel in 2008, which exists in both face-to-face and virtual forms. The face-to-face panel consists of 30 representatives selected largely at random from a pool of volunteers. Care is taken to ensure that every directorate and section of the workforce is adequately represented. The employee panel is consulted on a variety of issues relating to new or existing initiatives or policies and meets quarterly, with occasional additional workshops or focus groups to explore specific issues.

Engagement ambassadors

There is also an 'Our Voice' Forum, which was established in 2010. The group consists of 65 'engagement ambassadors' from across the council who meet quarterly to share best practice on engagement issues. 'The criteria for joining the Our Voice Forum are a little less formal than for the employee panel,' explains Sibley. 'Quite a number of employee panel representatives from 2009 enjoyed the experience so much that they now come along to the Our Voice Forum.'

The forum is further supplemented by a virtual network, which Sibley fondly calls 'the Essex Engagers'. The network has grown organically from 30 members to over 300 and comprises employees who have expressed an interest in employee engagement. The group meets to share news and advertise volunteering 'engagement activity' opportunities.

Corporate roadshows

The council holds regular corporate roadshows to enable employees who are not involved in the panels to raise any questions they might have directly with senior management. 'There has been a lot of change and at

Communicating about engagement

The council uses every channel at its disposal to make employees aware of how it is responding to feedback and to promote employee engagement initiatives more broadly. HR business partners and their counterparts within the communications function use directorate and weekly newsletters, where appropriate, to spread the engagement message.

In addition to the staff intranet, the council uses Yammer, a private social network, to share good news stories. 'It's free, you can tailor it to suit your needs and it's a useful and informal way of connecting with employees,' says Sibley. 'You've got to use as many ways as possible to speak about engagement and to raise awareness.'

The council has a communication campaign 'you said, we did,' or 'you said, we can't because' to report back to employees on how their views are being taken into consideration. 'We now get our communications experts to identify relevant examples in their directorates of how we have acted on employee suggestions and every possible channel is used to promote these,' says Sibley. The council measures the impact of these efforts through its employee survey.

Results of engagement initiatives

Sibley believes much of the work her team has helped to deliver has had a positive impact on engagement.

Participation rates in the engagement survey have steadily increased over the last four years. The engagement index in the 2008 survey was 60 per cent, although the participation rate – albeit not necessarily an indicator of engagement itself – was only 45 per cent.

The last survey results in 2011 saw a return rate of 67 per cent, with 39 teams reporting an employee engagement index score of 70 per cent, although the engagement index has dipped from 68 per cent to 56 per cent overall. Despite this, Sibley says, the results are impressive when compared with many other public sector organisations, particularly given the amount of transitional change the council has recently experienced.

Sibley is aiming high for 2012 and is hoping for an even better participation rate. 'The official line is we want to maintain our response rate, but I'm personally looking for 70 per cent,' she says.



Top Tips for engaged staff

Sibley has gained a huge amount of experience in the last 3½ years about what works and what does not in terms of employee engagement. 'One of the main things I'd say is share best practice,' she says. 'Speak to your managers and employees and find out what the people who are performing well are doing differently.'

She also stresses the importance of managers' roles in enhancing engagement. 'You should measure engagement at team level, because data shows a direct correlation with highly engaged teams and reduced sickness absence and high performers in the appraisal process,' Sibley says. 'The role of HR should be supportive – HR has got to be an exemplar of engagement – but middle managers are the key.'

Finally, Sibley says that organisations should not feel too pressured with terms of reference and formality. 'It's more important to have the courage to give things a go,' she says. 'The Our Voice Forum meets on a quarterly basis and initially we might have had around 15 people attending but now we are attracting 35 at each meeting; and of course we have our virtual network of over 300 Essex Engagers. This just goes to prove that employee engagement is infectious.'

