

HER MAJESTY'S REVENUE AND CUSTOMS (HMRC)



Challenge

How do you create and build an engaged team of colleagues when they are spread over 68 different locations? HMRC faced this challenge when four years ago it created its new 'pop-up' Counter-Avoidance Directorate, comprising 1,500 staff across the country of different backgrounds, grades and levels of experience, and with a remit to deliver at pace while under intense media spotlight to show results.

Assistant Director Lesley Dooley MBE:

"The speed of creation meant we needed to swiftly engage our staff and bring them on board while all were finding our feet. Senior leaders were liaising with ministers about financial tax recovery targets and policy initiatives to drive down avoidance, meanwhile we had no processes and all were on a steep learning curve. If we didn't gel quickly and work together we were in danger of falling behind. We needed everyone's perspective on what was working well, what wasn't working well and how we could improve."

Actions

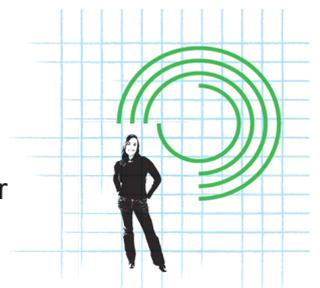
Every six months the Directorate runs a month of events around the country called 'Listening to You' (LTY). The purpose is to make sure every member of the Directorate has an opportunity to meet a member of the Senior Leadership Team every six months, and can tell them face-to-face what is working well, and how they think what isn't working well can be improved. The events are voluntary. All members of the Directorate are welcome to attend, irrespective of grade, and if unable to attend at one location can attend another event.

The purpose is serious, but to break down barriers and encourage everyone to get involved and say what's on their mind, the format of the two hours session is fun, interactive, and free-flowing, based on TV game shows such as 'Blockbusters', 'The Chase' and 'Bullseye'.

Assistant Director Mark Nellthorp:

"It is a great way to get people to speak out more readily in a way they wouldn't in a more formal setting, including giving the Senior Leadership Team feedback on how they are doing."

The promise to the Directorate is that every suggestion made will be acted on, and time and effort taken into assessing whether and how it can be implemented, or an explanation given as to why it cannot. Each round has generated up to 1,000 suggestions. They range from 'comfort factors' to legislation, from computer systems to ways of engaging with customers. Some are thought through, some are the germ of an idea. All are shared on the intranet and responses provided, detailing action taken.



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Ideas implemented include measures targeting people who might unwittingly be led down a path of tax avoidance. For example, information has been better designed to capture the attention, such as the '10 things' series about tax avoidance. Directorate staff now attend professional body trade fairs to heighten awareness of the risks inherent in tax avoidance.

Online feedback about the sessions from the Directorate has been 100% positive. The events continue to attract high attendance and a high volume of suggestions.

Lesley Dooley:

“Organisation is key. We have a small but dedicated resource to make this happen – to create the games, to sense check the material accuracy, to act upon all the ideas and follow them through. Communication is delivered in a variety of ways – one idea from the first LTY was a dedicated weekly newsletter which the team create and deliver without fail. Each idea acted upon is referenced back to the LTY sessions – thus building the idea that participation does actually lead to a difference. Senior leadership buy-in is also of paramount importance as is their agreement to lead all the sessions and to dedicate the time in their packed diaries. Indeed the main negative feedback has been when the senior leader has not been available which we quickly addressed.”

Mark Nellthorp:

“During LTY month, all of the Senior Team sign up to visit a number of locations every week. The sense of purpose, teamwork and practical innovation these events generate in the Directorate is well worth it. We are all committed to being part of a robust HMRC that makes sure everybody in the taxpaying population is paying their fair share, and therefore UK society as a whole is benefitting.”

The 2016 Civil Service People Survey scores showed Mark Nellthorp's Strategy and Change team in the top five teams for innovation.

Mark Nellthorp:

“Regular senior leader face to face engagement with staff is key to building trust and partnership. You have to discover what works best for your team. LTY has worked particularly well for our team dispersed over so many locations. Whilst some of the sessions are key information updates we also build organisational learning into the events in a fun way through the games. Staff really appreciate the opportunity to work face-to-face with others having fun and seeing things improve as a result of their input.”

