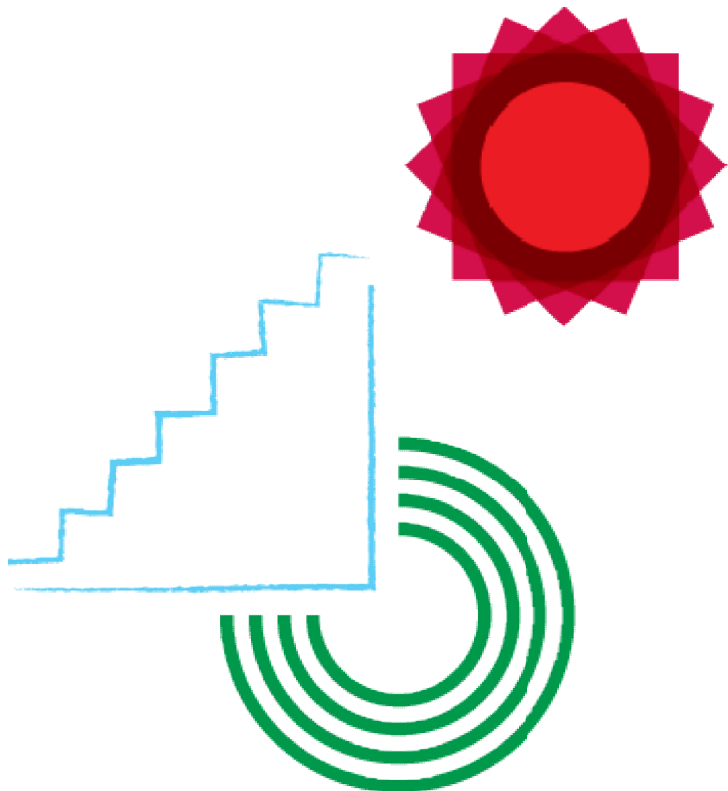




ENGAGE
FOR
SUCCESS

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AT OXFAM

Story by Jane Cotton, HR Director at Oxfam



EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AT OXFAM

Introduction

Oxfam is an organisation with very committed staff, who care deeply about our mission of overcoming poverty. However, that can mean we take staff engagement too much for granted. Here are a few recent stories about approaches to engaging staff:



Oxfam Listens

The results of our staff survey rang a few warning bells. While overall engagement scores were high compared with most organisations, we received feedback that we weren't doing enough to value people in a busy organisation. In response we initiated a process which became known as "Oxfam Listens".

Oxfam Listens took an appreciative approach, focusing on the positive strengths of the past, to identify actions to make high staff engagement the norm at team, divisional and organisation-wide levels. Each team conducted their own session to think about what they needed to change. Conducting the meetings at team level enabled the organisation to emphasise the importance of the line manager, and the team taking control for shaping its' own and the organisation's destiny. Teams were responsible for implementing their actions. Divisional level actions were collated by the Directors of each division and carried out. Finally the organisation wide actions were collated, themed and presented to the Board of Directors for sponsorship and action. At organisation level the actions ranged from creating more opportunities to hear about the great work the organisation does in countries, to creating a new managers' induction course, to organising opportunities for staff to discuss the organisation's future with the Directors. Every six months progress on the organisation wide actions was reviewed by the board and communicated to staff to show the impact they had by taking part in shaping the future of the organisation. The results of the most recent staff survey showed a significant improvement in our engagement and satisfaction. For example, 90% feel respected by the colleagues they have day to day contact with and 89% of staff enjoy their job.

What does Oxfam do around Engaging Managers?

When managers join Oxfam, they attend our Managing People at Oxfam programme. This takes place in Oxfam offices all around the world, and runs as a 5 day course. With Country Directors and first-level Programme Managers all in the same room, they gain a common approach to management, as well as learning from each other in the participatory activities. Mandatory management procedures are covered, but participants most often enjoy and get insight from the behavioural

sessions. Managers get the chance to explore their preferred leadership styles and learning styles, and really get to grips with the implications of those on the teams that they manage. Coaching skills sessions also work well in the Oxfam culture.

At a more advanced level, Oxfam runs a Leadership Development Programme. What are participants of the programme saying about it?

“The ability to spend time with some of the most remarkable leadership thinkers and practitioners has changed so much of what I do and how I think of what I do.”

“It has been a personal development – it’s been absolutely fabulous! Extremely inspirational and absolutely practical.”

The aim of the Programme is to explore different views and approaches of leadership, and to offer participants the opportunity to rethink their leadership approach. It is a programme that challenges traditional leadership assumptions and takes participants – in a safe manner – out of their comfort zone. 36 colleagues from all over the world come together in Oxford three times during the course of 10 months to explore their leadership challenges and to support each other in identifying how to address these. The modules cover Personal Leadership; Leading others; and Leading in Global Contexts. Participants work in Master classes, Learning Groups, Trios and Action Learning Sets – each of them offering an opportunity to reflect, to engage in sharing and learning from each other.

Graduates of the Leadership Development Programme are offered the opportunity to develop their coaching skills by being trained on the Work Place Coaches Programme. 29 trained coaches currently work with colleagues across Oxfam. The coaches receive ongoing professional development and support, including newsletters, telephone workshops and coaching supervision.

Recruiting a new CEO

Barbara Stocking has been a superb CEO for Oxfam over more than 11 years. So her recent announcement that she will stand down in February 2013 sent a shiver of apprehension through the organisation. Karen Brown, our Chair of Trustees, therefore followed up Barbara’s announcement very quickly – not only explaining the plans and timetable for recruiting a successor, but asking all Oxfam staff to input their thoughts on the attributes we should seek in our next CEO and the priorities they should focus on. Although the timescales were tight, more than 60 responses were received, and most came from teams, including large departments, who had come together to discuss Karen’s questions. There was very positive feedback about this opportunity, and Karen has now shared a summary of the feedback, which has fed through to the job description and recruitment adverts.

Clear Strategic Narrative

Of all the aspects which contribute to engagement, this is one where Oxfam struggles. All staff know and understand our mission “working with others to overcome poverty and suffering”. But our approach is not so simply summed up. In each country where we work we analyse how change happens, and Oxfam’s contribution – we then draw on a wide range of skills and expertise in areas as diverse as water and sanitation in emergency response; getting poor women’s voices heard; persuading governments to invest in health and education; helping poor people develop business and access markets. So our role is much more complex than, say, Wateraid or Sightsavers. And we are not very good at communicating it simply to staff or supporters. We will soon have a great opportunity to do that as work is nearing completion on an Oxfam Strategic Plan to steer the work of a confederation of 17 Oxfams around the world over the next 6 years. So watch this space for an update on whether we communicate this in a clear and compelling way!

