

## Employee Engagement Case Study: Lowdham Grange HM Prison



### Key learnings

- An informed employee voice will eliminate the “rumour mill”
- The organisation must communicate and make relevant its core purpose and values
- Difficult operational circumstances should not hold up good employee engagement practices
- Trade unions can help the organisation to identify employee issues
- Senior managers must be accessible and open to employees’ input
- Informed employees are more likely to make reasonable requests
- Reward and recognition can positively build on good employee engagement

### Background

HM Prison Lowdham Grange is a ‘Category B’ men’s private prison, located in the village of Lowdham (near Nottingham). It was opened as a privately-financed, constructed and managed prison in 1998. In 2006, Serco took over the contract to manage the prison and provide a secure, respectful and constructive environment for the 1,000 long-term prisoners. Approximately 475 Serco employees are currently employed on the contract and they perform every job role in the prison. The contract director aims to make Lowdham Grange “a workplace of choice where people are proud, and feel valued and listened to”.

The operations manager stated that the core aims of the prison are to prevent escape, to rehabilitate, to reduce re-offending and to educate: “we give the prisoners new skills in order that they can be employable on release”. He stressed that “we want to be the best prison and leaders in our chosen field”.

The prison offers workshops, education and training for inmates in vocations such as bricklaying, plumbing, electronics, painting and decorating and industrial cleaning. All work and training programmes can lead to NVQ qualifications in related fields.

A modern partnership agreement with the Prison Service Union (PSU) sets out 12 key mutually-agreed principles and commitments, some of which include:

- *To develop and maintain an organisation that provides a high quality of customer service; great value for money, and which responds quickly and pro-actively to change;*
- *To maintain a safe, just and decent work environment in which people learn from each other and make the best use of resources and their talents;*
- *To provide all employees with opportunities to develop their skills, experience and qualifications, improve their employment security and have a successful career;*
- *A joint commitment to working in partnership to foster innovation in the way that we deliver high quality great value services to our customers;*

The prison achieved a Level 4 Performance Rating during 2011 which places Lowdham Grange amongst the best for prison performance in England and Wales. The completion rate of the 2011 Viewpoint survey was close to 100 per cent, and the level of employee engagement increased by seven per cent on the previous year.

## The Challenge

The contract director inherited “a good basis where communication and voice mattered”, though he believed that some people still lacked the confidence to “speak up and challenge senior managers” and “engagement wasn’t always a happy experience”.

There was an overriding culture where “employees did not always realise they could raise issues”. Furthermore, there seemed to be a perception amongst some employees that the new contract director had specifically been appointed to cut jobs. The situation made the aim of creating a working environment where employees felt they had an informed voice particularly challenging.

In addition, it seemed that most employees depended on the “rumour mill” to receive communications, which was supported by the fact that some rumours were eventually proven to be true. The union also knew that it had similar communications challenges. The PSU officer said: “we needed to be more effective by better organisation; we were too distant from employees”.

There was also the challenge of getting employees to understand the contract’s core values. The senior management team identified that “a piece of work needed to be done to make the values relevant to all employees, across all of their different jobs”. Alongside this, management realised that they needed to build employees’ trust and respect, even though their actions to do this could be interpreted differently. And at the same time, they needed to help employees to excel in their jobs, no matter what job they were doing within the prison.

The senior management team’s first action was to ensure that every Lowdham Grange employee completed the Viewpoint survey. Management could then be certain that every employees had, had an opportunity to speak up (even if disengaged), and they would know all of their employees’ views and perceptions. A great deal of work went into achieving a near perfect completion rate, including free breakfast for those who came in early to complete their survey, continued encouragement at staff meetings, and published lists of those who had completed to encourage those who had not.

It is important to note that the 2011 Viewpoint survey was completed against a backdrop of enormous operational challenges. Employees were facing increased levels of extremism and radical behaviour from the prisoner population with increasing risks of violence. There was a 24 per cent increase in the number of foreign nationals in the prison which resulted in 39 different nationalities amongst prisoners, each with

complex needs to address. Mental health challenges had also increased amongst a younger and longer-term prison population.

Employees have also had to cope with a recruitment freeze since October 2011. There have been no promotions in the last two years, nor any anticipated in the next two. This has been coupled with a pay freeze, reduced overtime payments and the removal of contracted hours. All of these measures have created an environment where aspirations of improving employee engagement would have been considered impossible in most organisations.

## Making Things Better

### **Developing a “learning organisation”**

To meet the employee engagement challenges at Lowdham Grange a number of initiatives were implemented.

One was to introduce a regular training session called ‘Second Tuesday training’ as a means of engaging with employees. The regular sessions give employees the opportunity to get away from their day job, mix with their colleagues and learn new skills. The gatehouse supervisor said: “Second Tuesday training is really good; it was discussed at the Colleague Forum. It mixes groups together and has led to much greater co-operation between different departments”.

Training is not considered a “tick-box” exercise at Lowdham Grange. Senior manager (Residential) stated: “they will invest in you if you work hard. The contract director is totally committed to training people if you can justify it”. The same manager has used her own training experience to encourage and develop her colleagues: “Serco has given me huge opportunities to develop and excel – I try to pass all this knowledge on to my managers and staff and encourage them to do NVQs and the CMI 1 and 2 Foundation Degree in Offender Management”. In addition to this, the manager has also cascaded her mentoring and coaching skills on to her team to continue to pass on to their employees.

### **Creating the informed employee voice**

The contract director and his senior managers have established a weekly ‘Director’s Hour’ which provides three and a half hours of quality time for employees to have direct access to them. The direct access to senior management might be perceived to cause difficulties for line managers, but the operations manager points out: “the fact that employees talk directly with the contract director does not cause me any problems at all. It actually helps because everyone has their eyes on the ball. It might create more work but it means that issues are getting resolved. There’s no point in sweeping things under the carpet; if we did we wouldn’t improve. We need to highlight where we are not so good”.

The contract director also invites first line managers to a ‘Director’s Breakfast’ to brief them on Serco’s strategic information and give them an opportunity to ask questions. Managers are then tasked with cascading the information on to their teams clearly and accurately. The operations manager believes: “my job is partly to help employees to see that bigger picture. I’m happy to question my senior managers to get answers.” The gatehouse supervisor confirms that this process works, “I know what’s going on, things are communicated well, monthly updates don’t contain jargon, they’re easy to read and make total sense. I feel very well informed on the job”.

There are regular staff meetings at Lowdham Grange, during ‘shut down’ periods at the prison. Employees also meet in focus groups to discuss the impact of changes and new initiatives.

The trade union meet the senior managers once a month which, as the PSU officer points out: “gives us an overview; we know what’s happening. We’re invited in early and we have informal conversations to try to nip problems in the bud”.

Alongside these regular meetings, employees have other opportunities to put forward their more informed views. There are directors’ ‘Stop and Chat’ rounds, an employee suggestion scheme, and a “Dragon’s Den” opportunity where employees can present a business case for implementing their own ideas.

The Viewpoint “You Said, We Did” campaign shows employees that their ideas are considered and progressed wherever possible. The focus groups are also used to support this “listen to improve” agenda.

All of these initiatives have helped to improve employee engagement at Lowdham Grange, while also producing some tangible results including ‘coaching and mentoring’ training, improved training facilities onsite, an accurate skills matrix, and an ‘employee wellbeing’ programme.

### **Giving regular reward and recognition**

There are a number of other organised events at the prison which help to supplement the growing positive culture created by good employee engagement, and are well-received because of it. Lowdham Grange employees enjoy occasions like barbeques, Christmas buffets, golf sessions and team building exercises. After the results of the 2011 Viewpoint survey, the prison held a prize draw for 63 colleagues in recognition of their 63 per cent engagement score. The prize was a £100 gift voucher in recognition of the near 100 per cent completion rate, and the list of winners was published in the Director’s Monthly Report.

The PSU officer says: “The contract director works hard on recognition so it really means something to celebrate an occasion or receive a prize like the £100 gift vouchers”.

Lowdham Grange opened a colleague memorial garden in 2011 as a tribute to six colleagues who had died in service. The contract director has also reintroduced five and 10-year awards for employees. Colleagues receive reward recognition for ‘outstanding commitment’, ‘excellence in prisoner care’, ‘best newcomer’, ‘above and beyond’, ‘unsung hero’, and ‘most dedicated team’. However, recognition goes deeper than prizes. The gatehouse supervisor summed this up best when he said: “they put me in an area they thought I’d be good at; they gave me comprehensive training and I feel totally empowered. They’ve opened doors and given me opportunities. I’ve gained confidence both in and out of work”.

## **Impacts and Benefits**

### **Improved employee satisfaction**

As two custody officers explained: “it’s complex dealing with prisoners” but they both “feel fine about coming in to work” and “mostly enjoy working here”. This is a significant testimony within the context of a prison working environment. The senior manager (Residential) believes that: “employees are happier than they were in the past now that ideas do go up the line”. She said: “it feels like employees tend to like the structure and organisation eventually although they might resist at first”.

The contract director explains an interesting outcome of working with engaged and informed employees: “within reason, employees get what they want because they are reasonable in what they want”.

### **Reduced number of employee issues**

The PSU officer has no doubt that Lowdham Grange employees “have benefitted from a change in leadership style”. He makes a key point about the benefits of increasing employee engagement: “we have

far fewer disciplinary and sickness issues than before". Reductions in unauthorised absence, voluntary leavers, disciplinary and grievance are also evidenced in local HR metrics.

### **More cooperation and working together**

The gatehouse supervisor talks about the "creation of a helpful culture where departments co-operate with each other" and where "individuals can innovate". He is "proud to work for Serco" and has been nominated for an award believing that "recognition is an incentive to come up with good ideas".

### **Positive workplace culture**

The biggest impact is, arguably, the creation of a workplace culture where all employees are trying to improve both themselves and the prison as a whole. The new open culture has highlighted issues that are being addressed by senior managers who "listen and care about the staff, and can give support". As the contract director noted in his January 2012 Director's Update, "nobody will rest on the success of the last Viewpoint survey, but instead we will build on it by continuing to challenge, talk, contribute and communicate with one another".