

Leadership diagnostics and development - a winning combination to create an engaging culture

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Employee engagement is increasingly being recognised as a crucial vehicle to achieve organisational effectiveness. West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service and Real World Group demonstrate how employee engagement can be enhanced by through leadership diagnostics and development.

Introduction

A recent government review has confirmed that employee engagement is a key issue that organisations need to achieve in order to be successful. Never has this been more the case in the Fire and Rescue Service, where recent years have seen major changes in the drive for service modernisation. Such modernisation has required a fundamental shift in the way services are led, with a move away from traditional command and control leadership styles to a more engaging, transformational approach to leadership. In adopting such an engaging transformational leadership approach, it is more likely that employees will bring their hearts and minds to work and go the extra mile, rather than just doing what they are told and working to rule.

The four fire services of Yorkshire and Humber embraced the need for a new approach to leadership by funding a Regional Leadership Diagnostics Project, delivered by Real World Group, a company specialising in leadership development and research.

The Project aimed to diagnose **organisational** and **individual** leadership development needs through assessing the leadership culture of the organisation, using the FRS Leadership Culture and Change Inventory (LCCI™), and the leadership style of individual managers across the Region, using the FRS360, a 360 degree feedback questionnaire developed specifically for the FRS.

Both the 360 feedback questionnaire and the LCCI™ (organisational survey) have three main elements:

1. **Engaging transformational leadership behaviours:** these are based on RWG's model of engaging transformational leadership, which has emerged out of extensive research and contains the leadership behaviours that are known to have a positive impact on staff engagement and well-being at work (e.g. showing concern for others, empowering staff, building a shared vision).
2. **FRS Personal Qualities and Attributes:** These show themselves in the form of specific competencies or skills, which can be thought of as the **WHAT** of leadership.
3. **Attitudes to work and well-being at work**
These assess how motivated, committed, and satisfied staff are at work and, therefore, measure the extent to which people feel engaged with their organisation.



The aim of the Project was for each of the services involved to act on the results so as to enhance the leadership culture of the organisation. In order to determine culture change, the LCCI™ was repeated approximately 18 months following the baseline survey.

Creating a change in Culture

West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service (WYFRS) seized the opportunity to enhance the leadership culture of their organisation. They have demonstrated how employing leadership diagnostics and following up the results by tailoring leadership development to address the needs identified can have a profoundly positive impact on the leadership culture of the organisation.

The results from WYFRS's initial LCCI™ found that more needed to be done to engage staff, especially those at the Firefighter level, and to create a culture in which all individuals within the organisation are encouraged to take on the role of leader, are encouraged to think for themselves, to work innovatively and use their initiative, to give and receive feedback, and to feel supported.

The general feedback from the 360-degree feedback programme reinforced the results of the survey. Additionally, one of the main themes to have emerged from the 360-degree feedback was that Watch Managers did not identify themselves as leaders and felt alienated from more senior managers in the organisation, from Station Manager level upwards. The consequence of this appeared to be misunderstanding and conflict between management and those that worked on the ground (Watch Managers and Firefighters).

What they did

WYFRS addressed this feedback with vigour and designed a comprehensive series of development activities aimed at enhancing the leadership culture. As Martyn Redfearn, the Director of Human Resources, described, traditionally there has been a heavy focus on management development and operational competency development but that what has missing is leadership development; leadership development is essential because it is the crucial vehicle for operational and managerial success.

The overall aim of the combined leadership development programmes was to develop a culture of engaging transformational leadership. In order to do this it was necessary to:

- Develop supervisory and middle managers to take the leading people part in which they provide direction, inspiration and encourage high performance. This requires managers to be assertive, persuasive, considerate, resilient, and self confident. These abilities do not come naturally to everyone and for some it is about helping them understand how to exert influence without authority.
- To create a culture of constructive feedback, reflection and self awareness, of participation and open communication, and to build and nurture working relationships between the levels of management.
- Support supervisory managers to understand the organisation's goals, constraints, and pressures under which more senior managers operate.

To achieve the above, a comprehensive set of development activities were designed and implemented by the Workforce Development team. Julie Comb, the Workforce Development Manager described what these involved:

- Comprehensive leadership development activity aimed at Watch Managers and Station Managers including: rolling out the FRS360 degree feedback and associated coaching so that more managers (over 200 to date) were able to go through the process. This served to promote the development of the leadership & Core Values that are important to the organisation and embed these in the organisation.
- Training of internal staff to provide coaching for the FRS360; this not only equipped staff with coaching skills that they can use in the workplace, it also helped engrain the model of engaging transformational leadership in the organisation.
- The implementation of a coaching and mentoring scheme throughout the organisation. This helped to promote a culture in which reflection, personal development and support is encouraged. A range of employees from all levels and departments were trained as coaches. This demonstrated management commitment to creating a development culture and helped bridge the gap between levels of management in the organisation (e.g. Watch Managers and Station Managers having access to more senior managers).
- A four day Watch Managers Leadership Workshop designed to help managers acquire the skills, knowledge and attitudes that enables them to return to the workplace confident in their ability to demonstrate appropriate leadership behaviours and to lead their teams effectively.
- Involving Station Managers in the development of their Watch Managers. For example, as a supplement to the Watch Managers workshop there was a one day Station Managers workshop. This workshop was aimed at informing and involving Station Managers of the goals of their Watch Managers development. It hoped to promote better working relationships between the two groups of managers and to help station managers provide the support for watch managers to transfer what they are learning in the work place. In addition, before the Watch Managers attend the 4 day workshop, the briefing materials on the course are sent to their Station Managers so that Station Managers have to have a dialogue about the course with their Watch Managers.

Change in Leadership Culture

Eighteen months following the commencement of these leadership activities, it was clear that they were having a positive impact on changing the leadership culture. The repeat leadership culture survey results demonstrated a substantially positive improvement in the majority of the leadership areas assessed; such an improvement in leadership culture in a relatively short space of time is exceptional. The leadership area that showed the largest improvement was the area of showing genuine concern. This leadership area refers to managers having a genuine interest in staff as individuals, valuing their contributions, developing their strengths, coaching, mentoring, and having positive expectations of what their staff can achieve and is the area that is central to the engaging transformational leadership model and that research has consistently shown to be the most important in predicting staff engagement and staff well-being at work.



Creating a happy and healthy workforce

It was not surprising, then, to find that at the second time point there was a substantial improvement in staff's perceptions of how the leadership culture affects their attitudes to work and well-being at work.

In relation to attitudes to work, there was an improvement in staff's perception of how the leadership culture impacts on their job and organisational commitment, motivation, job satisfaction, sense of team spirit and team effectiveness. These are all crucial indicators of staff engagement, so such an improvement in these areas does suggest that developing an engaging leadership culture does actually increase staff engagement. In relation to well-being at work, there was an improvement in how the leadership culture positively impacts on staff's self confidence and also staff stress at work.

It is clear from these results that developing an engaging leadership culture at WYFRS has had positive benefits for the workforce. We know from our research that such benefits are also likely to result in improved organisational performance.

Why the success

It is true that not all leadership culture surveys show a positive improvement between time points. So why was WYFRS so successful? There were a variety of reasons as to why the force was so successful, all of them equally important.

- **Strategic planning**

In line with best practice, the leadership development activities were part of the training and development strategy that was, in turn, linked to corporate objectives. From the outset, it was clear what leadership behaviours needed to be developed.

- **Senior Management Commitment**

There was a true commitment from the top of the organisation to change the leadership culture. This commitment was demonstrated throughout the organisation, so was apparent for all to see. We know from working in organisations that obvious commitment from the top is crucial if leadership diagnostics are to have an impact.

- **Acting on the results**

The Service used the results as a training needs analysis and planned their leadership development to meet the needs identified. An organisation cannot expect to see an improvement in their leadership culture if they do not act on the results of their diagnostics. The LCCI was able to provide the Service with specific areas that they needed to develop.

- **Quality of the development tools**

WYFRS development activities were so successful because of the design and quality of the activities. Both the Watch Managers' workshop and the FRS360 degree feedback were met with scepticism initially because this was a new form of development for employees outside of middle/senior management. However, word spread of how beneficial they have been and there is now a waiting list for both the Watch Managers' workshop and the FRS360. Key to the success of these is their relevance to the workplace.



Implications

What the story from WYFRS demonstrates is that using leadership diagnostics and following these up with leadership development activities can be very successful in

creating a culture where staff feel engaged with their work and with their organisation. We know from our own research and from that of others that such an engaging culture increases staff well-being and also leads to improved organisational effectiveness. At a time when spending in public services is being cut, and organisations are required to do more with less resources, organisational diagnostics and training and development may, at a superficial glance, seem to be a luxury. However, taking this approach is short sighted, as having an engaged workforce means that doing more with less is likely to be achieved as staff are more likely to go the extra mile to achieve their objectives. It is clear from WYFRS that taking a strategic approach to leadership development is advisable, as it is efficient and is likely to achieve a return on investment. As with all training and development, leadership development should be linked to clear objectives and desirable outcomes, rather than being ad hoc and unsystematic; if the latter approach is adopted then ROI is unlikely.