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Leadership Essentials

Supporting

Authentic leaders create a safe and enjoyable working environment



“Studies have found that when people feel supported at work – when they feel safe and their environment is an enjoyable place to work – they are more productive. There are various ways in which leaders can provide support, but proactively looking after the health and safety of your team, finding ways to make the workplace more fun and upbeat, and ensuring that nobody is bullied or harassed, are all important.”

(Hesapro, 2013; Oswald & Sgroi, 2015)

Compassionate Leadership

‘Compassion’, a desire to help others that are suffering in some way, has not always been associated with leadership, and, writing from an NHS perspective, West, M. & Bailey, S., (2019) identify a number of myths associated with compassionate leadership ‘that must be addressed to ensure people see the value of compassionate leadership.’

That is:

- loss of commitment to purpose and high-quality performance
- tough performance management and conversations won't be allowed or will be labelled as bullying
- always taking the easy, consensus way forward rather than putting patients and communities first
- not being able to challenge the status quo and make the radical changes our patients and communities need
- team work and system working will be controlled by whoever has the most power and is most ruthless.

West, M. & Bailey, S., (2019)

Compassion is ‘a core value of the NHS as a whole and its NHS staff’, but there is increasing evidence that compassion is a fundamental ‘soft’ skill for leaders that has a positive impact upon the performance of any organisation.

In a review of recent research, for example, Poorkavoos, M. (2016) summarises the key benefits of compassionate leadership:

- Compassionate leadership benefits sufferers, clients, employees (those who witness the compassion act and those who are involved in the actual act of compassion) and the organisation
- Compassionate leadership sustains the sufferer through the grieving process and facilitates faster recovery
- Compassionate leadership improves employee engagement and retention
- Compassionate leadership enables people to experience positive emotions which:
 - Boosts productivity
 - Lowers heart rate and blood pressure and strengthen the immune system
 - Results in positive customer service

Fun and Humour in the Workplace

Google Inc. has the reputation of having some of the happiest workers (Irvine, 2019). This is not just to do with the ‘perks’ it provides (which include billiard tables, free haircuts during work hours, free food, shuttle rides to the workplace, bringing pets into work) but the fact that employees are given as much freedom and control of their time as possible. Soul-sapping routine work that does not vary from day to day is designed out of the system. All employees have the chance to spend up to 20% of their working week on a project of their own choice. Staff tend to choose something going on within Google, but when one employee recently decided his project would be world peace, nobody challenged him. Google maintain that this attitude towards its staff is what has made it so successful as a company.

A study published in 2014 by researchers at the University of Warwick found that happiness at work led to a 12% increase in productivity (cited in Warwick news & Events, 2014). The report put this down to positive emotions appearing to invigorate human beings. Positive emotions and happiness also empower staff, according to Martin Seligman (2011), commonly known as the founder of Positive Psychology. Staff who feel happy aim higher and persist longer at work. They feel less stress and tiredness, work better in a team and are more creative at problem solving.

Staff are happier at work when they are given the opportunity to play to their strengths and display their knowledge and skills. Knowing that the work of the organisation is meaningful also makes employees happier, so leaders need to be well acquainted with how the organisation is creating value or improving the world. As important to meaningfulness at work is knowing just how your own department and individual work tasks are contributing to that organisation and what would be missing if those tasks were not done.

When leaders share their vision for the organisation and involve staff in developing that vision (which is the case at Google) this also contributes to employee happiness, as does being recognised and rewarded for empowered behaviour.

Good constructive relationships with colleagues at work are a major contribution to happiness in the workplace and the idea of 'fun' and 'play' at work is becoming increasingly important to workers who want to be creative, committed and motivated. The 'It Pays to Play' report highlights a positive correlation between productivity and play demonstrating that fun at work can (BrightHR):



From massage days, dress down Fridays, office pets and work choirs there are numerous ways that modern, progressive companies can help their staff be more productive, happier and more satisfied at work.

Laughing and having fun won't negate all the amazing work you do, it will actually help you improve the great things you're already doing and think differently about some of the challenges you face. As a leader it is not necessary to interfere with staff having fun together unless it is seriously threatening a deadline or the quality of the work.

Positive and negative feelings and attitudes are usually highly contagious among people, so if someone in your team is consistently negative, miserable, anxious, aggressive or a moaner, you need to engage with them directly about it and find out if there is anything you can do to remedy or improve the situation.

Bullying and Harassment

If a member of staff appears particularly unhappy, bullying or harassment might be behind it. Signals that something is wrong include:



'The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas)', defines bullying as: 'Offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, an abuse or misuse of power through means intended to undermine, humiliate, denigrate or injure the recipient.'

Furthermore, Acas defines harassment as: 'Unwanted conduct that violates people's dignity or creates an intimidating hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.' Harassment is covered in law by the Equality Act 2010, as well as the Protection from Harassment Act 1997.

On the whole harassment tends to be more overt and public, and more physical. It is usually aimed at someone who is different, because of their sexuality, gender, ethnicity etc. Bullying is often more private and is not always obvious at first. The person being picked on tends to be competent or popular, and is seen as a threat by the bully.

As a leader, make sure you know what your organisation's procedures are for preventing and tackling bullying. Ensure that your staff know what constitutes both harassment and bullying. Intervene immediately if you see harassment or bullying happening, or suspect that it might be happening.

Set a good example yourself, by avoiding any aggressive behaviour such as using shouting, sarcasm, blaming and labelling, finger pointing, sweeping statements or deliberately ignoring someone.

If you treat everybody fairly, give positive feedback wherever you can, make sure that all necessary criticism is constructive and carried out with the staff member(s) involved in private, really listen to your staff and foster a positive working environment, the chances of bullying or harassment happening are considerably reduced.

References

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