

Outstanding employee engagement strategy

Winner Network Homes

Rewind to 2015 and Network Homes was, admittedly, in poor shape. It had just come off the back of a failed merger, the workforce was disengaged, leadership was disconnected, and the customers – many vulnerable individuals – were dissatisfied. HR too was disengaged and lacked executive profile. Radical change was needed.

Fast-forward to 2019 and the charitable housing association has seen a 15% uplift in employee engagement, a score of 89.2% customer satisfaction, huge reductions in staff sickness and turnover, and has made *The Sunday Times*' 100 Best Companies to Work For list. And the HR function was voted team of the year in 2017-18 in the company awards.

This complete overhaul can be traced back to HR. When Fiona Deal came on board as executive director of people and culture in 2015, HR was handed the not so simple task to "build a great organisation".

Yet HR couldn't engage the rest of the workforce without first looking internally. This meant agreeing what great HR looked like and re-inventing the function as the 'people and culture' team.

Then HR set out to engage all 550 employees with the cultural journey ahead. To say this posed a challenge would be an understatement. The launch of the people and culture agenda at the staff conference met with a fair amount of scepticism. Part of the problem was the disparate structure of the organisation, meaning there was no consistency in pay, policies, terms and conditions or management.

In just six months, HR managed to harmonise pay and terms and conditions, with every employee moving over to a new contract. Staff roadshows, face-to-face consultations, and efforts to build relationships were key to this success – something that other teams had tried and

failed to do three times in the past.

With these fundamentals in place, HR could then set out to change the culture.

The employee engagement journey involved 10 key steps: showing commitment from the top, setting clear values and behaviours, asking 'how to be brilliant?', investing in cultural excellence, turning managers into ROCKSTARS, investing in learning and development, promoting health and wellbeing, developing talent, holding staff conferences, and giving something back.

As part of the step to set clear values and behaviours, HR engaged the workforce in sessions to agree what the organisation wanted to stand for, resulting in HART (hungry, accountable, respectful, together). HART was then integrated into everything, including the staff awards and HARTBeat, the talent management programme.

But the journey hasn't all been plain sailing. In Summer 2017 the Grenfell Tower tragedy shook the entire social housing sector. For Network Homes, worse still was the fact that some of its tower blocks were clad in the same flammable material and



built by the same contractor as Grenfell. This posed the biggest challenge to date, throwing the association into crisis management mode, diverting resources into fire safety and remedial works and slashing other budgets, including that of HR's engagement strategy and the staff conference. However, HR didn't give up. It seized the chance to get creative, bringing everything in-house and using employee champions to embed it all, and ending the year with an event to thank all employees for their response to Grenfell.

That engagement was maintained during this period is testament to the commitment of HR, with judges especially impressed with the function's capability during this challenging time. They praised Network Homes for being "very honest" about the situation. One judge noted that "it's good to hang your dirty washing out". They said that the fact that "during the programme they had to stop and refocus money into other things and downsize, but they still kept the morale going and maintained engagement" makes Network Homes more than worthy of this award.

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