Best HR team
winner
Zoological Society of London

Anyone visiting the Zoological Society of London (ZSL)’s HR department back in 2014 might have thought they were at the Natural History Museum, rather than the very-much alive collections of London and Whipsnade Zoos. That’s certainly how HR director Fiona Evans felt when she arrived in January 2014, walking into a department with no accurate staff lists, no HR data, outdated (or non-existent) policies and an unqualified HR team. The department was seen as an administrative function, only capable of supplying tea and sympathy.

Today things couldn’t be more different. A new team of 14 (including one from the original team who has been developed and promoted to senior HRBP) look after everything a modern HR department needs, from international support to reward, HR systems to OD. The new-look HR function is highly valued by ZSL’s director general, council of trustees, managers and staff.

There are several achievements the HR team at ZSL are particularly proud of. One is the very first action taken in 2014: the surveying of the organisation’s 1,000 staff and 400 volunteers. More than 26 changes were introduced as a result of the Now&Next survey, including a reward and recognition scheme (The Pride of ZSL), a cycle to work scheme and an employee assistance programme. Tellingly, the “I believe action will be taken by directors as a result of the findings of this survey” response improved by 17% in one year.

The results of the survey also enabled the head of training and OD to convince director general Ralph Armond to double ZSL’s training budget. In last year’s annual training report Armond wrote: “It is great to be reminded of just how much has changed and how much is now being achieved in training and OD. And what good value it is!”

Enhanced leadership development activity, focused on behaviour, has resulted in ‘leadership’ being the most improved category within Now&Next since 2014. Some questions have improved by as much as 21%.

Another focus has been diversity, with a shift towards becoming far more family-friendly. More women are taking maternity leave, and coming back on different flexible working hours. Scientists are being trained in diversity and inclusion, and E&D is now monitored closely (from a standing start).

Where recruitment used to be sloth-like (it took on average 12 weeks to recruit a job), ZSL’s processes now have more in common with the cheetah. It takes only six to seven weeks to fill a role, thanks to an online system and training for more than 100 managers in recruitment and selection. Onboarding has also had a makeover, with the dull brown envelope being replaced by a ‘welcome’ postcard and a colourful A to Z of ZSL. Directors attend a meet and greet lunch for new starters — but more popular is meeting the animals, which could include feeding giraffes or stroking a Galapagos tortoise’s chin!

HR at ZSL has experienced a total metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly in terms of employee experience, with strong partnerships, a deep understanding of the organisation, and genuine belief in the mission of ZSL at its heart. And the transformation isn’t over yet, as the HR team strives to make ZSL an even better place to work. This year they are introducing a new self-service HR system and e-learning platform, as well as developing a 10-year people strategy.

Our judges were blown away by ZSL’s entry. They praised how clearly the narrative showed the culture of the organisation, and the journey the HR team had been on. They loved the authenticity of ZSL’s story and the clear alignment to the business. One judge even said: “I would like to work there.” Surely there’s no higher praise than that.

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