

Best *HR team* Winner *Network Homes*

Network Homes would be the first to admit that 2015 was not an easy year for them. Their proposed merger with another housing association fell apart, and shortly afterwards their staff survey results showed shocking disengagement.

Network Homes' chief executive Helen Evans realised a radical shift was needed to put people at the heart of the organisation. She created an HR role on the top team with a mandate to engage the group's people in a new strategic goal: to make Network Homes a great place to work.

So, where to begin? Especially when HR – tasked to lead the change – was so disillusioned itself? New executive director of people and culture Fiona Deal realised they had to get better before they could start helping others.

The idea was that the way to unlock this was through valuing and appreciating people. Building pride, confidence and belief were at the heart of the strategy. Then there was cultural engagement. The team knew they wanted to excite their people about the art of the possible, equip them with skills and confidence to be successful and embed a positive 'can-do' culture to underpin peak performance.

But before it could dive into any of this, there was the 'small' matter of harmonisation to deliver.

In 2015, after the failed merger, the board recognised they needed to amalgamate the group structure. Network Homes was one of the last housing associations hanging onto the now outdated governance



structure of a parent company, with (in this case) six subsidiaries.

Three previous attempts at harmonisation of pay and terms and conditions had failed. The CEO had been told it would "take years" and "cost millions". Deal committed to delivering it within six months; and that's just what she did.

After hours of face-to-face consultation, pages of policy-writing and huge engagement with the Staff Consultation

Shortlisted

Dorchester Collection

Financial Times

Galliard Homes

The Creative Engagement Group

Wiltshire Council

Wienerberger

XPO Logistics

Committee, every employee willingly signed a new employment contract. The company achieved harmonisation at a cost of only £350,000 and without a single grievance.

The results speak volumes. Network Homes halved staff turnover from 24.8% (2015-16) to 12.5% (2018-19 year to date). And the recent staff survey, which was completed by 89.2% of employees, showed that overall engagement is up 15% from 2015.

Better still, latest metrics show Network Homes is filling 45% of vacancies internally. The organisation says it is proud of this track record of growing its own talent, commenting that it proves its people are the best cultural fit for the organisation.

So there you have it. The story of how a disillusioned HR team took itself in hand to 'be the change it wanted to create'. But then in 2016 the Grenfell Tower tragedy changed everything; it was a game-changer for the whole social housing sector.

Network Homes was forced to slam the brakes on many cultural initiatives to divert budget into fire safety and remedial works. This led to downsizing the executive and senior management teams, and the customer services directorate, in order to release savings.

The judges noted that Network Homes is clearly a "vibrant, innovative team", who have managed to rise against every challenge thrown their way with honesty and open-mindedness.

Valiantly confronting truly challenging times, Network Homes is a deserving winner of the Best HR team award.