

Trust me... I'm a public servant

Control, autonomy, the freedom to do your job as you think it should be done – whatever you call it, most of us want it to be a part of our working lives, says Cary Cooper



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Time and time again studies show that stress levels are lower and job satisfaction is enhanced when people have control over the various aspects of their job, feel valued for their contributions and have meaningful relationships with the people they work with – particularly their line manager. In the end this all leads to greater motivation and higher productivity for staff.

To enable people to have autonomy, to work more flexibly and to find a reasonable balance between their work and private lives an atmosphere of trust is essential. Employees must feel that their boss trusts them to deliver their objectives regardless of where, when or how they do their job.

At a time when there is a variety of new technology available and when two out of three families are dual earners (or working single parents), the need for greater autonomy and flexibility is fundamental. Without this it is unrealistic to expect people to lead dynamic personal lives and give their all at work on a sustainable basis. So if we are to achieve our corporate objectives, and attract and retain highly qualified, talented people we have to help them to feel in control of their working lives. This latter point is particularly relevant in a time of transformational reforms throughout the civil service and public sector when more is being asked of everyone.

Creating a climate of trust in organisations, and between managers and their work groups, is not easy – particularly in hierarchy-based organisations of the public sector. However, it is do-able and very necessary, given the changing demographics and expectations of the larger UK talent pool. The best people won't enter the public sector if they think they will be treated like sheep.

What does this mean for public sector managers? It means doing things differently. It requires more thought about the objectives they set for subordinates to achieve and more consideration of realistic timeframes. It is about negotiating flexible working arrangements with staff – that is, actively developing a psychological contract where the employee's work objectives can be met in a way that allows him/her flexible working arrangements that meets their outside needs (child rearing, elderly care etc).

This is the approach that Lloyds TSB initiated with a work options scheme over a decade ago and many other organisations in the financial, IT and other sectors have developed in recent years. This

is not just about offering flexible hours, but about a lifestyle change where we are empowered to use new technology to enable us to reduce the down-time of the commute; to allow us time for family commitments; to enable us to be more efficient in how we use our time and from where. Think about it, which is more effective – working at home between 8am-9.30am and then arriving at the office at 10am or sitting in traffic for an hour or more during rush hour and arriving at 9.30am stressed out? This is about culture change because we need to get rid of the idea that anyone who walks into the office after 9.30am is skiving. Evidence throughout the developed world, whether it is studies from Cranfield Business School or Tel Aviv University, suggests that creating an environment where people feel that they work flexibly has significant organisational, as well as personal outcomes.

Providing people with some autonomy in their job is also important in terms of decision-making. It is often suggested that one of the problems in the civil service and the wider public sector is that staff are good at identifying problems and exploring options for dealing with them, but poor at implementation. This is often attributed to the fact that employees in the public sector are risk averse. People need permission to take calculated risks, and to accept that they will from time to time make mistakes, but it must be without career-terminating consequences. As Henry Ford once remarked: "Failure is only the opportunity to begin again more intelligently", or as the old saying goes: "If you always do what you always did – you'll always get what you always got." And, as my colleague Ivan Robertson noted in a recent Management Clinic column, most successful entrepreneurs and leaders have at least one example of failure on their CV – it's what makes them both resilient and successful.

Trust is an integral part of any change or transformational process. Only by allowing people more autonomy and control, by providing some flexibility and by truly engaging them through passion, vision and involvement, will we improve individual health and wellbeing, and ultimately the organisational bottom line. Mark Twain summed up the importance of trust in leadership when he said: "Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you, too, can somehow become great."

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