

Engagement or divorce?

The relationship between the NHS and its staff is at a crossroads, says Ben Moss

The NHS is the UK's largest employee, so it's no surprise that it hits the headlines almost every day. In recent weeks, the government challenged GPs to open their surgeries in the evenings and nursing shortages were reported as a trust in Surrey launched a new recruitment campaign – in Scotland. This is against a backdrop of major change that involves cutting costs, while increasing efficiency and productivity. And in the background, Lord Darzi continues to design the blueprint for NHS reform.

Ara Darzi is a rare breed – and not just because he manages to combine being a top surgeon and politician. He was a deliberate choice by Gordon Brown because he is a clinical leader who empathises and engages with the workforce. He demonstrated this when, following complaints that hospital porters were always late bringing patients to surgery, he became a porter for the day. To his surprise, he found that no one looked him in the eye and started to see why porters didn't feel part of the team.

So the NHS is changing fast, but there are still major issues regarding the engagement and inclu-

sion of a massive workforce. The simple fact is that when you are driving major change a certain baseline level of employee engagement is required to give the enterprise a fighting chance. Goodwill and discretionary effort on the part of staff are critical for maintaining and improving standards in a climate of extreme uncertainty. As my colleague Cary Cooper discussed in a previous column, the necessary precursor to employee engagement is psychological wellbeing: if staff do not feel healthy, energised and have a sense of purpose they will never have the motivation or resources to fully engage with the overall mission and objectives of the organisation.

There is strong research evidence to show that the wellbeing and engagement of staff is a critical driver of staff retention and absence rates, as well as customer satisfaction and ultimately productivity (Harter, Schmidt and Keyes, 2003). A recent survey by IDS of 24,000 NHS employees showed that 60 per cent have thought about leaving the service in the past year, while 61 per cent reported that their morale and motivation had deteriorated in same period. So getting wellbeing and engagement right really is important for the NHS.

A couple of years ago the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) produced a landmark report – The Drivers of Employee Engagement – based on a survey of 10,000 staff in 14 NHS organisations. They defined engagement as: "A positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values...The organisation must work to develop and nurture engagement, which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee."

So engagement is something that comes from employees, but which has to be earned by employers. I wonder what percentage of NHS employees feel that their employers are taking active steps to earn their engagement? Of course, employees themselves come with a certain level of built-in engagement that derives from their sense of vocation – particularly doctors and nurses. But there are much higher levels of engagement to be gained if staff are treated appropriately by the organisation.

And it's important to get this right across the board because there are also thousands of NHS support staff without such a strong sense of vocation.

Where does engagement come from? Having a strong sense of purpose every day and feeling that your role is worthwhile is the starting point. Employees want to feel that the organisation is as committed to them as they are to it. Often this perception is strongly driven by their relationship with their line manager, as well as how they see senior leaders behaving. This was one of the key conclusions from the IES study, but it also found other key drivers of engagement in the NHS:

- Employees feeling valued and involved (strongest driver)
- Employees feeling that their ideas can be voiced and will be listened to
- Employees having opportunities to develop their jobs
- Employers showing concern for employees' health and wellbeing

The good news is that the NHS has realised that there is only so much you can ask of the UK's largest workforce – that, in some cases, there was nowhere else left to look for improvement other than helping staff to feel better about coming to work. Employee engagement has become part of the Department of Health's national framework to support local workforce development – a guide published for HR directors. Another sign is the evolution of the Workforce Directorate and the rise of the role of workforce director in NHS trusts themselves.

But the real sign that things are changing is that several NHS trusts, and even the Department of Health itself, are now embarking on major employee engagement-building projects. These are long-term projects that take in infrastructure, policies, working patterns, leadership style and individual development, so it will take time for the effects to be felt. Clearly, many other factors come into play, but in my view this is an important step in the right direction for the NHS if the great push for reform is to be sustainable.



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