

So tell me

what exactly do you do here?

Lack of understanding about what other people in your workplace actually do can have a serious impact on morale and motivation, warns **Gordon Tinline**



If individuals tend to think their own job is much more important and difficult than everyone else's there will undoubtedly be negative consequences



Gordon Tinline is a director at **Robertson Cooper Ltd.** You can join experts from the firm at the **Business Wellbeing Network Annual Conference** at the **Inmarsat Conference Centre, London, on 11 November.** Full details on www.robertsoncooper.com

In the work I do in the public sector on employee engagement and wellbeing I often find staff who have little or no idea what their colleagues do. This usually has negative implications for the person him/herself and more broadly.

For example, one of the questions in the ASSET measure of employee engagement and wellbeing that I use is “I am troubled that other people at work are not pulling their weight” and this often draws a high level of agreement. Focus groups and interviews with respondents tell us that this stems, in part, from a lack of understanding of what others do rather than an informed judgement about their levels of motivation.

It is difficult to know exactly what everybody else does in a large complex organisation. However, if individuals tend to think their own job is much more important and difficult than everyone else's there will undoubtedly be negative consequences, not least in terms of morale and resilience. Such outcomes could flow from a deep-seated lack of trust, but before assuming there is a need for fundamental team building or “relationship climate” interventions it's important to consider whether simply sharing role knowledge more effectively might have the required impact.

Where evident, it is worth considering the cause of knowledge deficits in relation to colleagues' roles – especially when this occurs within groups that work closely together.

You may find that this is not intentional on the part of jobholders – for example, one possibility is that increased role ambiguity and lack of goal clarity makes it difficult for colleagues to share role-related knowledge because they don't properly understand their own role.

Another is that most people feel so overloaded just trying to fulfil their own responsibilities that they have no time or energy to wonder about what their colleagues are up to.

Whatever it is, they're sure that they're busier than others and working on more important tasks! This kind of thinking can lead to a silo mentality and tension within departments and organisations.

So how important is it to foster shared understanding of roles within a workgroup and across an organisation? What are the benefits? For managers it's critical – for without a reasonable level of knowledge about their peers' roles they dramatically increase the risk of work overload.

Knowing what work to take on and which tasks are best performed by others is essential to effective work distribution and management. Other aspects will play into this, such as the extent to which organisational goals are clear, but peer role awareness is an important contributor to effective workload management.

A less obvious benefit of taking more interest in

your colleagues' roles is generating positive emotional reactions. The impact of positive emotional experience in the workplace is often underestimated or discounted as “the soft stuff”. However, the work of psychologists such as Martin Seligman and Barbara Fredrickson has produced a body of evidence to demonstrate a range of benefits that individuals and organisations can expect if they systematically foster positive emotions.

This is hardly surprisingly because positive emotions equate to employees feeling good, but specific benefits have been proven in terms of increasing the capacity of individuals to develop, accept change and cope with pressure. Taking an interest in what your peers do helps them to feel valued and it may even stimulate them to seek to understand your role better.

Obviously we need to be realistic here because you will not have the time to spend your day wandering around asking your colleagues what they are up to; and if you have never done so before this behavioural shift may initially give rise to suspicion about your intentions. But if you accept there is a need for a greater shared understanding of roles across your team then where do you start?

One way into this, particularly at a team level, is an “internal stakeholder analysis”. Reviewing who within the organisation has a stake in what you do and who you rely upon to ensure you operate successfully can be a useful exercise. It is likely to reveal where there is a real business need to understand others' roles better.

Fresh eyes can also be very useful in this area. New employees usually need to ask lots of people lots of questions about what they do. As a manager, try asking newer employees how they see their own roles and those of their colleagues around them. Some of what they say will reveal only a partial understanding. However, they may also surprise you with insights about what people do and how roles seem to fit together.

Peer mentoring is another useful way of understanding colleagues' roles better. If relevant, consider how this mechanism might help to spread role knowledge among managers across your organisation.

Of course, the most direct way to find out about what colleagues do is to ask them what they're working on and go from there – sharing your own experiences as you talk. Doing this with even one or two people in a short conversation may well have unexpected positive consequences. Job descriptions are all very well for recruitment, but increasingly they are unable to capture the fluid reality of dynamic roles. They are certainly no substitute for talking to people about what they do.

So look around you, what are your colleagues working on? Perhaps it's time to find out.