Staff engagement in the NHS: some local experience

Staff engagement can help the NHS meet the challenges of reducing costs, raising productivity and implementing the organisational changes arising from the NHS White Paper. High levels of staff engagement have been proven to link to a range of positive outcomes, including for patients and to better health and well-being for staff.

Key points
- Staff engagement is an essential ingredient in meeting the challenges facing the NHS – in particular, securing efficiency savings, patient outcomes and changes arising from the Government’s White Paper.
- Effective staff engagement is achieved by the overall way staff are treated at work, including their degree of involvement in decision making.
- This Briefing focuses on improving engagement through greater involvement of staff in decision making as set out in the NHS Constitution staff pledges.

High levels of staff engagement can only be achieved by improving the overall experience of staff whilst working for the NHS. Staff need to have a healthy and safe work environment, roles that count, effective managers and access to the right training and development. Importantly, organisations need to engage staff and involve them in decision making. This Briefing sets out some tips on how to do this to help meet the current challenges. It provides case studies from organisations that have successfully engaged with their staff through a variety of methods and describes the benefits that they have achieved as a result. Engagement has a number of dimensions: this Briefing focuses on staff involvement.

Engaging and involving your staff
The importance of engaging and involving your staff is highlighted in the NHS Constitution as one of the four staff pledges, requiring NHS organisations and staff to: “engage staff in decisions which affect them, involve them in improving services they provide and empower them to provide better and safer care.”

NHS organisations face major challenges. Many organisations are changing and all need to secure efficiency savings. Ensuring that your staff continue to be engaged and involved will be difficult in these circumstances but is essential if the NHS is to meet the challenges it faces.
This Briefing sets out some tips on how to successfully engage with your staff, based on discussions at events that NHS Employers has organised over the past year. It also draws on emerging evidence from a range of case studies from within the NHS. It concentrates on examples of engaging staff through involvement in decision making. We will continue to add additional case studies to the NHS Employers staff engagement web pages at www.nhsemployers.org/staffengagement.

**Staff engagement and managing change**

Many NHS organisations face major structural change over the next year and all will need to make changes to develop and implement their efficiency programmes. Effective staff engagement can help deliver change even in difficult conditions.

Many private sector organisations have gone through major change programmes over the past year as they dealt with the recession. The lessons from those that have handled change whilst maintaining staff engagement include:

- early sharing of information with staff and their representatives, guided by the legal framework but not limited to it
- consultation on options for dealing with the challenge, rather than management adopting a fixed solution
- honest discussion with those staff affected by the changes. It is better to say you do not...

**Top tips for engaging your staff**

Staff engagement should be integrated into the overall way of working rather than seen as a separate one-off initiative. It is a means of achieving key objectives for the organisation. In the wider economy, effective staff engagement has been shown to assist with reducing costs and raising productivity. There are tangible rewards from investment in staff engagement. For example, NHS organisations with high levels of staff engagement tend to have reduced absence levels and overall better performance.

Securing sustainable staff engagement needs a coherent strategy where a new way of working is developed in stages across the whole organisation. Experience shows that there can be a risk of isolated pockets of engagement.

Successful staff engagement does include improved communication but this is not limited to better communication tools or processes. It means basing communication on a dialogue with staff. In the NHS this includes partnership working with staff side representatives as well as direct discussions with staff.

Successful engagement needs visible support from leaders and also needs the support of managers and supervisors at every level. Leaders need to develop an engaging leadership style which supports staff and helps them solve problems. Ward-level supervisory staff, for example, need to be supportive of an engaging culture if it is to be effective, or they may see it as a threat.

Staff engagement is an essential ingredient in the NHS meeting the challenges it currently faces and, in particular, helping it secure efficiency savings, improve productivity and ensure quality care. It is also linked to better outcomes for patients and lower absenteeism, thereby reducing costs.
Case study: The Big Conversation – Barnet and Chase Farm Hospital Trust

Barnet and Chase Farm Hospital Trust used the Big Conversation technique as part of developing staff engagement with a reconfiguration programme and to help address long-standing staff issues in some areas. It was jointly developed with the local staff side. The aim was to “capture the heart and minds of staff at a time of uncertainty.”

The Big Conversation day was run as a jointly facilitated day with all staff invited and working at tables. The aims were to identify barriers in current processes, help staff understand the reasons for proposed changes and give staff opportunities to generate ideas for improvement. The day was a great success, with positive evaluation from participants, and has been followed up by action on the issues identified. The trust directors are taking a high-profile approach to ‘walking the floor’ and talking face to face with front-line staff. The trust has had tangible results from this staff engagement approach. Results show reductions in staff absence and in discipline and grievance cases as well as an improvement in its staff engagement results in the NHS staff survey, especially on the ability to contribute to improvement.

Different approaches to engaging your staff

Two examples of approaches to staff engagement based on involvement in decision making are the Big Conversation and Listening in Action.

The Big Conversation model involves regular discussion between ward-based staff and board-level managers on items selected by both. These groups are based on area of work and so ensure a cross-section of staff is involved. It is essential that issues can be identified by all those attending and that there is feedback following the meeting on issues that have been raised even if it is to explain why action cannot be taken. The meetings take place on a rolling basis bringing groups of staff together. Additional smaller conversations then take place between supervisors and their staff.

The Listening in Action model uses structured communication between staff and senior managers including the chief executive. The approach ensures that staff work in mixed groups, and senior managers should listen to issues being raised before responding. The initial conversations are used to identify areas of work that the trust needs to take action on, and smaller groups then work in detail on these areas. In this way the issues identified in meetings feed into practical action and moves from identifying issues to staff taking action. The Listening in Action approach has now been incorporated into a web-based tool which provides a structured programme approach to embedding staff engagement (See ‘Further information’ page 7).
Staff engagement and efficiency savings

A number of organisations have begun to use staff engagement as part of their efficiency programmes to generate ideas for savings. By using this approach trusts such as York Hospital have been able to get their staff to help them identify savings ideas.

Staff engagement and improved productivity

Staff engagement is an essential component of sustainable productivity improvement programmes. For example, the recent review of the NHS Institute’s Releasing Time to Care programme found that it was most effective where staff were engaged with the programme. Where staff are already engaged they are likely to actively support productivity improvement programmes and generate ideas for improvement. Releasing Time to Care uses techniques such as ‘process mapping’ which are designed to raise productivity through getting staff to analyse how existing processes could be improved.

A productivity programme also provides an opportunity to involve staff and develop engagement. Service improvement needs to become ‘everyone’s business’ rather than confined to specialist staff or reliant on external consultants. Clinical staff already have an obligation to improve their professional practice and the NHS and this needs to encompass overall service improvement.

Staff engagement and the patient experience

Many NHS organisations are taking action to improve patient experience. Where staff are engaged it is likely that there will be better patient care. A number of trusts have initiated patient engagement programmes where information on patient views is fed back to staff to enable them to understand the patients’ perspective. NHS staff have a strong public service ethos and this can be built on to engage them in reshaping services. Many trusts have introduced programmes to improve customer care and these can be linked to improving staff engagement.

Case study: York Hospital efficiency savings programme

The trust’s staff side representatives, with support from management, led a number of ‘bright ideas’ open events during July 2010 to enable staff to have an opportunity to share their views about how their trust could save money. Staff side representatives also arranged visits to sites based away from the main hospital. Those staff who couldn’t attend were able to submit their views confidentially. The event was simply headlined as: “Have you always thought ‘that’s a waste’ or ‘that could be done much better and save money?’ Well now is your chance...”.

The event generated 154 suggestions, ten of which have already been completed and are contributing to savings. A further 117 suggestions have been identified as having the potential to create further savings, which are being investigated by the trust’s corporate efficiency team.

The process of involving staff is ongoing. This has been through the use of suggestion boxes in staff areas and an online tool to enable staff to submit suggestions electronically. The collation of these ideas is led and coordinated in partnership with staff side representatives.
St George’s Hospital is a large acute hospital in South London. It has historically had effective staff engagement and a good reputation in the local community. Clinical standards were high but it felt it was not delivering a good patient experience and not all staff groups were fully engaged. The 2008 NHS staff survey showed rising levels of staff stress and increasingly unhappy patients. There was also a rise in patient complaints especially around poor communication. In 2009, with support from the London strategic health authority and working in partnership with the local staff side representatives, it embarked on a programme to improve patient experience. It decided to do this by focusing on increasing customer awareness among non-clinical staff through a programme called One Team.

Groups of non-clinical staff were brought together across a directorate and asked to examine how patients were currently treated within the hospital. The aim was that all staff would go through the programme and 10 per cent would then become ‘champions’ for a new approach across key departments.

Small working groups were organised to discuss key issues. For example, how would staff wish to be treated and did they feel that current services met this aspiration? In particular, did processes treat patients poorly and waste their time? Were issues communicated well and did all staff understand how their role contributed to overall patient care? The aim was for staff to develop their own responses to issues identified and help develop a culture of improvement.

As part of the programme, visits were organised to other organisations which interacted with ‘customers’ to help staff develop a better understanding of how interaction could be improved. These visits included retail companies and public sector bodies.

The initial focus on staff in bands 1 to 4 was designed to ensure that these staff felt fully part of the programme. The project was fully supported by the local staff side and was highly successful. The project won the Social Partnership Forum award for partnership working at the Healthcare People Management Awards 2010.
Case study: Islington PCT

Islington PCT is a high performing PCT in an area of London which has a high degree of economic and health inequality. It has had a strong focus on staff engagement and this has enabled it to sustain staff engagement through major organisational changes. These have included the setting up of its community services as a separate provider which has involved several changes of approach due to changing national guidance and local context. In recent months it has also had to deal with the management costs reduction programme for PCTs and the white paper changes.

Key messages from its experience are:

- focus on service and quality improvement not staff satisfaction
- value your staff and help them value their time (work-life balance)
- invest heavily in learning, development and supporting careers
- provide access to mentors, personal development, leadership development and grow people through project and programme opportunities.

Case study: Improving staff experience at Brent PCT

Brent PCT operates in a diverse and deprived borough and its staff survey identified a range of issues in 2008. The trust took a decision to seek to improve staff engagement by focusing on improvements to staff experience in areas that had been identified. It worked with a consultancy to develop an updated code of behaviour for staff which aimed to foster pride and supported this with an all-staff event to celebrate achievement.

It improved the completion of staff appraisals and relaunched its provision for flexible working. It invested in greater support for staff health and well-being and measures to tackle bullying and harassment. By improving staff experience in key areas it hopes to improve staff engagement.

Spotlight on primary care trusts

Primary care trusts (PCTs) are facing a twin challenge in staff engagement. The community services in PCTs have largely been separated as provider arms and there is a challenge to secure staff engagement following this organisational upheaval. The commissioning and other parts of the PCT need to continue to function effectively until their proposed abolition in 2013. PCTs need to secure staff engagement in the face of these challenges.

Some tips on how to maintain staff engagement in challenging times include:

- Seek to explain the facts to staff, making clear which changes are within the remit of the trust to affect and which changes arise from wider policy decisions.
- Review communication methods to ensure that they reach all staff, for example taking account of dispersed work sites and hard to reach groups. Communicate as much as possible and give frequent updates. Do not be afraid to say that the answer is not available. Work with local staff side representatives to tackle concerns.
- Be honest about the potential impact on staff of change and accept that staff survey scores may be adversely affected in the short term.
Further information

A wide range of resources on staff engagement issues can be found on the staff engagement pages of the NHS Employers website: www.nhsemployers.org/staffengagement

The NHS staff survey provides a wealth of information on staff engagement issues, including a composite staff engagement score which enables organisations to benchmark their performance.

Since 2009 the Care Quality Commission has provided organisations with a detailed analysis of their performance, and trusts should be able to use it to inform their local strategies for staff engagement. The 2010 survey is now underway.

For more information on the Listening into Action programme, contact the Optimise consultancy. They describe the programme as follows:

“Listening into Action is a compelling, outcome-oriented approach for engaging and empowering staff on a widespread basis to drive changes for the benefit of patients, staff and their local health community. Widespread adoption is enabled through access to the web-based ‘LiA Navigator’ – four phases each with several steps, and more than 70 tried and tested tools, examples and templates to adapt for local use.

There is also an option for coaching support, and a practical New way of working for the NHS handbook to support spread. Listening into Action does not require costly consultancy involvement, but rather is locally-owned and driven. Eight acute hospitals are already pioneering adoption of LiA and achieving great results.”

For more information, see www.listeningintoaction.co.uk/LiA-info

A number of NHS organisations have used Big Conversation approaches either in-house or with partners. We can supply further information on request. Please email staffengagement@nhsemployers.org

For more information on the issues of linking staff engagement and patient experience, see the NHS Employers website for case studies: www.nhsemployers.org/staffengagement

Employee engagement is important at a time of major organisational change. Some useful resources on this issue can be found on the UK Work Organisation Network’s website: www.workplaceinnovation.eu/contact-us

Keep in touch with our staff engagement work

A range of case studies on staff engagement issues can be found on the NHS Employers website, which is regularly updated. See www.nhsemployers.org/staffengagement for more information.

You can also join our virtual staff engagement community and receive monthly updates about our work. To join, please send your contact details to staffengagement@nhsemployers.org
NHS Employers represents trusts in England on workforce issues and helps employers to ensure the NHS is a place where people want to work. The NHS workforce is at the heart of quality patient care and we believe that employers must drive the workforce agenda. We work with employers to reflect their views and act on their behalf in four priority areas:

- pay and negotiations
- recruitment and planning the workforce
- healthy and productive workplaces
- employment policy and practice.

NHS Employers is part of the NHS Confederation.

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