CASE STUDY

SOUTH WESTERN AMBULANCE SERVICE NHS FOUNDATION TRUST

Culture into action

Overview

The ambulance sector has historically had a high rate of bullying and harassment cases recorded in the annual staff survey. While SWAST’s results are similar to other trusts within the sector, the trust board wanted this to change and alongside Unison colleagues, we commissioned an in-depth cultural review in 2018.

Key benefits and outcomes

- Reduction in formal employee relations cases by two thirds within 12 months. The new process was launched in November 2018, and formal cases decreased from 91 in the preceding 12 months to just 33 in the last 12 months.

- Reduced case handling length (investigation and case hearing) from 15 weeks to five weeks on average.

What the organisation did

The cultural review was implemented via a survey and in-depth interviews. While no overarching culture of bullying was found, there were areas where incivility and disrespect were an issue.

Following publication of this survey, both internally and externally, we addressed the findings with a comprehensive action plan, elements of which are outlined below.

People-centred processes

The cultural review highlighted that staff were concerned about the disciplinary process. The policy was looked at to ensure that the individual going through the process was placed at the centre of it, and greater consideration was given to the use of informal processes. These changes mean we now resolve more issues informally and have reduced formal investigations and hearings. We also review the case at each stage of a process to sense check the approach and inform the next step.

We also revised our dignity and respect at work policy, which has placed greater emphasis on swift management action and informal resolution as soon as a concern is brought to our attention.
Health and wellbeing

We launched our Staying Well Service in 2015, which provides direct support and signposts our people to specialist counselling support as well as fast-track physiotherapy for physical injuries.

We formulated a staff wellbeing engagement group, which is jointly chaired by the deputy director of people and culture and the Unison secretary. Members include representatives from staff groups across the trust.

The group has enabled us to develop the following initiatives:

• Slimming World Trial. NHS Improvement initially provided funding for 30 places but due to the high interest in the trial, the trust funded a further 60 places for staff to undertake a 12-week programme. To date, the group has lost a total of 55 stone! We continue to share these weight loss journeys and celebrate their success.

• Development of our peer support guardians’ (PSGs) network who are volunteers across the trust and offer confidential, informal discussions with their colleagues. They also signpost people to other sources of support such as the trust’s Staying Well Service, our freedom to speak up guardian or external sources of professional wellbeing support. Our PSGs also support the trust’s freedom to speak up agenda.

• We have provided mental health first aid training to 156 staff. Participants learned how to spot the early signs of poor mental health, feel confident in helping someone who is experiencing a mental health problem, provide help on a first aid basis, and prevent poor health from becoming worse. One key model used by our mental health first aiders is the ALGEE model:
  
  Approach
  Assess for crisis
  Assist with crisis
  Listen and communicate non-judgementally
  Give support and information
  Encourage appropriate professional help
  Encourage other supports

• In January 2019 we designed a 12-month health promotion campaign to encourage our employees to stay happy, healthy and fit. We highlighted different themes and competitions every month and implemented a ‘going home checklist’ to encourage our people to unwind at the end of the day.

Engagement

We are committed to asking our people for their feedback, including on our own practices. We survey every part of our HR function, from asking new starters about our joining process, seeking feedback on the reporting we provide, as well as asking for comments from formal hearing chairs on the quality of our support to them and the process.

We ask our people for feedback on all our policies and processes, through focus groups and an online suggestion process. This data is collated by the senior HR team and discussed with the directors of people and culture on a quarterly basis.
We have increased our communication and created our databook, which is a collection of people and culture metrics, from our workforce diversity to the average length of an employee relations case, making data accessible to everyone, busting myths and celebrating our success.

We also regularly seek feedback through emergency department roadshows and drop-in sessions. All feedback is discussed within our regular team meetings and used to improve our processes.

**Leadership development**

We have created Aspire, Connect, Transform (ACT), which is a comprehensive leadership strategy to support aspiring, new, existing and outstanding leaders. The programme’s golden thread runs through all streams of the programme of compassionate and inclusive leadership. Currently we are training 350 leaders across the organisation, from junior leaders up to executive directors. The programme is underpinned by the outward mindset concept, helping our leaders to think and lead beyond their own objectives, taking responsibility for the impact they have on others, and building relationships to help things go right first time.

**Results and benefits**

- Our Invest in Yourself campaign encourages our people to stay well, resulting in achievements of weight loss, becoming mental health first aiders and engaging in competitions. Our staff feedback forum, which reviews our wellbeing initiatives, has provided positive feedback on these campaigns. Tangible benefits have been seen through engagement via social media, an increase in colleagues being able to support each other and significant weight loss!
- Wide ranging engagement with our people has provided first-hand feedback on our processes and practices and has been used to develop these to better respond to staff needs.
- A greater focus on being open to feedback has developed meaningful interventions to better support our people, such as developing a support guide for staff suffering long term or life-limiting conditions.
- Increased numbers of peer support Guardians from 55 to 90.
- Increase in freedom to speak up referrals from just one in 2017/18 to 22 so far in 2019/20.
- 350 leaders engaging with our leadership programme.

**Takeaway tips**

- Recognise the importance of being open to feedback and partnership working.
- Engage with staff to understand their experiences and enable meaningful change.
- Understand the importance of compassionate leadership and focus on your own wellbeing as a leader.
- Be open and transparent about the challenges, the journey and the eventual success!

**Further info**

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