

A QUICK GUIDE TO APPROACHES TO IMPROVING STAFF ENGAGEMENT IN THE NHS

Staff engagement in the NHS is a complex challenge. NHS staff have a very strong overall commitment to the service and tend to identify strongly with their occupation. They have high levels of job-related motivation and above average willingness to recommend their employer as a place to work. The degree of engagement within an organisation varies with staff feeling most involved at team level.

The staff engagement indicator in the NHS Staff Survey combines scores for measures of staff motivation, levels of involvement and willingness to recommend their workplace. The indicator saw improvement between 2013 and 2017, but in 2017 it dipped from 3.80 to 3.78 out of 5. There remains considerable variation between organisations and occupations, and it is clear that maintaining staff engagement has become increasingly challenging in the current environment.

This quick guide looks at the range of the approaches that organisations can take to sustain staff engagement. There isn't one simple solution or initiative that has been shown to be effective in resolving all engagement issues, but there are a core set of approaches that have had positive impacts in organisations where they have been implemented effectively. The guide links to resources and case studies looking at how NHS organisations have put ideas into practice.

This note does not cover approaches that are provided by consultancies such as Optimise or Listening into Action, or where more detailed information is available elsewhere such as on the link up with the Virginia Mason Institute.

Key themes

- Creating a positive workplace culture.
- Effective people management.
- Supporting line managers.
- Feedback.
- Involvement.
- Recognising and valuing staff.



Creating a positive workplace culture

Staff engagement will best be developed within an overall workplace culture that has positive dimensions, for example, a culture where leaders work as part of a collective leadership team and devolve authority, where openness and learning from mistakes is encouraged and where staff contribution is recognised. A workplace culture that has negative characteristics such as over centralised decision making or a high degree of secrecy and blame is unlikely to foster high levels of staff engagement. In exceptional circumstances distrust within an organisation or between staff and senior leadership can also impede staff engagement. Staff engagement is also supported by effective team working and communication.

There are now a range of tools that can be used by organisations to understand and take action on workplace culture. The most comprehensive of these have been developed by **NHS Improvement**. These tools have been developed with high performing trusts and are now being made available on wider basis. Trusts have also been working on the concept of a just culture that is supportive of staff, for example **Mersey Care Trust**. Organisational development techniques can assist an organisation to understand and change its culture, for example through appreciative inquiry. More information on organisational development can be found on the **NHS Employers website**.

Effective people management

Staff engagement will best be developed in organisations that are effective at people management. Organisations that have good systems for recruitment, retention and appraisal are more likely to be effective in sustaining staff engagement. The NHS Staff Survey suggests a strong relationship between the quality of appraisal and staff engagement. Health and wellbeing interventions also appear to have a mutually reinforcing impact on engagement. Action on equality and diversity has a clear link to a more engaged workforce in diverse organisations. Bullying and harassment and violence against staff will have a negative impact. Overall staff experience is clearly the bedrock of effective staff engagement.

Effective approaches to people management in the NHS include focussing on values based recruitment and action on **retention and improving appraisal processes**. The link between health and wellbeing is being recognised and there is an increasing focus on mental health. Many organisations consider diversity as a key element of their staff engagement strategies and take actions such as supporting networks of staff. Furthermore, an increasing number of organisations are **taking action to tackle bullying** and developing approaches to reduce workplace violence.

Supporting line managers

Line managers, ie those staff providing day to day supervision (even if they do not use the title manager), have a critical impact on staff engagement. It is line managers who have ongoing relationships with staff, can encourage or inhibit involvement in a team, and are the key communication route for the organisation.

Historically little support has been provided for line managers in their people management role. The NHS Staff Survey has shown they are seen as supportive but not as strong in areas such as providing feedback. Many trusts have begun to develop leadership and development programmes to support line managers. NHS Employers has worked with organisations to produce a range of tools, for example our **supporting line managers briefing**, which can be used to assist managers to foster engagement. The most effective organisations have integrated line managers into their overall staff engagement strategy, ensuring that they have support and capacity to lead in a more engaging way and are supported to do so.

Feedback - from asking to acting

The NHS has developed a range of methods to seek views from staff. The nationally mandated NHS Staff Survey provides an annual snapshot of staff opinion including on levels of staff motivation and staff engagement. The Staff Friends and Family Test provides a more frequent barometer of staff willingness to recommend. Over four in ten organisations have developed their own local surveys sometimes known as pulse surveys which have localised questions and provide more in-depth data. A growing number of organisations have begun to use online technology tools to gather staff views.

The NHS is not short of surveys and there is some evidence of staff feeling over-surveyed but still not listened to. Many organisations have sought to tackle this by more clearly communicating how they have responded to staff feedback through you said, we did newsletters and briefings.

Organisations that have effective feedback mechanisms have focussed on developing local survey tools which complement the NHS Staff Survey. This can be done by focussing in more depth on selected topics, using more sophisticated measures, and by gathering more qualitative data through free text options. An example of this is the Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh survey tool, **Go Engage**. Online tools can provide real time feedback channels for staff to give views and there is an example of this at **North Devon Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust**. Mobile based applications can make it easier to get staff views on a frequent basis using a simple question or set of questions, and this has been done at **University Hospital Bristol**. The Department of Health and Social Care has also developed an **online feedback forum** for NHS staff. A small number of organisations use more generic tools such as Yammer.

Involvement - from ideas to implementation

The most challenging element of engagement for the NHS has been involving staff in decision making. Although the NHS Staff Survey shows the majority of staff feel they are able contribute ideas to their team, most do not feel their ideas are acted upon. Staff feel in particular feel that they are not able to influence overall decision making in large organisations.

Organisations have adopted a range of techniques to **foster involvement**. A greater emphasis has been put on the visibility of senior leaders and on back to ward opportunities for leaders to be seen out and about across organisations and, in case of senior clinicians, to undertake work as part of clinical teams.

Organisations have refreshed approaches to face-to-face meetings with staff, especially where these involve large numbers of staff. The most popular approach has come to be known as the big conversation. There are a range of techniques that can be used to encourage and support dialogue in large meeting, such as **The Event in the Tent at Milton Keynes**. On top of this, roving roadshows have been used in organisations with more dispersed workplaces.

A key challenge is encouraging staff to suggest ideas for improvement and for organisations to make most effective use of the suggestions. Organisations have built upon traditional suggestion schemes and now use other approaches such as mock dragon's dens or even crowdsourcing where technology tools are used to post and discuss staff ideas.

It is also a challenge to ensure staff involvement within ongoing quality improvement models. Techniques range from quality cells and huddles to wider ranging quality improvement campaigns.



Recognising and valuing staff contribution

One of the areas where the NHS could improve is **valuing and recognising staff**. Only four in ten staff feel valued by their employer. Organisations seek to address this through a range of approaches to recognition, including award schemes, non-pay incentives and long service awards. There is a wide range of criteria used and there has been a move to link awards to organisational values and have more patient and user input. An appreciative culture where leaders and line managers make a personal expression of appreciation can also have a real impact. Updated information is available from the **NHS Employers Reward network**.

Linking to patient outcomes

Research has highlighted a link between staff engagement and patient experience. NHS Employers has published a number of **case studies and a common themes document** on how four trusts in the North East have improved staff engagement, and the relationship between staff engagement and patient experience.

Further resources

The NHS Employers staff engagement web pages provide a range of resources which will help you to develop your local approach. They include:

- news, blogs and briefings
- case studies
- information and data from the NHS Staff Survey.

Please join our staff engagement network by emailing steven.weeks@nhsemployers.org.

Follow [@NHSE_Steven](https://twitter.com/NHSE_Steven) on Twitter for more updates.

NHS Employers

NHS Employers is the voice of employers in the NHS, supporting them to put patients first.

We actively seek the views of employers on key workforce issues and use our expertise to support them to develop a sustainable workforce, improve staff experience and provide high quality care to patients. We influence workforce policy at regional, national and European levels and turn policies into practical workable solutions.

NHS Employers is part of the NHS Confederation.

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