

NATIONAL PPMA LEADERSHIP AND OD NETWORK

JULY 2008 DEBATE

ON

CHANGING THE WAY WE WORK

Invited Contributors:

John Atkinson – Director of Operations, Leadership Centre for Local Government

Lucille Thirlby – Senior National Officer for Local Gov, Unison

David Robinson – Project Director, The Way We Work Programme, Hertfordshire County Council

David opened the debate by stating that the key driver for change in Herts CC was for it to become more customer centric, supported by the need to optimize the use of resources and technology. The philosophy behind the change was to move the organizational mindset from one of 'work is where we go' to one of 'work is what we do'. At the same time, there was a wish to empower staff and use ICT as a real enabler.

David explained that one of the key levers for change in Herts CC was linked to accommodation change. There were previously fifty-one offices accommodating 4,500 people who have now moved into three purpose built offices with modern, state of the art facilities. This has enabled teams to be centralized. In addition, he was keen to construct a central location for training in place of the disparate centres that had previously operated across the County. There is now a modern, purpose built training centre adjacent to one of the main office buildings that is fully accessible to all council staff.

The process used in Herts CC to make this change followed sound change management protocols and was not simply a case of transferring staff from many buildings into a few. Full opportunity was made to review the needs of staff, not just in relation to their jobs but also to them personally. As a consequence, the Council identified different categories of staff need which included those who required an office full time, those who were office based but also mobile, those who were fully mobile and those who would benefit from working from home. The contributors emphasised the importance of engaging with staff personally rather than simply engaging with them on an impersonal job family basis. This high level of engagement throughout the process also included other stakeholders and Unison was engaged from the start. Unison was particularly helpful in helping to identify issues before they arose and, as such, helped to ensure a smooth change process.

The transition process that David followed was instrumental in gaining staff buy in and the first move only involved 500 staff. These staff then helped support the transition of the remaining 4000 staff and, in this way, staff became actively involved with managers in the change process. Consequently, there was much better 'buy in' to the change.

David emphasised the importance of all stakeholders working together and, as a consequence, felt that the level of trust and confidence between staff and managers had increased rather than decreased as a result of the change. He also re-affirmed that the change was not driven by savings on staff costs and that only six redundancies had occurred throughout the three year project lifecycle.

As a result of the transition, Herts CC is reporting a 33% saving in office space and a 70% saving in paper space, with an overall saving in property costs of £1.5M per annum.

While the direction of travel in local government seems to be to deliver local services for local people, the question was raised as to whether the Herts CC model flies in the face of this? David responded by reminding the Network that at the heart of the Project was the remit to become more customer-centric. So, whilst the property portfolio had centralised, the delivery of services hadn't. A key ingredient in the mix was the support given to the development of a flexible workforce that was less reliant on property and more reliant on ICT, thus enabling remote working. In this way, staff now work more locally by dropping into a local office, day centre or other council managed property. Closer working with its partners, such as the PCTs, allows this to be developed still further.

The question was raised that if this is a perfect model for change in local government, in that it satisfies the needs of the organisation, managers, the customer base and staff, then why aren't all councils following suite. Lucille from Unison reminded the Network that, whilst making improvements to service delivery were key, so too were making improvements to the working lives of those delivering these services. Lucille agreed that the stance must be to work together on such issues. Lucille went further to remark that Unison was keen to support the update of the public sector but there was a need to improve the level of involvement with staff generally and felt that the widening partnership agenda would help this.

Discussion ensued regarding the flexible working agenda and Lucille reminded the Network that whilst the work-life balance agenda seems to be working well where job flexibility allows, there are often posts where such flexibility isn't possible. Lucille cited many manual posts as one example. There was general agreement that a 'sheep dip' process to implement flexible working practices as part of a change process is not always the best approach.

The question was raised with regard to the leadership challenges to be faced when delivering this type of change agenda. John from the Leadership Centre, raised the point that, whilst the debate had so far focussed on making things better, it was the engagement of staff which was vital for success.

John felt that it came down to people owning what they create which needs to be considered to be at the heart of the change that needs to happen. John made the gently provocative point that in people management its often said that 'we should do unto others what we would like done to ourselves'. John questioned whether this was always right , bearing in mind the differing personal agendas of individuals.

In terms of the key factors for success, the contributors were keen to emphasis the importance of concentrating on the needs of the individual and not the issues surrounding the job. John remarked on the importance of ensuring that the people mindset is focussed on the 'doing with' rather than 'doing to' and felt that in the public sector we need to be a little more creative in terms of staff working 'for people' rather than 'for organisations'. Lucille emphasised the need for real and meaningful consultation to take place, not just with staff but with the citizens that they serve. David made a similar point regarding local ownership being key and used the Herts CC model of having a local group system in place as being important to support the transition and this had delivered real user group empowerment.

END

Richard Crouch
Chair of the Leadership and OD Network