

## A long engagement

DR CHARLES WOODRUFFE EXAMINES WHY 'ENGAGING' EMPLOYEES IN THEIR ALLOTTED ROLE IS ESSENTIAL TO GOOD HEALTHCARE MANAGEMENT

The healthcare profession is a vocation. People in healthcare pride themselves on their devotion to the caring ethic. It's something that many private business sector organisations do not fully understand, and perhaps helps to explain why a management system for the healthcare industry that derives purely from the private business sector may not be as effective as people expect.

All the same, there will always be situations arising in the healthcare profession that test morale. The very nature of healthcare is that practitioners need to extract maximum benefit out of limited resources. People who want to care for others get frustrated when they feel that the practicalities of resourcing are inhibiting them from doing so.

Healthcare managers have to be able to run teams of disparate individuals, with everyone working together without feeling that their individual talents are compromised or ignored.

### TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT

A term that is becoming increasingly important in the private business sector is employee 'engagement'. This means being fully intellectually and emotionally committed to a particular job, so that they want to give 'discretionary effort'. This is the effort which it is not necessary for an employee to give to a job but which he or she wants to give to it.

The term engagement is useful, honest and authentic because of its connotations of commitment, bonding and even affection. But it is important to distinguish between the process of engaging employees by helping them to love their jobs and want to give their best to the jobs, and hiring employees in the first place following a recruitment drive.

Because healthcare is a caring profession, employees are likely to be

inherently well motivated to offer discretionary effort in what they do. No healthcare professional is likely to be prepared to go home the instant their shift ends if they are tending someone who is in pain and who needs help. The healthcare sector rarely has the same kind of morale and engagement challenges that face people who work in private business, where making profit is key.

However, the private sector can still teach the healthcare profession about maximising employee engagement. In the private business sector, employers know that money is not necessarily the main

"GIVING PRAISE REQUIRES A NEGLIGIBLE AMOUNT OF TIME AND ENERGY ON THE PART OF A MANAGER"

factor in a person's decision to take and stay in a job. This is especially true in healthcare, where money is only one of several major motivating factors.

A good healthcare manager will have a subtle and intelligent understanding of the many non-financial factors that motivate employees. Among the most important non-financial motivators are:

- **Advancement** People in healthcare will be motivated to focus hard on their current caring assignment, but they will certainly want to feel that they are moving up the ladder of a career path.
- **Autonomy** A degree of real autonomy, where someone can really get 'into' their jobs, is likely to be welcome.
- **Civilised treatment** In all sectors, people will perform better if they feel they are being treated in a civilised way by their superiors.

- **Employer commitment** People like to feel that their employers are genuinely committed to them and to their careers.
- **Exposure to senior people** Most employees like to feel that senior staff notice them and that they could approach these people if necessary for advice and guidance.
- **Praise where praise is due** A classic sign of poor management is when staff are given negative feedback for what is perceived as poor performance, but never given positive feedback. Giving praise where praise is due often requires a negligible amount of time and energy on the part of a manager, but the emotional benefits to the member of staff can be enormous.
- **Support** Employees like to feel there is someone available to whom they can turn for advice.
- **The feeling that all one's talents are being used** Because there is often a large element of routine in healthcare jobs, it is easy for people to feel their talents are not being used fully. The Government tacitly recognised this when it introduced, for example, the idea of the 'nurse consultant' as a way of recognising the huge contribution experienced and able senior nurses have made within the healthcare profession. In practice, an important way of engaging healthcare employees is to give them the sense that their capabilities are being used and that there is a way forward for them to fulfil their potential within their profession.
- **Work/life balance** An employer who shows sensitivity to work/life balance issues is very likely to outscore one who doesn't. ■

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