

## Acas workshops at Scottish voluntary organisation working with young people

*This case study demonstrates how Acas helped a team of employees learn to work more effectively together<sup>1</sup>. Grievances brought against a former manager had divided the team and there was a disagreement about what behaviours were acceptable at work. With the help of Acas, the team established a better working relationship. The organisation went on to revise their Code of Conduct as a result of Acas' intervention<sup>2</sup>.*

### Background

The organisation which Acas helped is a voluntary sector organisation, with charitable status, almost entirely funded by local authorities, working with vulnerable young people across Scotland. The organisation employs some 130 permanent staff and another 70 sessional workers. The organisation has no recognised trade unions.

### The Challenge

The HR and management representatives reported that two members of staff brought grievances against their manager within days of each other, in one of the organisation's teams. They both alleged bullying and harassment on the part of the manager, coupled with the use of inappropriate, including sexual, 'banter'. The grievances were put on hold whilst an independent investigation was carried out. It found that there was a culture of inappropriate banter and behaviour within the whole team, encouraged by the manager. It also highlighted that the manager in question favoured some staff more than others, which led to an imbalance in working patterns, with the less favoured being expected to do more work than others under the fear of losing their jobs if they did not oblige. As part of a compromise agreement, the manager in question decided to leave the organisation, but this left a rift within the team between those who had sided with the manager and those who had sided with two aggrieved members of staff. In order to deal with the rift and to try to resettle the team, senior management decided to bring in Acas as they needed an external organisation that would be seen as impartial with no prior knowledge of the teams or their issues.

### How Acas helped

Acas was chosen as the HR representative had worked with the organisation before for mediation training, and Acas had also been involved in the roll out of the organisation's equality and diversity policy.

1 The Acas workshops took place in the autumn of 2009.

2 This case study is based on a discussion with the Acas Adviser involved in the project and three in-depth interviews with relevant parties involved in the Acas project – a Human Resources (HR) representative, a management representative and an employee from the team involved.



The Acas Adviser met with the HR and management representatives and the team's interim manager. It was agreed that Acas should focus on resettling the team and establishing professional boundaries and standards in terms of conduct and behaviour. It was decided that Acas would facilitate **a workshop day** focusing on the team in question and at a later date run **a half day session** with representatives from all the different teams across the organisation. The second session would be used to reflect on material generated by the first workshop in order to develop a revised Code of Conduct. Acas' role would end on the second day and further work on the Code would be carried out by the organisation's management team.

Five questions were devised that would be the focus of the first Acas workshop day:

- What would you classify as examples of acceptable/unacceptable behaviours in the workplace?
- What kinds of behaviour do you feel are acceptable in terms of pro-social role modelling?
- What does the term "professional boundaries" mean to you and can you provide some examples of good and bad practice?
- What is "banter"? When is it acceptable and when does it become unacceptable?
- How can behaviours impact on the effective working of a team and on the relationships within a team?

Members of the team were told in advance both about the objectives of the workshop, and the five question areas. According to the HR representative, reactions from the team were mixed, from cynicism to genuine interest. The management representative said that there was initially some negative reaction to an outside organisation was being involved as it was felt that the organisation had traditionally sorted out its own problems. The employee also reported initial suspicion amongst colleagues about why their team was chosen rather than other teams, but that once people understood what the day was about any feelings of suspicion subsided.

The workshop was a whole day event and was well attended. The HR and management representatives and the interim manager were all present. It began with the Acas Adviser explaining that Acas was independent and therefore not involved in any of the politics of the organisation. The Adviser then established some ground rules for the day focusing on respecting each other's opinions.

An opening icebreaker exercise involved each person saying one thing that was positive about the team and another that was negative. The employee commented that this had been useful as it involved talking to other members of the team and it got people talking together who normally might not have. Following the icebreaker the discussions on the five questions began. There were a mix of round table discussions involving all participants and individual group work. All those interviewed seemed to think these formats worked well.



*And we structured the whole day around these five questions and some of it we did just round a table and some of it was structured in groups. [...] some people bought into that and some reluctantly bought into it but they all participated, I'll give them their dues.*

(HR representative)

The group exercises discussing what could be considered acceptable and not acceptable in terms of workplace banter worked well and generated practical examples of the type of banter they found unacceptable. According to the employee, this brought about a realisation for some individuals that their own language had been unacceptable, and resulted in plans to change their approach in the future.

*Yes, but it was done in a pretty [...] supportive open way and I think most of the people involved in [banter] kind of went 'that's me you're talking about' and they were able to say 'right, fair dos, I take your point and I can work on that'.*

(employee)

The HR representative reported that the discussion had become emotionally charged but that it was managed well by the Acas Adviser. The employee felt that the participants knew it was not a discussion where they could completely clear the air as that would not have been possible without it ending up in arguments or worse.

*It wasn't a forum where we could really clear the air as such. It was more just an understanding of what we needed to do to be able to work together [...] and I think that was successful. [...] I mean [the Acas Adviser] made it clear [...] that it was not a name and shame session. [...] I do not know how that would have worked. I don't know how you could facilitate that. [...] Because that could of ended up [with] fisticuffs.*

(employee)

The management representative felt that having senior managers present during the day did not hinder staff from being open, whereas the employee thought that it might have done, but also felt that the looming threat of redundancies at the time was more of an impediment to openness.

Overall, all three interviewees spoke positively about the workshop. They all felt that it had helped the team see some of the problems more clearly and accept that they would have to work together, in a professional manner, in order to improve matters.

*I think what did come out is the realisation that whatever they felt about what happened, their focus of activity needed to be more professional about work... [...] and you could see almost like people thinking in their heads, 'right I might not like her but I need to work with her because that's what I need to be here to do, and if that's going to make things a little bit easier and stop all this tension then that's what we need to do'.*

(HR representative)



*I think it was less about the personalities because they're not going to change that. It was more about... letting us understand that things like that happen in workplaces and there's maybe certain things that you can't change but you need to be able to work together. [...] There needs to be a level of professionalism and you need to be courteous, polite to each other.*

(employee)

The Acas Adviser produced a report on the workshop for the senior management team. It highlighted what was considered acceptable or not in terms of banter and behaviour. The findings were used as the focus for a second half day session, also facilitated by the Acas Adviser and attended by a cross section of staff from all the different teams and sites within the organisation. Its aim was to take forward the discussions on workplace behaviour with a view to improving the existing Code of Conduct. The output from these discussions was used by the interim manager to revise the Code: to include sections on bullying and harassment, and create a specific section on what is appropriate and inappropriate in terms of 'workplace banter'. This was then rolled out across the organisation through a further series of staff workshops.

### **The outcomes and benefits**

All three interviewees felt that relations within the team in question had much improved since the Acas workshops. The management representative felt that the workshops had been invaluable in helping staff feel part of the process of review, which in turn had made them more accepting of changes than they might otherwise have been. It was also felt that the Acas work had helped those who had not realised the seriousness of some of the issues accept that there had indeed been serious problems. The employee's views concurred with this. On a personal level, it had helped the employee interviewed to understand what some colleagues had been experiencing and how the employee's own use of banter could impact on others negatively. It was felt that everyone had come away more considerate of others and with a better understanding of professionalism.

*I think the biggest thing I took away from it was just understanding the impact of some of the kind of joking and banter can have on other people. [...] See I think it raised everybody's awareness which really helped. [...] I wasn't aware how certain people were feeling, and then I become aware of it and hopefully I didn't have to change my behaviour...*

(employee)

The employee added that whilst things had undoubtedly improved in the team generally, it would probably be those colleagues more directly affected by the banter and former manager's behaviour who would be able to perceive much more of an improvement.

*If it had been a different person in here talking to you... more affected by what was going on, they would tell you it's absolutely night and day [in terms of the change in] how they feel coming to their work.*

(employee)



The HR representative felt that the Acas work achieved a 'real settlement' within the team. One of the more junior managers was ultimately moved and there were some that viewed the improvement in team cohesion stemming from this change in personnel. However, this did not diminish the work carried out by Acas. Moreover, the HR representative felt that thanks to the new Code, all employees should now be more aware of how they are supposed to behave within the workplace and how they have a responsibility to identify any problems and report them. The HR representative hoped this increased awareness would lessen the chances of similar problems happening in other teams, and also felt that improvements in communication within the organisation, including the introduction of a staff survey, an employee forum and a new performance management development review system, would pick up on any issues early on.

### **Views on Acas workshops**

All the interviewees were very positive about Acas and the work carried out. The management representative felt that the problems within the team were so entrenched that it justified bringing in Acas, as the task required someone with a fresh perspective that they would have struggled to achieve internally. The employee agreed that it had been better to have someone come in from outside the organisation who had no vested interests.

The interviewees were also impressed by the Acas Adviser, in particular the Adviser's facilitation skills. Both the employee and the management representative described the Adviser as being 'down to earth' and skilled at putting people at their ease. The employee seemed very impressed by the Adviser's approach,

*[The Acas Adviser] was excellent. Very experienced. [...] You know when you meet somebody and you feel as if you've known them for ages and you can talk to them. [...] [The Adviser] didn't come across as if [they] had all the answers. [The Adviser] was there to facilitate us finding the answers, so kind of sussing out for ourselves.*

(employee)

The management representative and the HR representative both said they would be happy to use Acas again but would hope that their new management structure coupled with better communication with staff, would all mean that the organisation would be able to pick up on and tackle issues sooner.

