



Case Study – Northampton College

This Further and Higher Education College in the East Midlands received an overall Grade 3 (satisfactory) Ofsted inspection in April 2009. It joined the Acas-managed Innovative Workplaces project perceiving it to be a potential catalyst to assist in moving the college towards an Outstanding Grade 1 College by 2013. The outcome was the identification of the importance of employee engagement and its connection to the college's overall aims.

Case study organisational background

Northampton College is a provider of Further and Higher Education to some 12,000 learners. 4,500 of these are full-time students predominantly 16-19 years old. The remainder are, in the main, adult learners taking vocational and professional qualifications. A small area of the college is concerned with higher education providing qualifications in Leadership & Management to middle and senior managers at levels 4 to 8 (HND to PhD). This unit also works with employers through organisational-development programmes and provides consultancy and leadership coaching. At the commencement of the project, the college employed 1003 staff (404 full time and 599 part time) at the conclusion of the project it had a workforce of 1039 staff (374 full time and 665 part time). The college operates across four sites, Booth Lane (Main Site), Lower Mounts (HE campus) Daventry campus and Westbury Court (the Business Centre) all in Northamptonshire.

Northampton College was one of ten organisations that participated, during 2009/10, in a project managed by Acas, known as 'Innovative Workplaces – Developing Organisations for the Future'. The project was funded by the East Midlands Development Agency (*emda*).

The issues

Following a 'satisfactory' Ofsted inspection in April 2009, the college's strategic vision was to become an Outstanding Grade 1 college by 2013. In order to achieve this its senior management had identified that there was a need to achieve a culture change from 'satisfactory is good enough' to one which promoted excellence across the range of its activities. There were three major strands of the college's strategy to become Grade 1 which were relevant to The Innovative Workplaces Project, these were: to raise teaching standards, develop leadership and management capability; to provide clear direction and



better mentoring, coaching and support for staff; and to radically improve any areas of 'failing provision' as measured against the benchmarks of the national FE 'Success Rates'. An additional challenge for the college was that, at the time of joining the project, it was in the early stages of demolishing and rebuilding its main campus without temporarily relocating its operations

The opportunity to participate in an Acas supported initiative was seen as a possible catalyst to help achieve the culture change required.

How Acas helped – 'The Innovative Workplaces Project'

This innovative project was designed to stimulate organisational change, be workplace focused, provide customised organisational support, and develop management and leadership skills through a practical rather than a theoretical approach. It offered in-depth support to a number of organisations in the East Midlands region that were seeking to change workplace practices and increase employee engagement as a means of improving organisational performance

Over an initial twelve month period during 2009 - 2010, the Innovative Workplace Project (IWP) provided a number of interventions to ten participating organisations. The IWP began in April 2009 with the recruitment and selection of organisations seeking to participate in the IWP. The organisations' nominated representatives participated in three core elements of the initiative commencing with an initial three and half day course to develop management and leadership skills, to build trust and dialogue between nominated representatives and to establish the group relationships necessary for action learning. The programme provided nominated representatives with the optional opportunity to gain a recognised management and leadership qualification.

This initial intervention was followed by monthly participant network meetings, which included action learning sets. Both the short course and the network meetings were facilitated via Acas' delivery partner UKWON. The third core element of the IWP was customised workplace facilitation provided by Acas Senior Advisers. Additional support was provided where there was an identified need, for example through Acas short training courses. Each organisation drew up an action plan and these were presented at a launch event in September 2009. These plans informed the projects within each organisation.

Northampton College

The action plan at the outset of the project centred on a Leadership and Management Development Programme, which had begun in October 2009, this had been designed to develop capability in leadership and management.

In addition to the nominated representatives attending the IWP's three and half day programme and attending the network meetings, the Acas Adviser facilitated a number of activities in the workplace which involved initial meetings and then the facilitation of diagnostic workshops involving functional groups including Heads of School, Trade Unions,



Teaching and Learning staff, Business Managers and Business Support. These workshops followed a staff engagement survey conducted during 2009 which identified that employee engagement was fundamental to the college achieving the culture change it was seeking.

The Acas Adviser produced a report which incorporated a variety of practical suggestions/solutions from the staff. This was presented to the College Workforce Development Group (WDG) which comprised of the Principal, Senior Directors, HR and organisational project representatives. A pivotal point in the project was when the connection was made between the college's Leadership Programme and the survey's employee feedback on issues of leadership and management. This led to the Acas facilitation element of the IWP programme continuing for longer than at other participating organisations.

The outcomes and impact

Although outcomes from the IWP project are ongoing, considerable progress has been reported in the development of leadership skills, and their application to achieving performance improvements, among college managers at all levels.

In terms of employee engagement there have been a number of outcomes which are on-going. A further Action Plan has been developed between senior managers and representatives from the two main trade unions following a joint meeting facilitated by Acas. This addresses issues of employee consultation, communications, student behaviour and teaching/learning observation. The action plan agenda is being addressed by different task groups. Two Acas facilitated joint problem solving training sessions had been arranged to take place for the managers and staff who are taking part in Task Groups.

The positive contribution perceived to have been made by Acas facilitation is summed up by the following observation:

"It has made the biggest contribution for us. It was useful for the college to have independent people who were experienced facilitators, with a proper reputation and the kudos of Acas"

**For further details please contact Acas Research and Evaluation at
research@acas.org.uk**

