

Acas and North Lincolnshire and Goole Hospitals NHS Trust: Building positive consultation and cooperative working

How Acas helped improve the effectiveness of an NHS Trust's Joint Consultative Committee, with a broader positive impact on staff-management relations, staff relations across sites, and the culture of consultation at the Trust¹.

The Challenge

North Lincolnshire and Goole Hospitals NHS Trust (NLAG) is an Acute Trust formed in April 2003 as the result of a merger between Grimsby Trust and Scunthorpe and Goole Trusts. It employs 4,700 people and recognises the full spread of NHS unions.

Several problems became evident following the merger. Management and union styles and employment relations traditions had been radically different at the Grimsby and Scunthorpe/Goole sites. At the Grimsby site, there was a high degree of partnership and open dialogue between management and unions, whilst at the Scunthorpe site, employment relations were more confrontational, with low levels of trust between management, unions and staff.

Following the merger, a new senior management team was appointed, many of whom had previously held senior positions at the Grimsby site. These managers soon discovered that staff-side (union) representatives from the former Scunthorpe/Goole site had little trust in management due to a history of having no genuine involvement in consultation, with decisions imposed by managers often against the unions' explicit wishes. The unions responded by taking all problems and disputes directly to formal procedures. Moreover, no facilities agreement existed for trade union representatives at Scunthorpe, in contrast to the Grimsby site.

A new Joint Staff Consultation Committee (JSCC) was established, post-merger. Its most pressing priority was to establish harmonised employment policies and terms and conditions across NLAG, however its effectiveness was hampered by the legacy of adversarial employment relations at the Scunthorpe site. Not only was there a high degree of mistrust from the staff-side at Scunthorpe towards NLAG management,

but there was also tension between the unions at the Scunthorpe and Grimsby sites. A manager described how unions at the Scunthorpe site perceived those from the Grimsby site as having “sold out” to management.

These tensions were ‘played out’ in the JSCC, preventing representatives from engaging in joint decision making. Attendance at the JSCC was very high as staff-side representatives sought to ensure that their interests were fully represented, and union representatives from Scunthorpe openly voiced their mistrust in management. The process of harmonising terms and conditions proved difficult: Scunthorpe representatives had very different perceptions of the nature of specific policies from their Grimsby counterparts; staff-side chairs from the previous sites came into conflict; and, according to one manager “there was conflict at every level, really”.

Other problems had emerged. Most notably, an internal survey at the Scunthorpe site revealed high perceived levels of bullying and harassment of employees by management amongst staff – despite the fact that in reality the Trust had no higher levels of bullying and harassment than other parts of the NHS. It was in response to this that the Trust sought external assistance and received support in the form of DTI Partnership Fund monies. The DTI money was earmarked for training in bullying and harassment, but it also provided the platform for a change of attitude amongst Scunthorpe representatives towards more cooperative approaches to employment relations. This was to prove the stimulus for an approach to Acas.

How Acas can help

The Acas adviser met with the Director of HR and the staff-side Chair, who described the perceived problems and the different cultures and management styles in NLAG. The Acas adviser and a colleague then sat in on a JSCC meeting as observers and fed back their views to HR and union representatives. The adviser identified two ‘camps’, or modes of behaviour within the committee and meetings; representatives who were prepared to engage in dialogue to resolve issues, and those who took a confrontational stance from the offset. This greatly impaired the committee’s capacity to engage in effective problem-solving. Further problems resulted when members raised minor issues which should have been dealt with outside of the JSCC structure, and when they ‘suddenly’ introduced new topics for discussion which committee members were not prepared for or had not been briefed about in advance. Time management was a problem, with discussion running over time to the point where some agenda items were not able to be discussed.



It was agreed that Acas would hold a series of three half-day 'information gathering workshops' with separate groups of management and union representatives at Grimsby and Scunthorpe. The workshops were designed to elicit management and trade union views on the JSCC: what they thought worked well, what didn't work well, and their underlying concerns. Participants were also asked to evaluate the actions needed to move the Committee forward, and ways in which they could work more effectively within the JSCC. Each meeting concluded with a summary of perceived problems and means by which each party could change their actions to address the problems. The separate groups of management and staff-side representatives identified many of the same issues and concerns around communication, union facilities, and the JSCC's "size, membership, timing and purpose".

A one-day joint workshop was then convened where the anonymised findings of the workshops were presented, and key issues were unpacked and examined. Consensus was achieved amongst the group around three key issues that needed to be tackled: behaviours/principles, communication, and organisation/structure. The group then engaged in a series of problem-solving activities related to the three areas. Principles for improving the effectiveness of the JSCC were discussed, agreed and drafted into an action plan. Acas advisers spent time discussing how processes of negotiation and consultation were differentiated, and how the JSCC might focus on the latter rather than being the forum at which the minute detail of issues were negotiated. And at the end of the workshop, the group agreed on a statement of principles relating to how union-management relations should be conducted and how information should be disseminated and respected.

The benefits: positive consultation and cooperative working

As a result of the workshops and the new mode of 'joint working' instilled in the Trust, the JSCC is now a more effective and efficient forum. The number of people attending the JSCC has been halved from 28 to 15, a process that was introduced over a transitional period. There has been a marked improvement in planning and adhering to agenda items, and in drafting and disseminating meeting minutes. And there is now a greater focus on core 'strategic' issues, with a corresponding move away from dealing with day-to-day operational problems. The latter are now addressed as they arise, on a more informal basis. Importantly, there has been a significant shift in the behaviours of committee members towards "constructive dialogue" and reaching outcomes that are acceptable to all parties.



The Staff-side Chair noted that some problems with the Scunthorpe constituency remained and that specific issues still needed to be resolved by management and unions within the Trust, such as the implementation of the trade union facilities agreement and demands posed by the Agenda for Change programme. However the chair described how relations between the staff-sides had improved: “We (union-management) can now work together because the staff-side now work really quite well together”. There were also tangible signs of broader improvements in terms of increased partnership working, the implementation of harmonised policies and conditions, and improved staff-management relations across the Trust. Managers now consult with the staff-side over issues as a matter of course, both during and – increasingly – outside of JSCC meetings. The HR manager described how Trust managers worked jointly with the staff-side on developing new policies on a regular basis, and remarked that there was a “pretty strong degree of trust” both between the staff-side and management, and within the staff-side.

Four months after the joint workshop, Acas returned to discuss and evaluate progress at a meeting of the JSCC. The impression of the Acas adviser, after observing the meeting, was that the effectiveness of the JSCC had improved considerably. This assessment was confirmed by both management and union participants, who believed that Acas’ involvement had greatly expedited the process of bringing management and union sides together. The HR manager noted, of the Acas intervention:

“I think largely you have to measure it on outcome, and the outcome was very good. I think (Acas) being seen to be independent and impartial was probably critical in getting staff-side commitment.”

¹ This case study is based on interviews carried out with Acas advisers, and trade union and management representatives at North Lincolnshire and Goole Hospitals Trust as part of Acas’ evaluation programme. We are grateful for their assistance and reflections on the project. A more detailed version of this case study may be found in Acas Research Report 06/05 ‘Acas in the NHS: Helping improve employment relations in response to ‘Agenda for Change’.

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