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Creating right culture is key

Departments and services are forever changing to match policy and framework demands. But is your workplace coping and, more importantly, are you? In the first of a five-part series on change, *Becky Hall* examines organisational culture

AS SOON as big changes are announced, the phrase "culture change" crops up. But what does it mean, and how can you influence what culture your organisation adopts?

Culture is the personality of an organisation. It covers what it is, how it works and what it believes in or stands for.

In the past, an organisation's systems and structures – rather than the people within it – have often defined this. Now there is widespread recognition that organisational culture needs to emerge from within. This means that it is staff that collectively create the culture and set the personality of an organisation. This is a huge task and, ultimately, can define how successful or unsuccessful an organisation can be.

In times of major change, when there have been restructures or mergers, it is important to look again at organisational culture.

When new departments or partnerships are formed, several cultures combine, so staff need to sit down together and work out what this new or shared culture will be. The key to culture creation within a climate of change is to

focus on the things that staff can influence. Obviously, organisations need to set the boundaries for change from the top, and this is often the first thing that is communicated in a change process. Once staff is clear about the organisational boundaries – drawn up from national policy frameworks, local needs, organisational standards and structures and client needs – staff teams can start to define themselves within the new boundaries.

Personality test

But how do you do this and decide what "personality" you want to create for your team?

First of all, it is useful to focus on values. What do you believe in collectively? What is the purpose – the driver for you and your team? If you can agree this, it becomes incredibly defining and a very powerful way of bringing new colleagues and teams together.

Examine how you work. What are your standards and behaviours? For example, a team may have a standard to provide good customer care, but is this always borne out in practice?

Look at management style and team structure. For example, is the management approach in keeping with the team culture? Look at how you respond to each other's requests, or provide support for one another. How does the team communicate? Do you meet regularly and update colleagues about your work? Do you email colleagues who sit near you, or do you take time out to have discussions?

Finally, look at what is visible: what language is used in your teams? What are the routine procedures and ways of doing things? What is the environment like and what is the – spoken or unspoken – dress code?

Teams rarely get time to focus on and agree these defining characteristics, yet they are so important in effecting working life. In our experience, doing this not only defines an organisation's culture but can leave staff feeling more empowered, engaged and equipped to cope with changes, which in turn provides greater job satisfaction. Organisational culture is too important to ignore, so make time to sit and discuss it – it will be worth it.

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