Staffordshire University - A cultural journey through change - case study

In April 2021 UCEA conducted a virtual case study interview with Paula Cottrell Director of HR and OD at Staffordshire University (SU) who described the HEI's unique journey through change. This case study places workplace culture at the heart of managing and responding to the changes imposed by the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic.

A Steadfast Approach

Before the onset of the pandemic, in 2019 SU had embarked on a programme of work to strengthen its organisational culture. Overseen by a Culture Steering Group, made up of a cross-representation of staff from across the University, SU launched the 'Staff Make Staffs' culture programme in early 2020 which commenced with a cultural survey aimed at identifying the University's cultural strengths, weaknesses and understanding what needed to change to help to maximise talent and drive performance. The insights from the survey would play a critical role in helping to shape the University's future workforce development strategy. The culture survey rendered an encouraging 62% completion rate and was completed during the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. SU made the considered decision to continue their work on culture, the feedback from which would help inform their learning from the pandemic and ultimately also helped to start planning their return to campus.

Mapping the Journey

When they originally mapped out their journey, SU could not of course have predicted that Covid-19 would raise its ugly head. Fortunately, their timely work on culture found SU travelling in the right direction.

In summer 2020, SU took the first step towards embedding a new working culture by engaging with all staff directly about the culture survey outcomes. Led by the Dean of a School or Director of a Service and supported by the Culture Steering Group members, this involved holding a series of communication events to share the survey results and to have 'honest conversations' about the feedback that had been provided. SU was particularly keen to listen to staff views about what had worked well and not so well for them during the pandemic. Notably, attendance at these virtual communication events was significantly higher than it had been when events were held in person and SU noted that staff were more forthcoming with their feedback at these virtual sessions, taking the opportunity to provide significant and honest comments in the 'Teams' chat bar.

During the next phase in their journey:

- improvement plans were drawn up with staff feedback at heart;
- change champions were trained and put in place to help to support local level cultural improvements that were identified from the communication events;
- Four cross-university major workstreams were also formulated which were the priority areas designed to have a major impact on the University's culture in providing more of a structured career framework to harness and develop talent, develop work across boundaries and reduce silos. This helped to create an environment which drives innovation and look at ways to increase empowerment – all of these workstreams were developed as a consequence of the culture survey and communication event feedback.

The University had started to consider its return to campus arrangements and what that would look like in September 2020. The feedback from communication events helped in supporting those arrangements, with the following being put in place:

- SU was aware that health and wellbeing was a particular concern during the pandemic and it conducted pulse surveys with staff a further four times on a six weekly basis covering a

range of questions surrounding mental health and wellbeing, organisational and personal factors. As a consequence of the survey feedback, online training was made available, a dedicated webpage was developed and the feedback also helped inform the University's approach to a new way of working.

- In addition to its statutory risk assessment obligations, personal online assessments were developed for all staff to complete prior to returning to campus. The assessment result formed the basis of a discussion with their line manager in helping to prepare for the return to campus and reducing concerns that staff may have.
- SU also published internal guidance for staff on returning to campus in addition to re-induction campus videos which familiarised staff with the practical return arrangements being put in place.
- When on the cusp of planning for a transition back to campus in June 2020, SU ran Q&A and communications sessions, addressing the more practical issues about returning.
- Finally, SU took all of the feedback into account and mapped out a framework for a new way of working entitled the 'Blended Working Framework'.

Journeying towards a new working culture ……..Blended Working

In accordance with the framework they had developed, SU implemented a blended approach to working. Factoring in both the current and future stages of their journey, they communicated their framework to the trade unions.

The framework established an expectation that staff would spend the majority of their time on campus, with flex around the edges where work could be better performed away from the workplace. The framework set out a full range of activities, indicating where these would be best performed, e.g. remote/on campus. Although there would be scope for staff to work remotely, the framework recognised that there would also be a need to get together in teams which also reflected the feedback from staff that they wanted to interact with each other and missed seeing colleagues. It was also established within the framework that some roles would need to be solely campus based, e.g. estates.

Prioritising Mental Health and Wellbeing on Route ……

With new working models on the horizon and the planned transition back to campus, SU was keen to ensure that the mental health and wellbeing of staff would remain paramount. Informed by the feedback gained through their work on culture and the survey, SU developed a new wellbeing strategy. The strategy focused on and beyond mental health considerations and included leadership and other wellbeing development initiatives, some of which were:

- Refreshing and relaunching its academic workload framework (based on feedback from the culture survey and a separate engagement survey) which included the provision of training for managers and academic staff on operating the framework and the launch of a new digital platform – co-created with staff in Digital Services – to record academic workloads more effectively.
- It was recognised that delays between staff departures and replacements were too long which impacted on workloads for existing staff. Commitment was made towards faster recruitment to enable better handovers.
- A review of the health and wellbeing programme suggested there was a disconnect between decisions of the senior leadership team and how those decisions affected staff personally. This led to SU putting in place a structure for communicating important decisions (e.g. academic board outcomes), addressing peripheral issues and supporting staff more widely.

Journeying on ……..

Although this is not the end of the journey for SU, they have found having a framework in place to be helpful in facilitating new blended working arrangements. An infrastructure has been put in place to log how the blended offering is being utilised and to understand take up of blended working. The intention is that take up will be reviewed under the framework and a decision made as to whether to adopt the same approach going forward.

Further information

This case study is based on an interview conducted by UCEA with Paula Cottrell Director of HR and OD at Staffordshire University on the 23 April 2021.

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