

## IPA Case Study

### Employee Engagement at the Royal Marsden

The Royal Marsden is a world-leading cancer centre, specialising in diagnosis, treatment, research and education. Along with its academic partner, the Institute of Cancer Research, the trust employs over 4,500 staff, treating around 50,000 patients each year. The trust operates two hospitals – in Chelsea and Sutton – and recently took on community services for Sutton and Merton.

### Employee Engagement at the Royal Marsden

Levels of employee engagement at the Royal Marsden, as with many other acute specialist trusts, are far higher than the national average. Leaders at the trust clearly see the importance of employee engagement in the NHS. *'It's a labour-intensive business'* said Cally Palmer the trust's Chief Executive, *'it's about quality of care and experience for patients. Unless you've got a common goal and common understanding in an organisation I don't think you can provide the best.'*

### Strategic Narrative

Senior management identify having a strong strategic narrative as the main factor accounting for higher engagement at specialist trusts like the Royal Marsden. As Cally Palmer described, the Royal Marsden has a *'unitary mission'* that is to find better ways to diagnose and treat cancer whilst offering patients the best and most personal experience of care. Sam Greenhouse, Assistant Director of Organisational Development echoed this, saying the trust has a *'very clear strategic narrative of helping patients with cancer. It's quite clear and specific. That makes for a good starting point'*.

Staff clearly understand this common purpose and they are able to see how their role contributes towards it – the trust comes second in the country in terms of staff agreeing that their role makes a difference to patients.

Unlike many trusts, the Royal Marsden has not been using a documented set of organisational values. They insist that there has always been a sense that employees at the trust shared an implicit set of values. However, the trust is now looking to set these out more explicitly. This is in recognition of the challenges that will face the trust in the future. As Sam Greenhouse explained, they want to be able to demonstrate that they are *'holding true to those values'*.

### Leadership

There is a strong sense of leadership at the Royal Marsden. Cally Palmer has been in her role for fifteen years and she believes that stability in the top team helps support engagement. First, it helps build trust and recognition. As Cally argued *'it takes a while for you to build trust when you come in to a new organisation as a director or chief executive... The more stable you are the more there is a sense of trust, I think that makes a difference'*. She also highlighted the fact that change and instability at the top can lead to inconsistency in terms of approach and direction. Stability on the other hand allows

for long term planning and consistency; *'it's a long-term game really in terms of trying to engage people in your mission, what you're trying to deliver'*.

There is regular contact between senior leaders and frontline staff at the trust. Cally Palmer believes that having a visible senior leadership team is important *'so it doesn't look like you're stuck isolated in an ivory tower somewhere'*. Previously, the Chief Executive had engaged directly with employees around specific issues. But in response to employee feedback that they did not see enough of her, the Trust has since introduced regular 'town hall' style open forum meetings. These are open for all employees to attend and to ask questions of the senior managers. As Sam Greenhouse said, these meetings allow for *'ongoing dialogue and a presence'* and they have been well received by staff. As one employee described, *'I thought they were really valuable. It's important to hear those messages from people at the top'*.

In addition to the regular town hall meetings, senior managers have started to do more walkabouts and visits to services. Jhangir Iqbal, the joint Chair of Staff Side described how *'rather than hearing from the middle managers and others saying how good things are, they go and hear from people on the shop floor to hear how they are'*. Frontline staff are invited to board level meetings such as the Quality Assurance and Risk Committee to input their views. Cally Palmer highlighted the desire to *'put frontline together with senior leadership whenever you can'*. The board gets a raft of KPIs on patient experience, care quality and finance, but it's seen as important to get the views of frontline clinical and other staff in order to complement this and *'triangulate'* with the information they receive.

The approach is clearly effective, with the Royal Marsden performing higher than the average for specialist trusts and far higher than the national average in terms of recognition of the leadership, communication between senior management and staff, and confidence in commitment of senior management to patient care.

## **Investing in staff**

Learning and development is seen as a priority at the trust. This is in part due to the focus on research and clinical excellence, but it is also seen as important in helping employees feel valued. As one employee explained *'there's a commitment to staff. People don't just come here and get put to work. There are development plans to try and move them to the next level'*.

There is a strong focus on mandatory training, which is linked in to the appraisal process, but there is also a wide variety of extra training on offer. This includes a programme for managers, Learning to Lead, which helps them develop all the skills they need to engage their teams. In recognition of how challenging the work can be, there is extensive help on offer through occupational health and staff support, ensuring that staff are *'able to keep working at their best – physically and emotionally'*.

Employees really value the support they get in terms of learning and development. As one said, *'it really helps people feel they're being invested in'*. Another argued that *'if you invest in staff, they feel appreciated and acknowledged for the work they do and they'll go above and beyond what is expected'*.

## Team working

There is a strong emphasis at team working at the Royal Marsden. This is in part due to the specialist nature of the work. Treating cancer requires multi-disciplinary team working; as Cally Palmer explained *'it's a team business if you like.'* She highlighted the close relationships she has with the Medical Director, the Chief Nurse and the Chief Operating Officer. These are then replicated throughout the organisation with close relationships between nursing, medicine and management.

Employees reflected this team spirit, with one saying *'there's a real sense of pride and of team work. The staff are proud of the service and what we deliver'*. The trust performs significantly higher than both the specialist trust average and the average for all trusts in terms of effective team working.

## Managing Change

With growing pressures on all areas of the NHS, management at the Royal Marsden acknowledge that there will need to be significant changes in the next few years and that this could potentially be a threat to engagement. As Sam Greenhouse set out, *'one of the challenges we've got is to sustain our levels of engagement. It's easier when times are easier but it's going to get harder'*.

Involving employees is seen as crucial in the change process. As Cally Palmer acknowledged, *'it's terribly important to listen because the clinicians and the people on the ground know their services better than I do'*. Ensuring staff are involved in change is seen as important both in terms of enhancing patient care and protecting employee engagement through the difficult process.

The trust is doing more to involve employees in the business planning process, either through whole-system events or through focusing on key themes across the organisation. Employees are encouraged to come up with suggestions for improvements. As one explained, *'staff are involved in the changes. Some people are fearful of change and do find it difficult but more and more staff are contributing to change and to ideas about how we can work differently, they're on board with it and not fighting it, we're harnessing their energies in a really positive way, and understanding it more. That's to be encouraged and without that we'd be really struggling'*.

This is supported by effective partnership working with Staff Side. As Jhangir Iqbal, joint chair of Staff Side described, *'both sides respect each other's standpoint and we work in collaboration to achieve the best we can in the circumstances both for the staff and for the organisation as a whole'*.

Throughout the change process, there remains a strong focus on patient care as the trust's priority. Cally Palmer emphasised how important it was to engage with staff in a way that resonates with them; *'it's all about using resources wisely, it's not about penny-pinching as that doesn't engage anybody'*. One employee who explained that while she felt that the focus at her previous trust was solely on saving money, *'here it's like, yes we need to balance the books, but ultimately the message I'm always being given is patient quality comes first'*. Again, this comes out in the staff survey which shows that the Royal Marsden outperforms the specialist trust average in terms of perceptions that patient care is the organisation's top priority, a figure which has increased since last year despite these challenging times.

**Key lessons:**

- Specialist trusts like the Royal Marsden benefit from having a clear and powerful strategic narrative that can drive employee engagement.
- Regular communication between senior leaders and the frontline is vital in order to build trust.
- Investing in learning, development and progression helps employees feel valued.
- Having a strong sense of team working can help build employee engagement.
- During times of change, employee engagement is vital in order to support innovation and guide decision-making.

**This case study was conducted by Joe Dromey, Head of Policy and Research at the IPA in February 2014. We'd like to thank all of the staff who took the time out to speak to us. It formed part of a wider project looking at employee engagement in the NHS. You can see the full report [here](#).**



*The* ROYAL MARSDEN