

The London Borough of Lewisham: Innovation in times of change

Introduction

The London Borough of Lewisham is a local authority based in South East London. It has 2,500 staff, delivering a wide variety of local services to a population of almost 300,000 people.

Why did London Borough of Lewisham want to use social media to engage staff?

The London Borough of Lewisham has already undergone substantial change following a reduction in funding from central government of around 40% since 2010. With significant further reductions in funding due to come in the coming years, the Lewisham Future Programme Board has been set up to see how transformation in terms of resources and processes could save money and deliver more efficient service to residents.

The London Borough of Lewisham sees engaging employees during times of change as a priority. As Andreas Ghosh, Head of Human Resources at the Council described: *"The more you can involve them [employees], the better....Employees need to understand the need for the change."* Adrian Wardle, Head of Communications at the Council says that before implementing any change programme, organisations must ensure that they are involving their employees in the decision-making process and motivate them come up with innovative ideas; *"We are trying to engage them in how we change services, and to maintain their motivation and use their expertise and their insight into how we can provide things differently and more efficiently"*. Employee engagement and perceptions of voice at London Borough of Lewisham are seen as remaining relatively high despite the challenges facing the organisation and its workforce.

There are a number of existing employee voice channels at London Borough of Lewisham which are used to involve employees in change. These include regular team meetings, wider meetings led by the Chief Executive and other senior staff, and formal consultations. In the last staff survey, alongside the regular questions, employees were asked to suggest ideas for reducing spending in their area without negatively impacting on service provision and outcomes for residents. There were several hundred responses.

In addition to these established channels for employee voice, social media was seen as another potentially effective way of engaging staff in addressing the challenges facing the organisation, and in *'harnessing their ideas and innovation.'*

What did they do?

In March 2014, the London Borough of Lewisham launched its 'We.Create' social media tool that aims to *'crowdsource ideas from staff'* on re-designing services and reducing costs while preserving service quality and outcomes to residents.

We.Create has been championed by the Lewisham Future Programme Board and has been used by Heads of Service from across the Council to canvass the ideas of staff for improving the workings of the council. These ideas have fed directly into the savings process.

As Geeta Subramaniam-Mooney, Head of Service, Crime Reduction and Supporting People at the Council explained: *"We set up a challenge [in We.Create] and staff can login and comment. The idea is for people to have a conversation about the challenge and generate ideas."*

As well as suggesting ideas, staff can also vote and comment on other people's ideas, enabling staff to shape suggestions collaboratively, and enabling managers to identify which suggestions resonate

with employees. Geeta Subramaniam-Mooney described it as being *‘very much an iterative process’* which allowed for solutions to emerge through discussion and interaction on We.Create. Employees who identify practical and implementable ideas are invited to get involved with the transformation team on their delivery. The process was supported by the Transformation Team who would monitor the discussion and take off inappropriate comments where they did appear, but this was rare.

Alongside the channels for employee voice, the culture is also seen as being important. As Adrian Wardle described, *‘I think we have a culture that encourages consultation and engagement’*

What have the results been?

We.Create has led to many employee ideas being taken forward. These include:

- Moving high transaction services online to reduce processing times for customers and staff
- Charging admin fees for blue badges to generate more income for the council
- Generating money through co-ordinated advertising, which is currently being reviewed by the Income Board
- Differential parking changes based on different demand for parking at different times in the day
- ‘Digi buddies’ to help vulnerable people improve their digital skills. This aimed to ensure that people who lacked digital skills weren’t left behind by ‘channel shift’ as more services go online.

In the year from July 2014, 533 staff members had used the system with over 100 ideas being raised and 3,815 unique page views.

As Adrian Wardle explained: *“The advantages of ‘We.Create’ is that we can post challenges in a timely manner, open the challenge for six weeks, the manager looks at the ideas coming in and....focuses people’s thoughts around particular questions which are then fed into the live discussion that is happening at the very top of the organisation.”* In this way, We.Create is seen as supporting focused innovation on the business-critical issues that the organisation needs to tackle, which can deliver relevant and usable solutions, rather than being a ‘free-for-all’.

For Adrian Wardle, one of the real drivers of innovation is the ability of teams to work across services. In order to innovate, he argues, the Council must encourage collaborative working and knowledge-sharing across teams and services. We.Create was seen as an effective way of supporting cross-team working and breaking down organisational siloes.

Through allowing staff the opportunity to suggest innovations and see them taken up, We.Create is seen as a tool to promote a sense of voice, involvement and employee engagement. As Adrian Wardle described, *‘they can see how their ideas feed in to the very top of the organisation around how we deal with a particular challenge, whether that might be how do we transform our early intervention services for vulnerable families, or how do we increase our income in a more commercial way’*

Where are they now?

The London Borough of Lewisham continues to face significant funding reductions and the need to make challenging savings. The organisation is committed to continuing to involve staff in the process of change, and to invite their suggestions and innovations, including through the use of social technology.

Key Lessons

- Digital platforms can help support employee-led innovation through an iterative and collaborative process.
- Posting challenges and having time-limited discussions can help support focused innovation that is directed towards business-critical issues and produces relevant, usable suggestions.
- Social media should be used alongside other voice mechanisms, and it should be supported by a culture of voice and involvement.
- Allowing staff to contribute their ideas and suggestions in this way can support a sense of voice and engagement at work.