

Diversity and Inclusion and Employee Engagement at Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust

Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust provides a range of health and social care services to people in south-east London, specialising in community health, mental health and learning disability services. Their workforce comprises around 3,500 people from various backgrounds and is based out of 125 sites across Bromley, Bexley, Greenwich and Kent.

Senior leaders at the Trust have a real commitment in supporting a diverse and inclusive workforce. As James Kellock, non-executive Director at Oxleas explained: *“it [diversity] is essential for several reasons. Firstly, if we don’t have a diverse workforce, we can’t recruit the best people, and secondly it is essential in establishing a good relationship with our patients, to reflect the communities we serve.”* Oxleas takes engaging with their diverse workforce very seriously - with various staff networks in place to encourage collaborative working, and inclusive decision making.

Employee engagement at the Trust has also significantly increased in the last decade. Simon Hart, Director of HR & OD attributes this to consistent support from the senior leadership team. As he explained: *“Do you cast the seed [of engagement] on stony ground or fertile ground. The fertile ground is around the expectations of the senior leadership team in the organisation. We believe in an open and transparent culture, and that we should be able to justify any decision we take to any member of staff.”* Oxleas now has the highest levels of employee engagement among the 57 mental health and learning disability Trusts in the country. Analysis by the Kings Fund has shown that Oxleas has had the highest level of staff engagement of any organisation over the last four years.

Senior Leadership

The senior leadership team at Oxleas plays a significant role in driving employee engagement and diversity and inclusion. As Juliana Frederick-James, Chair of the BME network said: *“The reality is that I don’t think you will meet any person at a senior level at Oxleas who would disagree that diversity and equality are important to the trust.”*

In order to build a strong relationship with staff from the very start, Stephen Firn, Chief Executive of the Trust is the first person new recruits meet at their induction. Wendy Lyon, Chair of Staff Side explained that Stephen welcomes staff to the organisation and is very keen to find out what the new recruits think about the Trust and how their first week in their new posts have gone. He feels this is important in getting a fresh perspective on the organisation and making all newcomers feel valued right from the start.

Although Oxleas has consistently been achieving high employee engagement levels, the Trust does not like to rest on its laurels. As Simon Hart explained: *“staff compare themselves with other Trusts and how they compare from last year”*, and so the leadership team is always trying to improve conditions to make their employees feel more engaged.

Christine Rivers, Head of Equalities and Human Rights at the Trust believes that a *“targeted approach”* has helped to improve employee engagement levels across various groups of the workforce. For example, the NHS Staff Survey of 2013 had shown significant gaps in employee engagement between disabled employees and their colleagues. However, the gap in engagement at Oxleas was considerably lower. As Christine Rivers explained: *“I have been focussing on disability as a particular area that we need to do some work on”*. This resulted in a staff survey being carried out to see if reasonable adjustments for disabled employees were in place, and by launching the Disability Action Group (DAG) to look at how the Trust can make improvements in supporting staff with disabilities. As Jackie Lo, member of DAG and a Health and Safety Coordinator described: *“it [DAG] gives us that extra voice, because leadership has always been supportive in terms of reasonable adjustments.”*

Another major achievement for Oxleas in recent years is being listed amongst the top 100 employers in Stonewall’s Index of Workplace Equality and fourth amid NHS organisations in the 2014 list of gay friendly places to work. Christine Rivers, Head of Equalities and Human Rights, who spear-headed the campaign believes this was achieved by having a vision and working towards it: *“when I speak to other organisations, they say they don’t know where to start and I always say – start anyway”*. She thinks that taking the first steps are essential in achieving organisational objectives. No matter how poor the results might be initially *“once the exercise is done, organisations will know where they stand when it comes to diversity and inclusion and what needs to be improved.”* Maeve Malley and Martin Smythe, of the LGBT network firmly believe that Christine’s role was pivotal in making Oxleas one of the top employers for members of the LGBT community. As Martyn explained: *“the major factor was Christine really driving things forward and pulling it all together”*. James Kellock additionally adds that Christine’s passion for her role and the way *“she balances her enthusiasm with a sense of pragmatism”* has helped to address issues various other groups of the workforce faced at Oxleas.

For Christine, the non-directive leadership style of Simon Hart, Director of HR & OD has been extremely important. This has allowed her to implement innovative practices at organisational level. As Christine described: *“Simon is a very good HR leader. In terms of my role, he is very flexible and lets me do what I want. He is not a directive leader and that means we can test something out and see how it works and develop it.”*

Employee Networks and Communication Mechanisms

Oxleas is proud to have an open and transparent culture where communication between employees and the leadership team is encouraged. Employee networks at Oxleas are crucial in supporting and sustaining this. Oxleas has staff networks for BME, LGBT, Disability and Lived Experience of Mental Health. These provide an opportunity for consultation and sharing of information as well as proactively supporting the organisation as a whole. As Simon Hart described; *“they [networks] have really matured and gone from strength to strength both in numbers and in their desire and ability to be able to contribute to the organisation.”*

Maeve Malley, Chair of the LGBT network believes that organisational support for employee networks at Oxleas has been very consistent. As she described: *“they [senior leadership team at Oxleas] are extremely supportive about having agreements around the networks looking at new policies, and being involved in both the delivery of systems.”* The Equalities and Human Rights Governance Group at Oxleas has representation from chairs of all the networks and Christine Rivers believes that this has been very important in increasing transparency around organisational policies and establishing the trust amongst members of various networks. Furthermore, Maeve Malley also believes that having a network for LGBT employees has helped members to better engage with the organisation as they are keener to share and debate organisational policies.

Two of the newer networks at Oxleas NHS Trust are the Disability Action Group (DAG) and Lived Experience of Mental Health Network (LEN), which were established to focus on the Trust’s systems and practices for disabled staff and those who perceive to have mental health problems respectively. Sarah Paynter, Chair of LEN regards that while it is new in comparison to the LGBT or BME networks, LEN’s existence and the recognition given to it by the senior leadership team at Oxleas has helped its members immensely. As she described: *“I think initially what a lot of members have said is that just knowing that it [LEN] exists is helpful in itself because what a lot of people have said is that they have not felt they were able to talk about their own lived experience, that it almost had to be a secret and so just knowing that there is an actual network within Oxleas is acknowledging that.”* Jackie Lo, member of DAG thinks that having a network representing disabled staff has helped members to drive engagement in the Trust.

Employee networks at Oxleas are also encouraged to work collaboratively and promote each other’s work. As Christine mentioned: *“We had a network chairs meeting and LEN had a particular thing that they wanted to talk about, and it was using the BME and LGBT network as critical friends. Sometimes it was about problem solving, saying we have got this really difficult thing we want to think about, how can you help us?”* Christine Rivers firmly believes that collaboration between the networks is essential *“because members were saying how powerful it would be if the BME network promoted the LGBT network and vice versa.”*

Partnership Working at Oxleas

There is a strong commitment to partnership working with the trade unions at Oxleas. It is seen as important both to employee engagement and supporting diversity and inclusion at the Trust.

Partnership is also underpinned by a belief that both staff side and HR have a shared interest in organisational success. As Simon Hart explained, *"I thought if Wendy Lyon [Chair of Staff Side] and I can have a good relationship, we can make sure that the rest of HR mirrors that relationship with staff side and then that will allow managers to become more trusting of staff side. It will help them see that HR and staff side are having a mature dialogue."*

Wendy Lyon is also employed by the trust as Head of Partnership. As Wendy described: *"Stephen Firn [Chief Executive of Oxleas] wanted somebody that was totally independent as far as they could be. It didn't matter whether they were in the Union or not."* In the role she acts as an advocate for all staff, irrespective of union membership, ensuring that their views are heard and considered. Wendy reports directly to the Chief Executive and has regular access to all Directors. Wendy and her colleague Yvonne Hayes, who is also a UNITE steward, also run a series of focus groups in each directorate which give employees the chance to share their views and raise any concerns they might have anonymously. The findings of the focus groups are fed back to Directors who are expected to act on the issues identified, and report back on progress both to Wendy and their teams.

The Future

There is a recognition across the trust that there will continue to be significant changes over the next few years, and that this will pose a challenge to employees. Senior leaders at the trust are aware this could potentially impact employee engagement, but they are focused on ensuring this does not happen. As Simon Hart explained: *"I think the real challenge is the size of the change and the pace of it in the face of really difficult economic climate. So it becomes harder but also becomes more important that as things get harder, it actually just means we have to work a lot with staff in terms of talking to them and being more transparent."*