

# Engaging employees in new values and behavior at South West Trains

South West Trains is one of Britain's busiest commuter railways, with over 5,000 staff delivering services across 207 stations for 143 million passenger journeys every year. But shortly after taking up its franchise in 1998, it was plagued by a series of industrial disputes and pilloried in the UK press. During the last strike in 2001, managers were trained to do staff jobs. It broke the strike, but left a legacy of poor relationships between employees and line managers.

That year the company decided to address the major issues affecting its performance. Two action plans were initiated to tackle the problem head on: an employee consultation process to define a new, shared set of values for the whole organization, and a new HR strategy. "We knew it was going to take time," says Kelly Barlow, employee communications manager. "Trust was low and we wanted to rebuild it by changing the culture, not just instigate a one-off event. We worked on the premise that it was going to take five years."

## Putting employees center stage

A series of focus groups were set up led by HR staff who were specially trained as focus group facilitators. "We wanted employee buy-in straight away," says Barlow, who was project manager on the values and behaviors program.

At the time, the organization had 3,600 employees of which 10 percent took part. Questionnaires were sent out to other staff, expanding the number contributing to 1,000.

"We asked them what they liked about the company and what they'd like to change," says Barlow. The results came as no surprise: people wanted more honesty; to be recognized more; for the company to be known for its professionalism; people to work together more as teams; and better communication.

By November 2001, the list of values and their accompanying behaviors had been whittled down to 20, the final choice of the top seven lying with the board. They were: communication, honesty, respect, teamwork, professionalism, learning and recognition.

## Launching values and behaviors

Barlow and her team opted for a low-key launch, focusing first on the management team so values and behaviors could be embedded across the organization. "So many engagement programs fail," she says. "They fail because the management team isn't committed. They fail

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In December 2001, managing director Andrew Haines led a one-day conference introducing the values to the senior management group. Then in early 2002, the values were launched to the remaining 350 managers in a series of half-day

roadshows over a three-month period. "The relationship that had suffered most during the strikes was between employees and their managers," says Barlow. "Getting buy-in from managers was key – we needed them to be engaged when we went live with the launch."

Active role-playing exercises during the road shows helped managers see how people might behave differently in different scenarios. But Barlow found lack of enthusiasm was not the problem. "Once they understood what we were trying to achieve, there was a lot of pressure on us to get going." But because Barlow wanted to embed the values and behaviors in the organizational processes first, she held back. "Securing the time was probably one of the hardest things we did – I didn't want managers to put a poster up and think the job was done. They were getting updates in team meetings or sessions held by their directors, but there was no deliberate communication campaign at that stage."

## Aligning values and processes

While the roadshow was running, the HR team worked on its new employee-centered strategy, aligning its core products and processes with the values and behaviors. "We didn't want to introduce values but still not change the workplace," says Barlow. "We knew that our recruitment standards and performance management process had to be aligned with the values before we launched them."

There was a large-scale change program for recruitment standards and the company now recruits for attitude and trains for skills. The

introduction of a values model into the performance appraisal process has also had a huge impact on the company's culture: "That was a key turning point because when managers are measured on their behavior, you can start to see a change."

Another key activity was the introduction of a three-day leadership program for all managers, which began in December 2002 and is still running now as the management population has expanded to 560. "It's very personal and works on the premise of emotional intelligence," says Barlow (see More Information).

When it launched, the board of seven directors took part in the program as normal delegates, sending a strong message to other managers.

### Rolling out the values

Before the communication campaign was launched, managers were given briefs, posters and quick reference guides, all emphasizing the importance of introducing values to staff in face-to-face conversations. Another initiative, a local development appraisal called "Time with your manager," was introduced. "It's a key process for us, designed so people can discuss their performance based against our seven values," says Barlow.

After an initial pilot of the scheme in the retail customer service area in August 2003, it was rolled out to other operational staff such as guards, drivers and engineers in December that year. Because of the volumes of staff involved, it's an ongoing process, but the most recent employee survey revealed that 75 percent of frontline employees have now been through a session. "We're really pleased, but now we've got to focus more on the quality of those conversations," she adds.

### Getting outside expertise

After 18 months of activity, Barlow turned to consultants HarknessKennett in early 2004. "Right from the start, the program was all about changing behavior. I needed the agency's experience to get frontline staff engaged, so they knew what to do to start that behavioral change."

HarknessKennett began by running

management and employee focus groups to measure awareness and understanding of the new values. While managers largely understood why the changes were taking place, frontline staff didn't. The focus groups also explored how staff wanted to be communicated to, what changes they wanted to see and how they wanted to interact with their manager. "It gave us a really good understanding of how to apply the communications strategy," says Barlow. "We wanted to make sure our values and behaviors strategy was aligned with our customer service strategy, which linked to our vision. We made sure that we had the right key messages in place to go out with the new artwork for all seven values."

### The recognition value

Given the history of poor relations between managers and employees, in June 2004 a simple thank-you card scheme was introduced, emphasizing the recognition value. It also gave Barlow and HarknessKennett the chance to subtly reintroduce all of the values to employees.

HarknessKennett has done all the creative and communication behind the scheme launch, which complements more official HR recognition processes. "It means staff can get a simple thank you from managers for day-to-day work. Again, it's all about restoring that vital manager-employee relationship," says Barlow.

The cards give the recipient the choice of further recognition by having a tear-off slip for a prize draw. "I wanted the element of choice as some people like recognition and some don't." Winners are then published in the internal magazine, on the intranet and presented with a thank-you gift.

It's been popular – the first draw in September 2004 attracted 150 cards, the second in January 2005 attracted 326 cards. The scheme will now be rolled out in May, allowing all employees to give cards to anyone else in the company. It will be accompanied by an employee guidance book, which like the previous guidebook for managers, incorporates artwork for all the values and has been designed by

HarknessKennett. "We've used a drip-feed approach to communicate this key value, and will continue to do so with other values in time."

### Engaging in the future

Barlow plans to build on achievements made so far, by kicking off with another measurement of staff awareness and understanding this year. "If we get really high scores, our next stage will be to engage staff with more of the values."

It's still early days and by Barlow's reckoning the earliest the engagement program will be fully in place is 2007. But a workforce that's more motivated has helped the organization to put some of its long-term plans into action. It now runs an additional 405 trains each week and has added over 12,000 peak time seats.

Barlow is also encouraged by a 50 percent response rate for a staff survey in September 2004, compared to a response rate of just 26 percent in 2001. "That really signalled that things were different. We met all of our HR KPIs in terms of employee satisfaction, employee advocacy, pride, loyalty. Every single measure in our survey improved."

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