



Partnership between employers and trade unions

London Ambulance Service NHS Trust has been identified as an excellent example of engagement and partnership working in a report covering the private and public sectors which was prepared for the department of business, innovation and skills (MacLeod).

The authors noticed that the change in relationships came when the London Ambulance Service was widely regarded as a failing organisation, with performance poor and public confidence low. Both sides came together to begin discussions on a critical path to recovery. Senior managers admitted publicly that the service was struggling – an honest admission that was vital in gaining the trust of staff who were only too aware of the situation. Both sides accepted that the relationship between the unions and management was dysfunctional and was itself contributing to the difficulties at service and station level, with constant threats of industrial action, petty disputes erupting regularly and large numbers of grievances. Above all they recognized that the poor relationship made it difficult to get issues of importance to staff discussed and resolved. Engagement was at a low ebb.

A framework agreement was written and agreed, describing a commitment to new ways of relating and setting out the areas requiring discussion over the period of its operation. A new representative structure was developed, with shared responsibilities for professional running of meetings and handling of disagreements. This does not of course mean that disagreements never arise. What it does mean is that they are handled respectfully and constructively.

It took widespread recognition that the organisation was failing for this change to come about. All public sector organisations will be under pressure over the next few

years, which will require similar levels of realism and a similar willingness to talk and to listen. There is a perception in some quarters outside the ambulance service that relationships with Unions are not as constructive as they could be and because of that, bringing about modernisation and workforce development has been difficult. This is far from the case in fact and both Unions and employers have worked together, locally and nationally over the last few years to bring about significant change and modernisation.

Staff support schemes

Ambulance clinical staff are out on their own and in pairs and do get to see a good deal of distress and pain. While dealing with life threatening emergencies can lead to post traumatic stress, going to the less serious calls can be just as wearing.

In line with the NHS Constitution, Trusts provide support and opportunities for staff to maintain their health, well-being and safety. In the ambulance sector we recognise that many of employees will potentially be exposed to both individual and successive distressing situations and will work in a situational environment that would not normally be encountered by other health care workers.

A range of services are offered across Trusts include: -

Confidential counselling through the Occupational Health Department

- Through an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) which provides staff with 'Lifeworks' – a toolkit of personal and professional resources you can use everyday. 'Lifeworks' offers a confidential service 24/7.
- A Staff Support Network. A team of volunteers from across the Trust all of whom have extensive experience within the Ambulance Service. Volunteers in the Staff Support Network are there to help staff who work in all sectors of the Trust come to terms with things they have observed or dealt with over the phone such as traumatic incidents (cot deaths, serious road accidents, murders and serious injuries) and problems staff may have at work (training issues, relationships with colleagues).
- Confidential Helpline. This service puts staff in contact with a Non-Executive Director and was introduced for the benefit of staff who, for whatever reason, may feel unable to raise a problem through normal channels.
- Specialist Harassment Advisors have been introduced to provide guidance, assistance and advice on the prevention and/or remedy of bullying and harassment
- Access to trained mediator(s) within Trusts.
- Chaplaincy support – Chaplains working for Trusts that are available to offer support to staff.