

Developing business minded managers

'I admit it - I don't have the skills I need to do this job properly any more.' This confession comes from Janice*, a registered manager of a privately owned 16-bed residential home in Essex. Even though she is a qualified nurse, has achieved NVQ Level 4 in management and leadership and comes across as an able and confident manager. She knows that with all the changes that are going on in the care sector there are big gaps in her knowledge and skills. She continues: 'It doesn't get talked about much, but many of us working in adult social care are feeling increasingly out of our depth, we simply have not been trained in the management and business skills needed to operate successfully in an increasingly complex and commercially focused world.'

In most businesses, it would be rare for an experienced manager to confess so openly that they lack the skills to do their work, but this is a view that is increasingly being expressed by care home managers and service providers.

TIME TO BE BUSINESS ORIENTATED

These are tough times in the voluntary and private care sectors and as lots of care business owners will say, running a high quality residential care establishment profitably, in an increasingly competitive market, means that managers have to be much more business orientated and enterprising than in the past. Skills such as marketing and customer service, finance and team leadership are in increasing demand.

In response to this increasing demand, Janice's HR Director, Lawrence*, came to the decision that the organisation needed to invest in higher education level management training. This decision was also driven by the realisation that the majority of its managers no longer have sufficient management training to do what was expected of them. All of its managers have a nursing background and although they have had some management training this has not sufficiently prepared them for the sort of business skills they now need.

Lawrence is aware that in order for a business to develop, it must seek out ways to enhance the skills of its staff. He commented: 'As a company we realised that we couldn't continue muddling through – it wasn't fair on our managers and if we want to survive and flourish in the future we just have to become more

It makes good business sense for a care business owner to ensure that their managers are trained in modern business techniques. Richard Field explores how companies are using training to raise their game to meet the significant challenges of a rapidly changing business environment.

enterprising and professional in all our management activities.'

MARKETING STRATEGIES

Marketing is an area where Lawrence reports the company is already reaping the rewards of the work-based foundation degree that Janice and a group of its managers are undertaking. 'We are working hard to develop a more consistent market presence and although we don't expect our managers to do the marketing of their service centres all on their own, it is very valuable when they understand and can act on the basic principles.'

In the past, Lawrence had noticed that managers were very reluctant to discuss marketing, but at a recent managers' meeting he was surprised by what had happened as a result of the training they had received. 'I was amazed to hear the informed and confident discussion that was going on between them, about things like our USP (unique selling propositions) and our market position in relation to our competitors. It's this type of shared language and business savvy that is already making a big difference to our bottom line.'

MYSTERY SHOPPING

An owner manager of a private residential care home reported that while doing the marketing module of a work-based care management foundation degree she became more involved in ways to improve customer service. She was curious to know how her own care home appeared to the outside world, so she asked a friend to act as a mystery shopper and phone the home posing as someone enquiring about a place for her elderly mother.

The manager was shocked by what happened next. 'It's not that the staff member who answered the phone was rude or anything, he just came over as being completely vague, and asked my friend to phone back - he didn't even ask for her contact details. If my friend had been a genuine customer I'm sure that we would have lost her.' As part of her work-based coursework, the manager wrote a marketing plan that included a customer enquiry response process.

Now all her staff have a clear understanding of how to deal with customer enquiries. 'For the first time ever we have a proper marketing and customer service plan and all our prospective customers and service users →

RETURN ON INVESTMENT - HOW HIGHER EDUCATION IMPROVES BUSINESS EFFICIENCY

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Marketing skills;
- Team leadership management;
- Customer service;
- Financial and business planning.
- Project management;
- Presentation skills.

BENEFITS TO THE BUSINESS

- Increase staff motivation;
- Improve staff retention;
- Greater service user and stakeholder satisfaction
- Improve standards of care;
- Better cost controls;
- Enhanced reputation with commissioning agents.

→ are now dealt with positively, considerably and efficiently – even at the busiest times of the day. Without the training I would not have had the knowledge or confidence to make these changes.’

HIGHER EDUCATION

People management and team leadership skills are also a vital ingredient for a successful manager in the care sector. Many companies and voluntary care organisations are finding that investing in university level skills training such as foundation degrees is saving both time and money. When managers improve their leadership skills the workforce tends to be more productive, better motivated and have fewer employment related disputes.

Other business skills that many managers in the care sector now need include financial and business planning. Well-written strategic and annual business plans are increasingly important. Such plans provide clear directions for the business and it is increasingly common for local commissioning agents to request copies of these documents. Higher education level management training develops these skills both in terms of business and financial

planning. Work-based foundation degrees in management can also provide managers with the opportunity to practice and hone their presentation skills – particularly useful when giving presentations to local commissioning agents.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Lawrence told me that when the company first introduced business skills training there were fears that it might lead to an approach that was overly commercial and the company would lose sight of the fact that they were in the business of caring for people. Lawrence’s approach was to ensure that they chose business training that embedded the company’s values and ethics. In fact, everyone seems to gain, he says: ‘If anything our service users receive better care and attention as a result of the business being run more efficiently.’

Several managers have spoken about the difficulty they had in finding the right type of management training. A commonly expressed view is that much of the existing care sector management and leadership training available is overly biased towards the NHS and does not provide for the business related skills that are so urgently

needed in the private and voluntary sectors.

Just how bad the situation is, is a matter of opinion. One director of training I spoke to thought that training provision for management and business skills in the voluntary and private care sectors was seriously behind the times. He said: 'For a multimillion pound sector employing thousands of people it's hopelessly out of date. The care sector is running on a cottage-industry model of skills needs that is at least 20 years out of date – it's time the industry woke up.'

Many people feel that management and business skills in voluntary and private care are in short supply and that the mix of traditional training available is inadequate to meet the demands of a sector that faces increasingly complex operational and business challenges. Perhaps it is time that regulators, employers and managers begin to make business skills training a real priority.

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* Real names have not been used in this article

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CASE STUDY: THE ENABLE GROUP

The Derbyshire based Enable Group is an award winning company that holds Bronze Investors in People status. It employs over 600 staff that provide a range of services including residential care, day services and housing for independent and supported living. The company is typical of a new breed of care sector organisations that are putting innovative and forward looking business training at the centre of its development strategy.

Paul Stapleton, Head of Day Services, is in no doubt about the value of business focused training. 'The voluntary and private care sector is experiencing a period of unprecedented change. Regulators, service users and commissioners alike are demanding greater flexibility and quality at a time when the public purse is being tightened. This can only be achieved through better trained staff working more effectively.'

The Enable Group is committed to strengthening its business skill-base at all levels with a mix of training approaches. A group of their key managers are currently undertaking a two-year work-based foundation degree in management through distance learning at Anglia Ruskin University.

In addition to this management level training initiative, the whole organisation is being prepared for the changes that are taking place, particularly in relation to the personalisation and transformation agendas. A special in-house 'Personalisation Training Team' has been formed to develop and deliver training courses that look at all aspects of change and its implications including legal, funding and policies. Paul comments: 'This training is being rolled out across the organisation, we are determined that every member of staff is up to speed with the knowledge and skills they need to do their jobs and deliver excellent cost effective services.'