

THE MANAGEMENT OF PEOPLE - REPUTATION

There used to be a saying, “My word is my bond”, which is perhaps in the light of recent events, somewhat ironic since it tended to be associated with the world of banking and finance. Reputation and, by implication, trust is hard won, but easily lost:

- The damage done to the reputation of the global banking industry by the financial crisis of 2008 will, I believe, take decades – perhaps a generation – to repair
- Who can measure the reputational cost of the ‘Horse Meat’ scandal to, amongst others, Tesco,
- What are the long term reputational costs to Bangladesh as a Country and its economy of the Rana Plaza disaster,
- What was the reputational cost to the staff of the News of the World, following the phone hacking scandal, and;
- What was the reputational cost to MP’s following the expenses scandal of 2009?

The list is pretty well endless and readers can doubtless think of their own examples in all countries and sectors. For me the key issue is that this loss of reputation was largely attributable to the actions of individuals, whether acting alone or collectively, which is part of the reason why your people are not just your greatest asset, but also, potentially, your greatest liability. Organisations, I would suggest, unless they are not concerned with their reputation, which would be worrying indeed, need a clear set of values.

An organisation’s values are neither something created by the Board and promulgated like the Ten Commandments, nor are they the creation of the HR department. If you want your people to take ownership of your values, you should involve them in their formulation. The Board/Executive needs to show leadership and should develop the first draft for discussion; this also serves the useful purpose of showing all their people that this is something that they (The Board) consider important. We are not talking ‘War and Peace’ here, your values statement should summarise the organisation’s core values in language that all your people, together with your customers and suppliers can understand. You are probably talking about no more than a list of 8-10, so no more than a single A4 page in large type. If in doubt, apply the ‘KISS’ principle; keep it short and simple.

So how do you involve your people in the formulation of your organisation’s values? My suggestion would be to include it as a ‘big ticket’ item in your regular team briefings. In larger organisations there is probably some form of employee consultation forum, if so then get it on the agenda for that body. Once you have a final draft, then you might consider circulating it to customers and suppliers for any comments. Ultimately this is about reputation and how your values will reinforce it and underpin it, so why not involve customers and suppliers in the process?

There is a major problem with having a statement of values and that is that everyone and I do mean everyone, particularly the Board, has to ‘walk the talk’ and their behaviours have to reflect the values. However, in due course, they will become part of the organisation’s culture, ‘the way we do things here’. This then has major and long lasting benefits for the organisation:

- ✓ It helps with recruitment. It enhances the organisation as an ‘employer of choice’. Applicants have some understanding of the culture of the organisation, before they apply,
- ✓ New starters understand the values expected of them,
- ✓ Deviation from the values will result in peer group pressure to conform,
- ✓ Customers and suppliers will appreciate being associated with an organisation with clear values that it adheres to, and;
- ✓ Reputational risk will be reduced.

So what might your values statement contain? I am not going to be prescriptive, every organisation must develop its own values, but here are some general thoughts to start the process moving:

- We value our People and our People value our Customers and Suppliers,
- We treat all our People with Dignity and Respect and our People treat their colleagues and Customers with Dignity and Respect,
- We act with Integrity in all our business dealings,
- We actively encourage openness and honesty within our organisation,
- We encourage initiative, coupled with responsibility,
- Our Reputation is critical to our success. Our People are actively encouraged to protect our reputation.
- We encourage our people to voice their concerns when they believe that colleagues are not acting in accordance with our values,

Organisations such as NHS Trusts and Social Services departments, which have certainly experienced their fair share of reputational issues in recent years, can simply substitute clients and/or patients for customers. I am certain that many, perhaps most, such organisations already have a Values Statement, but the key issue is that they really do have to 'walk the talk'; a values statement is not simply 'window dressing'. The Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust had a values statement, which is reproduced below. I shall not comment on the content, which I have not changed, but would ask a couple of fairly straightforward questions:

- Had all of the Trust's staff taken real ownership of these values and accountability for them, could the scandalous conditions have ever arisen?
- Had the Trust's Board and Executive 'walked the talk' and been seen as exemplars of the values, would the scandal have come about?

My answer, on both counts is probably not and many people have suffered and continue to suffer as a direct consequence of that failure. One, or two, individual failures would be understandable albeit disagreeable, but the problems at 'Mid-Staffs' were endemic.

It would be unfortunate and wrong if all NHS Trusts were to be tarnished by the scandal at Mid Staffs'. There are exemplars of superb care, kindness and excellent treatment. Based on my personal experience, here are some shining examples:

- ✓ University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust (Rugby & Walsgrave),
- ✓ Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust (John Radcliffe),
- ✓ South Warwickshire NHS Foundation Trust (Warwick), and;
- ✓ West Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Trust.

Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust - Values¹

Our Values

Together with our staff we have developed a set of Themes and Values which, along with our motto 'Because We Care' form a framework for a positive and supportive environment for our patients, visitors and staff. It is only through our staff's commitment to the care they provide that our Themes and Values can continue to be fulfilled.

Care for people

We are caring and compassionate in all that we do

We put the care and safety of our patients at the centre of the way we work

We are courteous, considerate and respectful to our patients and their families, and to our colleagues

We protect the dignity of our patients and their families, and of our colleagues

Listen and improve

We actively seek the views of our patients and communities, and respond by improving our services

We actively seek the views of our colleagues, and respond by improving the ways we work together

We believe that we must never stop learning and finding better ways of working

We help our colleagues to maintain and develop their capabilities

Work together

We work together as one team to deliver safe and caring service to our patients

We communicate and share information to deliver efficient and effective service to our patients and our colleagues

We are accountable to our colleagues for our personal contribution to the delivery of service to our patients

Do the right thing

We understand and respect the frameworks and guidelines that regulate our work

We challenge any process that stops us delivering safe, caring service to our patients

We do what we say we will do

There have, in recent years, been a number of cases – the horsemeat scandal being just one – where organisations have suffered significant reputational damage because of failures in their supply chain. Those same organisations very often make extensive use of audits of their suppliers. Such audits, which undoubtedly have their place, tend to rely upon the honesty of the auditors and the honesty of suppliers, neither of which can be assured. I do not doubt the honesty and integrity of most auditors and suppliers, but if a supplier is cutting corners are the auditors/you going to get honest answers? As my former colleagues at Responsible Trade Worldwide² (RTW) would say, part of the answer is to "Give the People a Voice". Organisations like RTW provide that part of the answer through properly validated and anonymised surveys that can be completed:

- On paper,
- On-line, and;
- Via IVR (mobile telephone).

Reputation is of course not just about organisations, it is also about individuals and even nations. I spent more than 20 years as an Interim Executive and soon realised that, in the eyes of a potential client, I was as good as my last assignment. That meant that establishing and maintaining my (good) reputation was crucial to continued business success. Some Interim Service Providers will say that there are thousands of Interim Executives in the UK, which is untrue. There are certainly thousands of independent contractors, but perhaps only a thousand, maybe even as many as two thousand interim executives and not one of them can afford damage to their reputation; bad news travels very fast! Reputation is also inextricably linked with Corporate Governance, failures in corporate governance can have a massive and negative effect on an organisation's reputation and may even imperil its very survival.

¹ <http://www.midstaffs.nhs.uk/Work-For-Us/Our-Values.aspx>

² <http://www.responsibletradeworldwide.com>