

“How to solve the staff wellbeing equation to boost performance”

It's not exactly been plain sailing in education over the past few years. With external pressures of inspections, assessments and curriculum changes and a notable increase in the need for student mental health and pastoral support, it's no surprise that education is ranked as one of the top sectors for work-related stress by the Health and Safety Executive. *Dr Sarah Hattam reflects...*



The Teacher Wellbeing Index, commissioned by The Education Support Partnership published in

November 2019, reports that work-related stress for teachers has risen for the third consecutive year.

Progressive businesses up and down the UK acknowledge the truth that their people are their greatest asset and it may seem that wellbeing is the new corporate “mot du jour”. But there is a wealth of compelling evidence which demonstrates that organisations that have healthier workforces are considerably more productive and outperform peer organisations.

In the current climate of increasing financial constraint, not least the recently increased employer levy for the teacher pension scheme, schools can expect a real return on investment of up to £9 per £1 spent when they put staff wellbeing fairly and squarely on the agenda¹.

Within the school setting, this uplift in the performance and engagement of staff translates to improved student outcomes. Which in turn influences customer choice and is likely to give an independent school that places staff wellbeing high on its agenda a valuable edge over its competition.

But what are the top tips for running a successful school staff wellbeing programme?

Be data driven

There's no cookie-cutter approach when it comes to staff wellbeing and performance. With a multitude of potential factors affecting performance, it pays to identify which of these are having a positive or negative impact on your staff. We suggest using an external provider of a robust, statistically

validated staff survey rather than merely seeking in-house feedback. This approach reassures staff about anonymity which facilitates open and honest feedback in order to unravel the potentially complex web of factors that are really driving staff performance in your school.

Herzberg's two factor theory of motivation shows us that, in any organisation, there are certain factors which create satisfaction and often a different set of factors which lead to dissatisfaction and negativity. Unless these latter “blockers” to staff performance are identified and addressed, many of the so-called “feel good” positive initiatives will be ineffective. It's a pre-requisite for every school to understand and action theirs. The well-known words of David Foster Wallace: “The fish are the last to see the water” underline the importance of understanding your school's culture. An externally delivered and robust engagement and wellbeing survey will provide a valuable snapshot into the quality of your “water”.

Be evidence-based

It's all too easy to adopt a tokenist approach to wellbeing, implementing seemingly nice-to-have initiatives like “Free Fruit Friday”, lunchtime mindfulness sessions or other one-offs. Not only do staff immediately see through these (back to Herzberg again), but such approaches never yield lasting improvement in staff wellbeing and performance. On the other hand however, identifying that a school has a sleep-deprived workforce provides valuable data which can then be addressed in an evidence-based way using targeted interventions.

Get senior team buy-in

The most effective wellbeing programmes have senior

management team buy-in. Because for interventions to have maximum impact they need to be triple-layered, providing tangible outputs at individual, team and whole organisation level. Initiatives need to enable individuals to better understand and implement healthy lifestyle changes. Paramount also is the identification and embedding of healthier ways of working both within teams and across the school as a whole. This will ensure that such healthy working practices endure in the medium to long-term.

Change – proceed with caution

Pace and management of change is a common denominator which can affect staff wellbeing and engagement adversely. There is a recently published study which involved making rats anxious so that researchers could monitor the effects of a new anti-anxiety medication. The researchers found that the most effective method of inducing stress for these lab rats was to introduce constant small changes within their environment. We're wary of drawing unreasonable conclusions, but we often identify that a common trigger for increased stress levels in schools is the pace of change. Pace and communication of such change is critical and in the words of George Bernard Shaw “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place”.

Elevate Energy Levels

Schools recruit staff on the basis of their professional skills, competence and experience. This is a given. But these vital attributes are only one factor in staff performance. They may be multiplied or diminished by the level of sustainable energy which any individual is able to deploy during the working day.

Learning From Best Practice

Mrs Sue Woodroffe, Principal of The Grammar School at Leeds shares their experience of addressing and improving colleague wellbeing.

“As the Principal of a large and vibrant school, with a dynamic pace and many competing demands on staff time, I was as aware as any school leader must be of the concerns around teacher workload just over two years ago. However, despite some small initiatives that we introduced, we never seemed to make a breakthrough.

When Concilio Health came on board, we started to believe that the impossible might be within our reach. Working with the baseline survey dataset gathered by Concilio Health, and their subsequent recommendations, we strategically addressed the three areas which were identified as having the greatest impact on staff wellbeing. We used their evidence-based, data-driven approach, under-pinned by the latest research to work on these. This won the respect and trust of our staff. We also established some new norms. Wellbeing was included on every agenda for every team at every level in the organisation as a standing item. We are still on a journey towards improved performance through wellbeing for all our staff and it remains a work in progress. Have we cracked it? No and I suspect we never will. But we know this approach is working. A repeat survey one year later showed significant improvement in staff engagement and wellbeing across all groups of staff in the school. Colleagues know that they can raise concerns openly and honestly within a culture where we trust that, if we can air the issues amongst talented and intelligent colleagues, without fear, then that same talent released can help us find solutions together.”

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¹ Deloitte Monitor briefing Oct 2017 “Mental health and employees – the case for investment”