

Strategic commentary

Why employee relations now need to be led by L&D

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Employee relations need to be the new focus of training. There are a bunch of reasons why, all of them rooted in the way in which organisations have moved to flatter structures and informality without equipping themselves with the conversation and relationship skills needed for this new world of work.

The latest figures from the Ministry of Justice show overwhelming demand for Employment Tribunals. Numbers of claims in England and Wales between April and June 2018 were up to almost 11,000, compared with around 4,000 past year (a rise of 165 per cent). The surge in demand has led to a growing backlog and a system creaking under the strain. The CIPD has warned of implications for HR departments in terms of the administrative resources needed to prepare for tribunal hearings and being involved over longer periods of time with cases that grow in complexity.

Much of the sudden increase in tribunals can be put down to the removal of fees in 2017. But not all. There has been a marked change in attitudes among employees to the authority of their employer and its leaders and managers. One of the most challenging issues for managers is reported to be dealing with their teams of “millennials” – the 20 somethings and employees in their early 30s sometimes referred to as “Generation Me” because of their

perceived sense of “entitlement”. Millennials, managers argue, expect special treatment: constant positive feedback and recognition, regular development an open door to career progress.

More people are feeling able to speak out against poor treatment, bullying and harassment by those in authority. The string of very public scandals in recent years has encouraged workers to think again about how they are treated, to be more acutely sensitive to what might be inappropriate and has helped to normalise the practice of making a complaint.

What is needed is a strategy of training for underpinning healthy employee relations:

Develop conversational intelligence

Staff, at all levels, need support in learning how to talk together, work together and deal with differences better in this new twenty-first century context. We have seen the rise and inclusion of emotional intelligence in the modern manager toolkit, now HR need to be thinking more about stocks of conversation skills or “conversational intelligence”, equipping more people to deal with and be open to the inevitable challenges of work – and not retreat behind digital media. Most often we opt for the route of least resistance, until there is a serious problem, and then come the flashes of anger and a

reliance on our authority and formal processes. Better skills mean all those inevitable workplace disagreements and differences in opinion and personality can be dealt with lightly, through open conversations that are based on trust. Conversational Intelligence is something which can be learnt and practiced until no-one ever feels as if their problems are unimportant or unsolvable, there's always a constructive way to reach a resolution.

Build in time for talking

Conversations only improve when they are a natural and regular part of working lives, not as an event – being summoned to a meeting, or into a weekly team slot. HR needs to make sure there are consistent messages about expectations from staff in terms of open conversations – and make it clear about what support and development is available, encouraging senior managers and leaders to be the main role models,

and put more time and resources into supporting people to move towards dialogue with each other and away from escalating their negative feelings. Managers need to structure their communications and relationships with staff in ways that provide an important element of time, to mitigate against knee-jerk reactions and voicing of instant opinions. That is why the face-to-face method needs to be used as much as possible. They provide a useful series of pauses to arrange and set up and deliver, ensuring time for reflection and a context where thought and behaviour will be different. In addition, in support of this approach there needs to be work on ensuring people understand that face-to-face does not just mean bad news.

Make conversations part of the team dynamic

Teams work best when people do not just do as they are told: every member plays a full part, feeling able

to take as much responsibility and contribute as much as the lead manager. Teams become more creative, motivated and engaged. This requires the development of a number of interlocking skills in the manager and in the team: building rapport, active listening, emotional intelligence and managing difficult conversations. People can admit their mistakes, discuss challenges openly, rather than keeping problems bottled up – leading naturally to more learning, better decision-making and constant support for learning and development – rather than relying on a once a year appraisal.

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