

Acas helps to improve working relations at a Midlands College

This case study demonstrates how Acas helped three separate teams at the College to improve working relations. A number of issues, ranging from informal complaints to grievances, had stemmed from allegations of inappropriate behaviour by colleagues, bullying and perceived poor management. Acas' intervention¹ helped relations to improve in all three teams and a key result was that formal grievance procedures were avoided in all cases².

Background

The college was formed as a result of a merger of Further Education colleges with very different cultures. Furthermore, since the merger the new college has undergone significant periods of change and rationalisation.

The challenge

Following the merger there were incidences, in three separate college staff teams, of complaints being brought against either line managers or colleagues on the grounds of behaviour, communication and poor management, and in some cases individuals felt that the behaviour they were experiencing constituted bullying. In some of the cases, grievances had been initiated but the formal stage of the grievance procedure had not yet been reached. Both the HR and the union representatives had been keen to exhaust informal routes before moving to a formal stage and had reached an agreement with staff members that this was an appropriate stance to take.

Avoiding formal grievances was considered important for a number of reasons. First, both interviewees felt that employees, in general, are not always aware that the process of bringing a formal grievance can be quite stressful, one interviewee citing this to being similar in some cases to a 'mini court case'. It was also considered that those raising the grievance were not always fully aware that if their complaint is not upheld they might have to return to work alongside or for the person against whom they had made the complaint. The HR representative additionally felt that it was important to be able to show that as many different options had been pursued as possible, and that the involvement of Acas showed clearly that the institution took the issues seriously.

1 The Acas workshop days took place in winter 2008, summer 2009 and winter 2009.

2 This case study is based on two qualitative interviews with a Human Resources (HR) representative and a union representative, and a conversation with the Acas Adviser involved in the project. The union representative was only involved in one of the cases discussed and so focused on that case but also covered employment relations more generally and how grievances were dealt with at the College.



In the case of these complaints, both HR and the unions felt that the available internal methods of resolution had been exhausted.

One to one and group discussions had been held and internal mediation tried, but the situation had not improved. Both HR and the union agreed that more support was needed, and in conjunction with the staff members involved it was agreed to engage Acas.

How Acas helped

In the first two cases, it was the HR representative who requested Acas' help whereas in the other case it was the union representative's suggestion, given the success resulting from the other two cases. Acas was chosen as both interviewees had previous, positive experience of working with the organisation. The union representative perceived Acas as independent, neutral and removed from the situation.

In all three cases the HR representative met with the Acas Adviser to explain what help the College was looking for. Since the issues impacted on other members of staff, it was agreed that Acas should work with the entire teams, not just those more directly involved in the grievance, and one-day workshops were established to do this.

In the event whole teams were involved, including staff and managers. The objectives of the workshops were set by HR and Acas beforehand, and were subsequently agreed by the union. In the most recent case, there had been some initial resistance among staff to a third party being brought in to try to improve the situation, but the union representative was able to convince the more sceptical members of staff that it was worth giving Acas a chance to resolve matters before taking things to a more formal level.

There were two stages to the Acas intervention in all three instances:

- In advance of the main workshop days, the Acas Adviser met each member of each team including managers and the union representatives – individually for 15 to 20 minutes. This was to enable the Adviser to get a full picture of the issues involved and understand differing perspectives. According to both interviewees it was felt that being interviewed in this confidential manner allowed staff to air their views and put those people who were nervous about the workshop day at their ease. It also helped the Acas Adviser to understand the issues better and design the agenda and focus of the workshop which the Adviser then agreed with HR and the union.
- The next stage involved holding one-day workshops, in all cases run by two Acas Advisers. In each case, the purpose of the day was to get the team talking to each other about what they felt the issues were, to identify what a good team should look like and to reflect on what behaviours were considered unacceptable in the workplace. The Acas Advisers set some ground rules at the start of each day to ensure that people took it in turn to talk and respected each others' opinions so that the exchanges did not become too heated. Whilst



there was a broad agenda for the day the Advisers stressed that there was scope to raise other issues providing they were relevant. Recalling the day, the union representative said that an ice-breaker exercise was used to encourage each person to find out about a colleague they did not know very well, and to report back to other participants. The rest of the day involved the team being split into smaller groups, using flip charts, to look at developing a set of rules of acceptable behaviours in the workplace. Each staff team was given a further task following the work with Acas, including setting, agreeing and owning an action plan that would be monitored at regular team meetings, and developing a charter concerning communication and team behaviours. The latter involved setting up a working party and getting feedback from colleagues.

The outcome and benefits

According to the HR representative, the Acas workshops had a positive impact on all three teams, but on one team in particular. The team in question had experienced problems with communication and a lack of structure following the merger of the former colleges. With Acas' help, this team put together an action plan detailing how the team members should work together. From the HR representative's point of view subsequent behaviour showed that the team have really taken ownership of the action plan, reviewing it and adapting it at their regular team meetings. As a result they now work well together. The HR representative attributed this success in part to the fact that the team were keen to engage and improve working relationships and that there were no entrenched grievances against individuals, but also to the fact that they received help from Acas to start this process.

The Acas support also benefited the other teams. For example, in the most recent case, the union representative had noticed an improvement in relations within the team.

There seems to be a lot more calmness. [...] I'm not getting as many emails. [...] I'm not getting as many calls.

(union representative)

The HR representative was also positive about the outcomes for the two remaining staff and the work done by Acas in developing tools such as the charter on behaviours had benefited the wider team and helped them to move forward. The union representative, who was only involved in one of the cases, commented that she was relieved that Acas' intervention had prevented this case from becoming a formal grievance, and that this grievance, without Acas' help, could have escalated into a bigger problem.

Furthermore, according to the HR representative, over a 12 month period the rate of persistent short term absence has dropped from 13% to 8%. In addition, grievances and bullying and harassment complaints have reduced according to more recent Health and Safety Executive Work Related Stress surveys conducted at the College.



All three teams are monitored to ensure that action plans and agreements agreed at the Acas workshops are adhered to by the employees involved.

Views on Acas workshops

Both interviewees had nothing but praise for the Acas Advisers. They were impressed by the Advisers' skills at getting people to engage and discuss the issues as well as 'manage' and 'defuse' discussions when they got heated.

What I wanted the Acas Adviser to do, which she did very skilfully, was to find a way to get the issues out on the table so that people could have a discussion about them, air their issues, discuss them professionally, see each other's point of view and then agree what they were going to do differently as a result...

(HR representative)

The HR representative felt that Acas had done everything that she had asked it to do and she would be happy to use Acas again. She appreciated the fast turnaround of the Acas work, which was on average five to six weeks from start to finish, as it is important to deal with grievances as quickly as possible. She described the cost of each workshop day as good value for money.

