

DURESTA

Acas delivers in-house training to provide an established SME with the tools to help its managers and supervisors manage effectively

This case study explores how Acas supervisor training and policy advice helped Duresta – a well-established bespoke upholstery company – to overcome management challenges and change employee behaviour. As a result of the training, supervisors are now better equipped and feel more confident in their roles, and employees are aware of the behavioural standards they should observe. The Acas Helpline has also helped the organisation clarify day to day issues while standard documents from the Acas website have been used to ensure best practice in Duresta procedures.

Background to the organisation

Duresta, part of the Sofa Brands International Group, has been making high quality luxury handmade bespoke upholstered furniture for 70 years in Long Eaton, Nottinghamshire, an area which houses several other upholsterers. Its 200 employees include skilled upholsterers, joiners, machinists and fabric cutters as well as office staff. The average length of service is over 20 years, and service of 30 and 40 years is not uncommon. Employee relations have always been harmonious. Workplace relations have traditionally been fairly relaxed, which has made it difficult for managers to tackle issues such as lateness and over-long breaks. However, recent developments, including the need to shorten production and delivery times and the company's achievement of the ISO 9001 quality management standard in 2012, meant that these issues needed to be tackled effectively.

Managers and supervisors wanted to be fair to all employees and were aware that they needed to comply with changing employment legislation, but felt that they were lacking in the knowledge and skills to deal with these problems. Managers were promoted because they were good at their jobs, rather than because they had managerial skills, and they had received little management training once in post. Moreover, given the tendency for managers to be appointed after many years of prior service on the shop floor, and since recruitment was from the local area, several staff



found themselves managing neighbours and even school friends, making the jump from shop floor worker to supervisor or manager especially challenging.

Choosing Acas

In 2011, Sofa Brands International appointed an HR specialist, the Group HR and Training Executive, who is based at Duresta. One of her first initiatives was to compile an employee handbook, setting out employees' existing rights and responsibilities. This was followed some months later by a managers' handbook, containing template documents and guidance on processes. The HR and Training Executive, who had found the Acas website useful in the past, referred to it again when producing these, observing that:

"Acas is an invaluable source of information and sense checking. The website and the standard letters and templates are really useful and mean that you don't have to reinvent the wheel."

She then approached a number of organisations with a view to arranging the training managers and supervisors felt they needed to manage employees effectively, and which was required to back up the work HR had already done in making clear what employees should be doing. While the handbooks set out *what* everyone should be doing, training was required both to reinforce this and to show managers *how* to do it.

Acas was chosen in the first instance because it already had an appropriate training course – *Essential Skills for Supervisors* – an overview workshop of essential supervisory "people" skills requiring no additional design input from Duresta. It was also felt that the local Acas advisor had experience of workplaces similar to Duresta and was expected to be on the "same wavelength" as those being trained. In addition, Acas was thought to offer "good value for money" and has a "good name in the industry", the HR and Training Executive said. The decision to use Acas was endorsed by the company's board of directors, who decided that they would also undertake the training themselves.

Supervisor training

Acas provided two one-day courses, one for some of the directors and the office managers and the other for the remaining directors and the factory supervisors and managers. These covered managing discipline and grievances, the importance of



monitoring absence, how to identify bullying in the workplace and the importance of leading, communicating with and motivating teams. The trainer was also able to refer to the newly launched employee handbook, which gave managers the confidence to use it.

“The overview provided in the training was spot on for the issues we are dealing with – how to do disciplinaries, how to have difficult conversations, how to nip issues in the bud and, how to do things properly. There were also open discussions, which participants liked.”

HR and Training Executive

Before the training, many supervisors and managers in the organisation had been frustrated by the lack of disciplinary action taken against certain employee behaviours. But managers were not confident that they could go about correcting this without making the problem worse.

“We hoped for direction and to have it explained to us what both employees and the company could and couldn’t do. The trainer was excellent at putting this across”.

Factory Manager

Impact of the training

According to the HR and Training Executive, staff are now spending more time doing their job, because managers and supervisors have the confidence to deal with issues which they would not previously have had the confidence to address. Teams are seen to have more respect for their supervisors because they now have the knowledge and skills to deal with problems. Employees now understand and accept that they cannot “get away with” behaviours such as lateness, clocking off early, delayed return from breaks and unscheduled breaks, the HR and Training Executive said. Employee relations are better because managers have the tools to manage better. Most employees were conscientious, the Factory Manager said, but there had been a sense of unfairness that a minority had been allowed to disobey the rules. Time that had previously been lost by this minority has now been regained for productive activities.

The Acas training was welcomed by the Factory Manager and the Cutting and Sewing Supervisor, who describe the course as very intense, but useful because it



was focussed on the day-to-day management practicalities that matter most. The fact that Acas is an impartial organisation was appreciated; “Acas just gave us the facts and told us the fairest way of doing things”, the Cutting and Sewing supervisor said. Course participants identified improved listening skills, the confidence to handle disciplinaries and grievances appropriately and a different perspective on unacceptable employee behaviour as the main benefits of the training. “The ability to really listen to employee grievances without jumping in and arguing has been especially helpful”, the Cutting and Sewing Supervisor said. In addition, the Factory Manager said that listening properly means that more can be learnt about the problem, resulting in a better understanding of it and a better chance of resolving it.

“People that I have had heated conversations with in the past I no longer have heated conversations with, because I’ve learnt how to listen. I haven’t had a cross word with anyone since the training, because I’ve learnt how to defuse situations.”

Cutting and Sewing Supervisor

Conclusions

Although employment relations at Duresta had been good, a lack of formal management training and understanding by a minority of employees of acceptable behaviours in the workplace had led to tensions within the organisation as it moved to shorter production times and adoption of the ISO 9001 quality standard. As a result of the Acas *Essential Skills for Supervisors* training, Duresta is seeing greater confidence amongst managers, better understanding of acceptable behaviour amongst employees, and improved relations within teams.

