

Name: Tristar Homes
Role: Union learning co-ordinator
Unions: Unison, Unite, UCATT and GMB
Size: 330 Employees
Sector: Housing
Location: North East

The organisation and the role of the workplace representative

Tristar Homes is an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO), which manages and maintains 10,600 council houses for Stockton Borough Council. Two thirds of the 330 strong workforce are in clerical and administrative and technical grades, with most of the remainder in manual and craft occupations. Unison, Unite, UCATT and the GMB are the recognised trade unions, with Unison being the largest. HR management are keen to encourage positive engagement with the unions, and have quarterly meetings with a joint consultative group of union reps, with a less formal 'liaison group' of union reps being consulted more regularly over day to day operational issues. Despite this high level of management engagement with the union, and good day to day working relationships between union reps and management, the company still faces the challenge of residual 'us and them' attitudes on the part of the workforce. The result is that some employees are distrustful of management.

The issue

A new HR manager was keen to improve the organisation's performance on training and learning. She was aware of the availability of funding for joint union-management training initiatives through Union Learn, so the company supported a union-led bid, which was successful. This led to the appointment of a union learning co-ordinator, seconded to this role for three days a week.

The HR department were keen to reach out to and work with the unions. Management appreciated that a union learning co-ordinator appointed from staff within Tristar Homes would be much better placed to reach out to other staff, many of whom were wary of reporting to their line managers areas where they felt themselves to be under-skilled. HR also felt that providing additional training would offer the organisation significant benefits in terms of a more skilled, flexible workforce, and also in terms of a more engaged workforce.

The union learning co-ordinator's role was to act as a champion of learning within the organisation. Her office was located in the depot where the company's craft workers report to, because this was the group of workers that were most difficult to engage in learning activities. This group were initially sceptical of getting involved, but the learning co-ordinator was able to make progress by persuading a few staff members to participate, and word then quickly spread about the training that was available and how good it was.

It was critically important that the learning co-ordinator was seen as separate from management, offering confidential advice. This resulted in her being approached by employees who felt that they needed to receive training to remedy what they perceived to be skill deficiencies, which they would have been reluctant to approach management about. Because of her independence and external funding, the learning co-ordinator was also able to promote a 'skills for life' agenda, which meant that she could encourage staff to take on any course which interested them, not just those which had a clear business focus.

How we benefited from effective collaborative working

Overall, over one third of the workforce had been through some sort of training organised by the learning co-ordinator. The learning co-ordinator could point to definite benefits for the union and for individual employees. As a result of the project, senior management of the company have an enhanced understanding of the benefits that unions can provide. It also changed employees' perceptions of the unions, increasing employee perceptions of union efficacy. There were also many individual stories of employees benefiting from the project. Employees had received basic skills training which gave them renewed confidence and opportunities. Others had acquired new skills, which allowed them to progress within the organisation in a way which would not have been possible before.

Management also identified significant benefits from the project. No formal quantitative evaluation of the impact on the bottom line, or of employee attitudes, had taken place, but there was nonetheless a wealth of anecdotal evidence of benefits to the business. Uptake of in-house training courses among craft workers had increased dramatically, giving management a powerful lever for improving performance. Many craft employees had taken advantage of the opportunity to acquire IT skills, which although not directly related to their job at the time that they did the training, was opening up the possibility for management of introducing handheld computers for the maintenance crews. Some employees had also taken the opportunity to train as locksmiths. The company had previously relied on contractors for locksmiths, so the development of multi-skilled locksmiths in house has already saved thousands of pounds. On a much smaller scale, some office-based staff went on face-painting courses, something which the staff involved enjoyed, and which boosted their confidence, but which also saved the company money because they no longer needed to pay for face painters for the company's regular customer involvement days.

What we would do differently

All involved felt that the project had been very successful, and would not have done anything differently. However, there are issues around sustainability. It is not clear how long external funding for the project will be available. There are four workplace union representatives who are designated as learning representatives, but to date, the learning co-ordinator has played the major role. One challenge going forward is to develop a sustainable structure of union

representation on learning issues, so that the good work of the project can be sustained, even if project funding ceases.