Looking at the experience of LNER on-board staff

Report prepared for DOHL

October 2023

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1. Introduction

This report was commissioned by DOHL who asked for an independent look at the experiences of LNER on-board staff. This review has looked at current arrangements and has sought views from a relatively small sample of staff and management. All have been co-operative and constructive in their comments. The purpose of the report is not to give a complete picture of all the activity or sentiment within the business – it would not be possible to do this comprehensively for a review of this size. It does however offer the business a 'checklist' to assure itself that initiatives and programmes in place are addressing potential concerns. In general, LNER seems to be performing well as a business as they recover from the pandemic and there is no business indication that there are any additional major challenges that are not being faced by others across the industry.

The report makes some general recommendations. Action to address these is already in hand for many. Some planned initiatives could perhaps be accelerated to address more quickly some of the 'lived experiences' that have been shared.

This review has been entirely focussed on LNER. However, it is reasonable to assume that some of the sentiments expressed have commonalities across other TOCs. All operators and staff have had to cope with the impact of the pandemic, the impacts of industrial action and the general concerns of job security and cost of living pressures. Together, these have understandably contributed to a lowering of staff morale.

First, very encouragingly, on-board staff overwhelmingly say they love their jobs – a positive sign that there is lots good about working for LNER. There are some less positive factors present that could be contributing to how individuals feel about their work environment. These factors are linked and contribute cumulatively to the overall picture. Broadly, the issues fall under four main themes:

1.   Trust and transparency
2.   Inclusion
3.   Management arrangements
4.   Rostering

In addition, there have been some examples of bullying and harassment in the workplace, and incidents of racism. It is unclear how widespread this is, but clearly causes great distress to those suffering from it and is not acceptable.

Combined, these factors could be contributing to sickness, disengagement and anxiety amongst some on-board staff.

2.   Trust and transparency

Engagement

The Nov 2022 staff survey 'Speak from the Heart' had a fairly low response rate at around 40%, although this is not a particularly low score across the sector as a whole. Some on-board staff I spoke to felt the business had lost its direction.

One particularly low response in the staff survey was on the statement:

> *'I am appropriately involved in decisions that affect my work'.*

Clearly some staff feel they are not being suitably involved or listened to about decisions made which affect them. Over an extended period, this may add to disengagement. However, this has been a period of change for the business. Some uncertainty and disquiet as staff adapt to changes is to be expected.

Recommendation

- Seek to identify a clear line of sight between staff concerns and management action for staff by implementing a clearer 'you said, we did' approach.

LNER is already starting to do this is by developing a 'listening strategy'. Although the senior leadership team is visible in the business, it is not always in an environment where people can speak freely about what it is like to work for LNER. Multiple events are being set up to which all staff will have the opportunity to attend. These will be co-presented by a member of the senior leadership team and a local manager, where the business will really be able to listen to what staff really experience working for LNER.

LNER is also developing 'The Colleague Hub' expected to be ready in 2025. This will be a physical, dedicated space for all LNER frontline team members to use to collaborate, connect and receive support for their day-to-day activities. This might include support with work-related documents or briefs, signposting to helpful resources. It will be a space which will give employees the opportunity to learn from and share expertise with each other whilst creating a sense of camaraderie and community.

Trust and transparency

The staff survey reported a score of only 19% in response to the statement:

> *'When it is clear someone is not delivering in their role, we do something about it.'*

It seems on-board staff do not believe that management deal with poor performance well enough.

Individuals who are hard-working and take pride in their jobs can feel let down and demotivated when action is not taken against those who are not contributing as they should. This could undermine trust in the senior leadership and management teams.

In LNER, considerable time and effort is spent in addressing staff issues – several of which are discussed in this report. Many of them are handled (rightly) confidentially. To staff, it can appear that concerns are not properly dealt with because there is no follow-through communication with staff, or any obvious business change that is implemented to demonstrate the issue has been addressed. This may be because it has been handled confidentially with the individual concerned.

Recommendation

- Management considers ways to report 'generally' on actions addressing staff concerns, whilst maintaining appropriate confidentiality and employee privacy.

Inclusion

Racism

Reported cases of workplace racism are rare. Staff and management should know that any form of racism is unacceptable, and everyone in the business needs to act to ensure it does not prevail in the workplace, particularly as the number of incidents of racist behaviour experienced by individuals is likely to be higher than those reported. It is not fair for action to be taken only when the (hopefully small) number of individuals who suffer directly make formal complaints. It is the responsibility of all to call out (or call-in) unacceptable behaviour or comments, at the time they occur. Management's responsibility is to make sure that any racist behaviour whether blatant or subtle is acted upon, and that staff are aware that it has been addressed. Ongoing campaigns are in place to support the 'no racism' agenda.

Additionally LNER has appointed a consultant to undertake ED&I training for managers. This is encouraging. I understand that wider ED&I training is being rolled out across the company and LNER are developing and starting to implement a wider programme of EDI activity.

Recommendation

- The ED&I training continues to be rolled out to all staff, perhaps using the regularly rostered TED slots.
- Management, TUs and staff visibly own the 'no racism in the workplace' message, including creating quicker channels of communication for reporting, recording and resolving incidents – however supposedly 'minor'.

Bullying and harassment

There seems to be some systemic 'low-grade' bullying and harassment which arises from – amongst other things:

- unofficial 'pecking' orders
- peer groups
- favouritism within the management team
- intimidation regarding TU membership *('no-one will speak to you if you don't join the Union')*

Whilst some of these experiences may just seem to be part of normal interactions within communities of people, some of it extends to causing serious distress for some individuals. Action, when it is taken, relies on victims reporting colleagues. The incident is then handled in confidence. Consequently, staff may not be confident that issues are being dealt with firmly enough, and management are not taking a sufficiently visible 'zero tolerance' approach towards inappropriate behaviour.

Investigation of grievances occupy a lot of management time. It is possible that these are the result (or perhaps cause) of bullying – through grievances and counter-grievances being made. When discussing these issues, staff agreed that many of these could be nipped in the bud, but it is rare that managers would observe these behaviours directly, so are relying on 'she said, he said, they said' reports of events that have occurred.

The current industrial action has understandably increased tension overall, including sometimes between staff, with some individuals fearful of repercussions from colleagues if they choose to work during strikes, for example.

> ## Recommendation
>
> - LNER develops a clear, straightforward procedure for dealing with 'minor' bullying and harassment allegations quickly to avoid them becoming formal disciplinary or grievance issues.

Inclusive crew rostering

LNER had previously developed 'family' arrangements for on-board teams – i.e. aiming to roster the same groups of people together so that they can develop strong team working and individuals get to know the people they are working with. The flip side of this approach is that teams can develop into cliques that are then very difficult for new or occasional team members to fit in with.

Rotating teams so that individuals work with a different mix of colleagues may offer greater levels of consistency, professionalism and inclusion across the piece – particularly if combined with recommendations on management arrangements and rostering provided later in this report.

> ## Recommendation
>
> - LNER checks its current approach to crew rostering is as inclusive as possible.

There is a strong 'friends and family' ethos within the business. Although this is potentially a strength, the business must be careful that:

- recruitment procedures are completely fair, and anyone with a conflict of interest should not be involved in an individual appointment;
- close personal connections are separated;
- recruitment, promotion and other management decisions (including rostering arrangements) are not subject to favouritism by either management or Trade Union officials.

> ## Recommendation
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> - LNER:
>
>   - assures itself that there is independence and fairness in recruitment and promotion decisions;
>
>   - monitors and audits grievances/complaints and disciplinary processes to ensure there is no bias (whether conscious or unconscious);
>
>   - reassures staff that management is being held to account for promoting and exhibiting fair and inclusive behaviour;
>
>   - demonstrates to the LNER Board that issues are being addressed and that any further problems are escalated and acted on quickly.

Social Media

Some social media items have been forwarded to the review that the individual who has shared deems inappropriate and unprofessional. These were posted on private sites accessible by LNER staff. The Social Media policy is reasonably clear about the standards individuals are expected to adhere to when engaging on social media. The 'IT Acceptable Usage and Security Policy' states:

> '*Failure to comply with this policy is a disciplinary offence and may be considered to be an act of gross misconduct'.*

Individuals will have different levels of what constitutes acceptable social media use. Inappropriate social media posts – even on closed sites – can be an example of exclusive behaviour, even if the poster is unaware they are having this impact.

> ## Recommendation
>
> - Management considers refreshing the Social Media policy to explicitly identify crude comments, sexual references or swearing to be against the policy even if they are posted on closed employee sites, and to directly link the consequences of failure to comply with the Social Media section of the overall IT Acceptable Usage and Security policy.
> - Social Media use (and its potential impacts) be included more explicitly in the wider changes being introduced as part of LNER's EDI strategy.

Whistleblowing and making complaints

LNER has always had an independent whistleblowing service. This has recently been relaunched under "Speaking Up" branding. This will strengthen the processes for concerns to be raised and handled independently. LNER will be expanding the awareness of "Speaking Up" over the next few months. This will help address the concern that some staff have that they will be labelled troublemakers if they make complaints.

Recommendation

The LNER Board regularly monitors and reviews the independent whistleblowing and complaints procedures data it has in place is effective and assures itself that staff are confident that matters raised are being addressed and that confidentiality will be maintained.

3. Management arrangements

Current arrangements

Changes have been made over the last several months to the arrangements for on-board service provision. The food offering has changed, and the resourcing on board has been altered to reflect the service provision and the configuration of the Azuma fleet. This included the replacement of the Senior Host role with a new role, titled Customer Experience Leader.

There are usually 4 customer experience crew on board, plus a chef, if the service is a 'Dine' service. A Customer Experience Leader is rostered for 'Dine' services. A Customer Experience Leader is also always rostered on a 10-car Azuma service (which is two 5-car sets coupled together with no through gangway). This is so a senior colleague on board, in addition to the driver when the Train Manager is in the back section of the 10-car train.

Both Customer Experience Hosts and Customer Experience Leaders all report to Customer Experience Duty Managers.

Management of on-board staff when on-board

On-board activities are generally directed by the Train Manager. In practice, on board Customer Experience Leaders and Hosts 'self-manage'. This means they decide amongst themselves who is going to work which position. However, it also means that there is no-one formally in charge to resolve minor disagreements or to address anyone not delivering. The Train Manager is fully responsible for safety and operations, revenue protection and passenger information. The revised

arrangements encourage Train Managers to support Customer Experience Hosts when time allows, and Customer Experience Leaders are being trained to check tickets to support the train manager. The Trade Union rejected proposals for Customer Experience Leaders to be able to collect commission for ticket sales (as Train Managers do). This means that although Customer Experience Leaders can check tickets, they do not sell them.

Further, it is likely that a train on which a Train Manager is busy is likely to be when the Customer Experience Leaders and Hosts are also busy.

Mostly Train Managers and Customer Experience Leaders and Hosts work well together, but the lines of accountability are not clear when they do not. This can contribute to bad feeling and may lead to unnecessary and time-consuming complaints for management to resolve.

Recommendation

LNER clarifies the lines of accountability between on-board roles, particularly in the event of issues arising.

Service provision and resourcing

The on-board service provision has undergone a significant change in response to timetable changes and the introduction of the Azuma fleet. Some teething troubles as the new arrangements bed in are to be expected.

'Dine' and 'Dish' services have been targeted at 'premium' services. However, it is not always clear to staff why particularly services have been allocated. For example, offering a Dine service on regularly stopping services make service rather more difficult to deliver. Staff have also pointed out that when a Dish service is offered, a chef is not rostered. This means that there is one fewer member of staff, but not necessarily fewer passengers. Although the fresh hot food offering is not served, delivering the full hot and cold Dish service can be challenging when there are 2 rather than 3 members of staff covering first class.

It is also not clear why Customer Experience Leaders are not rostered on particular services. Staff find it perplexing that the menus determine whether a senior member of staff is on board. Although the Deli menu is a less detailed than the Dish and Dine offering, it is not necessarily more straightforward to deliver.

Specifically, many staff noted the significant difference in customer type travelling at the weekend. Although they commented that it was lovely to give individuals special attention if they are travelling for a treat or a special occasion, there are considerably more customers expecting an 'all-inclusive' experience, including

excessive requests for alcohol. Staff sometimes find it difficult to deal with these customers.

The LNER website clearly sets out the expectation for food service (e.g. 'Enjoy two courses, Choose one main'), but the same is not true for drinks.

Recommendation

- Provide clear explanations to explain to staff how on-board staff allocations are made and introduce a feedback mechanism for this to be reviewed in the light of staff experiences on-board.
- Introduce and state clearly on Menus the alcohol policy for food service.

The role of the Customer Experience Leader

A common view of the Customer Experience Leaders is that they are called leaders, but not empowered to lead. The calibre of the staff seems high, and my impression is that giving the Customers Experience Leaders additional leadership responsibility could help resolve some of the sense of on-board lack of direction and take some of the burden from the Customer Experience Duty Managers.

Recommendation

- Consider expanding the Customer Experience Leader role to include supervisory responsibilities for Customer Hosts

Appraisal and performance

The line managers of all on-board staff (the Customer Experience Duty Managers) are depot/office based. Because line managers are not usually directly observing staff at work, they are not able to give immediate and regular feedback (either positive or negative). This lack of direct appraisal is a cause of frustration for staff who feel that those who are not pulling their weight are not suitably dealt with. It also means that no-one is responsible for giving support or guidance to staff who would benefit from it.

Again, to reinforce the point, the staff survey reported a score of only 19% to the statement:

> *'When it is clear someone is not delivering in their role we do something about it'*

It also means that management are not necessarily aware of consistent good performance unless colleagues take the time to give this feedback.

> ## Recommendation
>
> - Management introduces a regular performance appraisal process for Customer Experience staff.

Designating Customer Experience Leaders as 'in charge' of the customer service team whilst on-board could help resolve some of these matters. Additional duties could involve:

- Allocating points of sale for staff (this is generally done amicably between staff, but it would be helpful to have an arbiter if not)
- A brief report of how the service went, business, comments etc.
- Any problems with service or stock
- Any feedback about colleagues – positive and negative
- Supervisory accountabilities for Customer Hosts
- Deputising/supporting Train Managers

Management span

All on-board staff report to Customer Experience Duty Managers. These Duty Managers have perhaps 50-60 staff reporting to them. This is a very large management span. Staff may see their line manager typically once or twice a week when arriving at their depot. Much of the Duty Manager's time is taken up ensuring that services are resourced in the event of sickness, absence or disruption, as well as managing sickness, new starters and returns to work.

As a result, Customer Experience staff say they can feel isolated on board, particularly if the service goes wrong for any reason (stock shortage, or significant delays, a challenging customer). When disruption occurs they can sometimes feel rather isolated – particularly as it is they doing their best to keep customers happy.

Although Customers Experience Duty Managers are rostered for shift work, their shifts start later and finish earlier than on-board crew. This reduces the opportunity for staff to see their manager and places a lot of pressure on Customer Experience Duty Managers to cover their very wide management responsibilities.

> ## Recommendation
>
> - Consider aligning Customer Experience Duty Manager rosters with those of on-board staff.
> - Further consider ways in which the Customer Experience Duty Managers can be more present with on-board staff.

Career development

For many, career progression from a Customer Experience Leader is either to a Duty Manager, or to a Train Manager – although others do take different career paths, and LNER are very supportive of staff developing their careers across the business. It isn't clear whether the aspiration to become a Train Manager is due to increased pay or status, or whether the different duties genuinely appeal. The difference between Customer Experience Leader and Duty Manager roles is huge. There is almost no overlap in activity, so it is not a particularly natural or easy transition for an individual to make. Some Duty Managers do not have on-board experience, and this again can lead staff to feel sometimes that their managers do not always understand the challenges they face.

The Customer Experience Leaders I have spoken to really enjoy the people interaction they get from their job. Opportunities to develop and progress are limited as many potential roles for development are office-based.

> ## Recommendation
>
> - LNER consider ways in which the Customer Experience Leader role can be developed so these senior staff work alongside their colleagues for part of their shift and undertake additional management duties for the rest.
> - Such a development could also provide opportunities to modify the very challenging Customer Experience Duty Manager roles.

Job security

As a result of the recent changes to the Customer Experience roles, the total number required by the business has been reduced. Whilst the numbers Customer Experience Leaders and Hosts rebalance to planned establishment levels (as people leave the business or change jobs) additional Customer Experience Leaders are not being appointed. Although this has been done to provide job security for all, some have expressed concern about their futures and the perceived value of the role to the business.

> ## Recommendation
>
> Enhance the communication to Customer Experience Leaders about their roles.

4. Rostering

Existing system

There is no doubt that the rostering system for on-board staff is very complicated. Rosters are fixed for a 12-week period. The rosters allow staff to plan their lives and ensures that they are working to a cycle that gives suitable rest and doesn't require staff to work shifts too closely back-to-back. The standard working week is 35-hours.

Rosters are not even. Within a 12-week cycle, although the total number of hours worked should be the same for everyone, the amount of 'active' work will vary (because there will be varying gaps between working one turn and another). Further, the number of rest days can vary from between 29 days to 42 days. Working short shifts and having fewer rest days will suit some staff, but most people seem to prefer longer shifts and more rest days.

The allocation of rosters is negotiated between management and Trade Union representatives. LNER have introduced a system for staff to bid for their preferred roster slots. However, within a roster group, allocation is first made according to tenure ('seniority'). In practice, individuals don't even try to apply for rosters that will be allocated to those with longer service because they don't want to risk losing their second or third placed choice.

This results in newer staff taking the less popular rosters - generally those ending late at night, or with shorter shifts that then result in fewer rest days, which in turn reduces the opportunity for overtime earnings. A further consequence of rostering in this way is that shift patterns are often one day on, one day off. It can sometimes be 3 weeks before individuals have consecutive days off.

To an outsider, the rostering system does not seem fair or transparent.

Future Arrangements

Although considerable progress has been made on rostering in recent years, for some change may not be coming quickly enough.

LNER is keen to introduce a cyclical rostering system, which would mean that everyone would take their turn rotating through rosters (through earlies, middles and lates). This option is not welcomed by the Trade Unions who consider to tenure being an appropriate reward for long service.

In any event, the disparity in allocation of rosters for whatever reason could easily contribute to a sense of unfairness.

Flexible working

The rostering system is further complicated by the accommodation of flexible working. In line with current employment requirements, LNER have accommodated flexible working for many employees. The reasons for a flexible working request are varied. It could be that someone has caring or parenting duties that means they cannot work evenings or weekends, for example. Or health conditions might mean someone can't work long days or do late shifts. A member of staff who is on a flexible roster is entitled for that information to be kept confidential. However, there has been some anecdotal evidence that those on a restricted roster have experienced critical comments from colleagues who have accused them of 'working the system'.

The consequence of extensive flexible working arrangements on top of the 'best' rosters being taken by seniority means that remaining staff are very squeezed, working unsociable and awkward shifts, often without regular consecutive-day breaks.

Currently the systems of seniority and flexible working are not working together in a way that appears transparent or fair. Although technically everyone is working the same number of hours over the roster period, in practice, it really does not feel as though everyone is receiving equal pay for equal work.

Recommendation

- Rostering arrangements be changed so that the allocation of work is fairer.
- The process for devising rosters must be transparent so that staff can be confident that everyone is being treated the same.

An on-board staff survey, for example, could encourage staff to be more explicit about what their view of 'fair' means. This could explore:

- alternative ways of rewarding long service. E.g. an increase in rate of pay after 5 years, 10 years etc. without distorting work allocation in the way it appears currently;
- a systematic assessment of the characteristics of rosters and how preferences vary across the cohort;
- staff ideas on how to accommodate flexible working patterns fairly without adversely affecting remaining staff.