# A positive work environment:

## a six-step guide

Times are hard, and the temptation is to focus on profitability to the detriment of your staff. Resist the temptation, says, Ally Yates, and concentrate on achieving a balance between people and profit

It's hard to be both a good business person and a good employer. For there is no doubt that profits can be made on the back of unscrupulous or unsavoury practices, much as we might condemn it. Profits are also eroded by rising running costs and poor financial management, however. Having said that, how many nurseries are there that would compete for the title of Employer of Choice and have a fair chance of winning?

Putting people before performance can, sadly, limit growth and leave you wondering where it all went wrong. And yet, if the aim within the sector is to provide children with the best start in life, why not align that with giving staff the best employment and career development opportunities?

Most nursery businesses, most of the time, do, in fact, work hard to honour these two competing priorities of profit and people, because they know both are important, but no one says it's easy. Yet, it is perfectly possible – if hard work - to achieve a better balance between the two by focusing on the six key elements that contribute to a positive - and profitable - work environment.

## 1. Provide clarity of direction

We all know that people work best when they understand what's expected of them. You can achieve this by sharing with your team the overall purpose of your business and the values on which it is based. It's worth remembering that if the 'purpose' is the over-riding objective for the business, then the values are the moral compass that guides staff towards achieving that objective. Think hard about how you convey this shared purpose - these must not be hollow words, but translated into clear expectations for each staff role and for the contributions you expect each person to make. Purpose, values, roles and goals create a framework which allows each staff member to exercise their judgment. Asking the question, 'Is this activity consistent with our purpose, values and goals?' is a constructive and helpful way to rid the business of non-value-adding tasks.

## 2. Engagement

When staff enjoy coming to work and feel their contributions are recognised, so their level of motivation and engagement rises. Research by David Rock and the Neuroleadership Institute identified five factors influencing motivation at work:

- status (how good I feel about myself relative to others)
- certainty (the need to know what's coming)
- autonomy (having a sense of control over your work)
- relatedness (having a sense of belonging)
- fairness (a perception that you're treated fairly).

> '...learning the alphabet is just as important when running a business as it is for pre-schoolers. Think ABCDEF: authenticity, building capability, clarity of direction, diversity, engagement and feedback'

Different people are more or less motivated by different factors. The challenge for the employer is to understand what most motivates each member of staff and to provide that source of motivation in their day-to-day work. In my experience, autonomy scores highest. Most people want to feel they can exercise control and choice over what they do at work. This is achieved by establishing a clear purpose, shared values and expectations - by bosses who avoid the all too common trap of micro-managing.

## 3. Building capability

Helping staff develop is a core strategy when building a profitable business where people profit too. A core element of this is training. What is crucial to success is how your staff are developed within the business and how well you as the boss can adapt your style to different learner needs.

For example, a new recruit will benefit from a more directive style with clear instruction about 'the way things are done around here'. Better for them - and you - to have that clarity than to be thrown in at the deep end. A directive style also works best when the risks of getting something wrong are high and it is vital to avoid ambiguity.

As staff develop, you can start to relinquish control. Capable staff noticeably flourish if they are given the freedom to act without the need to revert to the boss. Using a more enabling style demonstrates that you trust your staff to draw on their own resourcefulness - and it frequently pays dividends.

## 4. Feedback

Having clarified for your people the overall direction of the business in terms of purpose, values, roles and goals, you now need to ensure your people know exactly what progress they're making. As an illustration, when you're going on a journey you identify key milestones. Managing staff is no different. People need to know how they're doing. The brain is a pattern-recognition system and, as such, we find it much easier to spot things that are out of kilter with our expectations. These 'errors' are often the basis for negative or constructive feedback.

But what's really powerful is the ability to spot where someone is doing well and then provide recognition of that. Genuinely acknowledging the effort someone goes to (even when they're unsuccessful) can be more rewarding and more motivating for them than recognising the achievement of a goal.

## 5. Value diversity

Each employee has a unique contribution to make, and the work people like to do is influenced by their preferences. For example, one person may have a strong preference for getting things done, while another may lean towards engaging with parents – effectively acting as an ambassador for the business. Top managers value and leverage the diversity within their team.

Research by Margerison and McCann, authors of the Team Management Profile (TMP), have identified eight role preferences that need to be covered for a team to be high-performing.

In reality, teams often show a bias towards two or three of these roles with a minority - outliers – who can find themselves marginalised. To be more effective, the team needs to include the views of the outliers and everyone needs to agree tactics to plug the gaps and ensure each team role preference has a voice at the table. After all, a team is only as good as its weakest link.

## 6. Authenticity

If a boss says one thing and then behaves in a contrary fashion, we register the dissonance. And so, the seeds of distrust start to be sown. Walking the talk helps bosses to drive up their scores on the trust equation, demonstrating both reliability and credibility. As a result, staff feel, "I can trust this person," and a more positive, and often more loyal, environment is created.

With authenticity comes humility – the ability to share mistakes, to admit you don't have all the answers and to be willing to ask for help. Herein lies a big opportunity for learning. Reflecting on mistakes or shortcomings can help to improve processes, drive efficiencies and increase quality. If your business could leverage just one per cent of the potential learning to be gained from humility, how much would that add to the bottom line?

Finally, learning the alphabet is just as important when running a business as it is for pre-schoolers. Think ABCDEF: authenticity, building capability, clarity of direction, diversity, engagement and feedback. Addressing each of these six functions will help improve your maths performance too, for positive employment = people + profit. ■



● Consultant and coach, Ally Yates, is the author of *Utter Confidence: How what you say and do influences your effectiveness in business*, which is available from Amazon, and an expert on behaviour analysis and the interactions that define us.
**Twitter: Allyyates_UC   W: allyyates.com   Connect with Ally on LinkedIn**