

Case study



Improving discipline and grievance procedures: an Acas joint working approach to training line managers and supervisors at Patak's.¹

Background

Patak's is renowned in the UK for its range of Indian pickles, chutneys, stir-in cooking sauces and curry pastes. Established in the 1950's by the father of the current owner, Kirit Pathak, the business has transformed itself from a family run business operating out of a tiny North London kitchen into a multi-national business with an estimated value of £50m.



Having undergone rapid expansion over the years, the business currently occupies five sites throughout the UK and employs around 750 staff, most of whom are white. Its largest factory and headquarters are based in Wigan, an area with a low ethnic minority population.

Morale and working conditions are generally reported to be good at Patak's. Both the Acas adviser and a Patak's employee confirmed its reputation as a good employer in the area. Management operate an 'open door' policy and make an effort to listen to and address staff concerns. There are regular forums for staff to communicate with managers through employee representatives and monthly lunches with the managing director to which staff is invited.

The decision to use Acas

Discipline and grievances was one area where it was felt management would benefit from practical training. In 2003, the Human Resource manager decided to address this issue and asked Acas to assist.

The primary intention behind the training was to ensure that all line managers were consistent in adopting best practice by refreshing them on correct disciplinary procedure. Past experience had indicated that managers were uncertain of their role in enforcing disciplinary matters lacking the confidence to handle discipline and grievance situations in an appropriate manner. Moreover, they were not always clear about the distinction between their role and the role of HR in handling such situations; in some cases, they were too keen to pass discipline and grievance cases straight to HR. Thus the desired outcome of the training was to empower managers in this aspect of their role by equipping them with the necessary information and skills.



Managers realised it was important to get an independent third party to run the training on discipline and grievance. The Group HR manager at Patak's was already familiar with the services that Acas provided and had attended network meetings hosted by Acas on employment issues. She felt Acas' impartial approach to employment relations made them ideal to conduct this training on their behalf. Moreover, Acas was an organisation that was familiar and trusted by staff and this would help to portray the training in a positive rather than a negative light.

What did Acas do?

Acas advisers agreed a training programme with Patak's that was based around the company's existing policy and procedures on discipline and grievances. The training took the form of half day workshops which line managers and supervisors were invited to attend. A trade union representative who was a shop floor steward also took part as did a member of HR. Acas ran three of these workshops, with up to 12 delegates in each session. Senior managers at Patak's recognised the benefits of adopting a joint working process which involves management and union representatives working together. The principle behind Acas joint working is to encourage people from all levels of an organisation to explore and understand issues from different perspectives.

The workshops covered the following key areas:

- The reasons for discipline: why it is a requirement and how it can be viewed as a positive way of setting standards and expectations within an organisation;
- Best practice: the correct procedures to follow when handling discipline and grievance situations;
- Delegate work using real life scenarios from organisations in similar sectors: role play exercises gave managers an opportunity to put into practice what they had learnt;
- Guidance on handling awkward or difficult situations: the need to view situations from an objective stand point and deal with it accordingly, whilst avoiding conflict and personality clashes.

Managers reported feeling much more positive and confident about their ability to handle discipline and grievance situations following the workshops. It was felt that Acas had created an environment in which staff felt comfortable with discussing difficult issues. The combination of techniques that the Acas advisers used also helped to make it a productive and enjoyable process.

Outcomes of Acas' involvement

As a result of undertaking the training, Acas was able to provide suggestions to HR staff about making small alterations to their policy on discipline and



grievances in order to ensure it matched best practice and ironed out areas open to misinterpretation. Once HR had made the suggested changes, they consulted the trade union for their opinion and the section on discipline and grievances in the employee handbook was revised accordingly.

In the period since the training, absenteeism has dropped and the HR manager felt that more general improvements in morale had occurred. Though this is not directly attributed to the training, it was felt that the training was among other factors that have helped contribute to a more stable workforce.

"If people feel they are being treated fairly then they're happier coming to work."

Group HR Manager at Patak's

Success factors

Acas' expertise in the field of employment law and the quality of training provided were vital components in the success of the training programme. The impartiality of the Acas adviser was also an advantage in ensuring that managers and staff were happy to buy into the training.

"They're experts, knowledgeable, independent – and delivered good quality training."

Group HR Manager at Patak's

Also contributing to its success was the fact that the training programme was tailored around existing company policy and procedure which resulted in policies that remained unique to the way the company worked. As the Group HR manager put it:

"(The Acas adviser) looked at what we had, took on board what other people had to say about it – the people who worked with it on a day to day basis – and fed back to us things that we could change to improve it. So in terms of that process, it was a useful exercise to have carried out because we ended up with something that was better than before."

**For further details please contact Acas Research and Evaluation
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Footnotes

1. This case study is based on interviews carried out by Turnstone Research and Consultancy with the Acas adviser, the group human resource manager and a staff representative at Patak's. We are grateful for interviewees' assistance and reflections on the Acas project.

