Case study

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Acas workplace training at Co-operative Retails Logistics:
Improving attendance management and workplace engagement

This case study demonstrates how an Acas programme of training in managing staff attendance led to reductions in absence levels and greater confidence for supervisors in adopting absence management best practice; helping, as a result, to tackle an historical companywide drift towards workforce disengagement[1].

The challenge

Spread across eighteen regional distribution centres, Co-operative Retail Logistics (CRL) is the distribution wing of the Co-operative Group, the world's largest consumer co-operative with a turnover of more than £9 billion, 4.5 million members and 87,500 employees.

During April 2006 – June 2007, the company rolled-out its 'Step 17' project; a Group HR initiative designed to promote best practice from within the business and engage staff through improved communication and trust. At CRL, the practical application of this project centred on tackling an historical staff absence problem which can be seen to have manifested itself in two ways. First, and most obviously, persistently high levels of absenteeism were having a detrimental business impact in terms of reduced productivity. Absence levels were acknowledged by senior operational managers as having been historically higher than the industry average, particularly as regards sporadic short-term absenteeism. The situation was said to have worsened in recent years with the introduction of new employment arrangements[2] which were described as having led to "a reciprocal sense of mistrust" among staff. Their implementation corresponded with marked absence increases, levels described by senior operational management as having jumped "from 3-4% to 6-7%, virtually overnight". One reason for this was a skills shortage at a junior supervisory level, a number of managers having had limited experience of, and no prior formal training in, managing attendance. As a result, according to CRL's HR manager, "many [supervisors] felt they lacked the skills and support to manage cases of absence" and therefore avoided doing so.

The second – related – manifestation of the CRL 'absence problem' was widespread procedural inconsistency in the way that absence was handled. Existing processes were said to have been loosely structured, unenforced and inconsistently applied, absence management having become largely contingent on individual discretion, with each manager 'doing their own thing'. As one manager put it:

> *There was a procedure... it was just not very well documented. As a result, it [the procedure] was more a case of whatever the individuals' own perception of what the procedure should be... it wasn't pillars of stone.*

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Formal procedures were described as having come to exist only nominally. Return-to-work interviews, for example, were said by one manager to have become "little more than a monosyllabic tick box exercise" and occupational health referrals, although practiced, were seldom documented. As such, "things became habit which weren't necessarily best practice". Step 17 sought a cultural change away from this approach.

How Acas helped

In 2006, CRL approached Acas to run training sessions across its regional distribution centres. The aim of these events was to facilitate the launch of new absence management procedures designed to reduce the high incidence of staff absence through the consistent application of sound attendance management. This objective was contextualised within a much wider ambition for a cultural shift away from traditional, castigatory approaches to managing attendance. Acas trainers worked with CRL's HR staff to adapt its training content towards the business' particular needs, running a series of fifty training sessions between November 2006-January 2007.

Events were attended by more than 250 staff, with sessions designed to assist all levels of CRL management with the practical application of good absence management; from experienced distribution centre managers to relatively junior supervisors with no formal absence management training. For many managers, this had a constructive symbolic effect insofar as it signified the commonality of the new procedural standards, there having been a shared hope among trainees that events would act as a 'leveller' in terms of how absence was understood and handled by individual supervisors and managers. Here, one manager spoke for many when he said he had been hoping for:

> A cascade [whereby] everyone was singing from the same hymn sheet throughout the depot and CRL as a whole.

Acas trainers and HR staff were also keen for employee representatives to be trained alongside managers, and the virtues of joint representation were widely extolled by staff. As one manager noted:

> …It [joint representation] reduces ambiguity for the application of procedures during future instances of union activity where they are defending employees in absence management cases. It's good for those on both sides of the table to have received the same training in that respect.

Feedback from staff[3] was overwhelmingly positive, 95% of those trained reporting having been either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with their experience. More specifically, there was a shared sense that courses had been appropriately pitched – 97% of trainees rating course content as being 'about right'. This was particularly the case for more junior staff, one manager commenting that he was:

... enthused with it [the training] at a supervisory level, because my supervisors were all long-term servers who had never received any formal absence management training. The training gave them first line management tools they previously lacked. As a result, whereas their previous mentality had been one of fire fighting, the training gave this approach more focus and made it more proactive... it was not too overbearing but there was still enough meat in the sandwich to make it worthwhile.

Accordingly, supervisors were said to have acquired a newfound confidence from the training, which gave them a clear framework they could follow independently. More generally, the broad thrust of training was well-received (particularly its explanation of relevant caselaw and the workshop approach it adopted), and the Acas presenters' knowledge[4] and even-handedness much praised. As one manager said:

It was good to have an independent trainer come in and say that 'this is what the two sides have agreed'. The third party delivery of the training was particularly valuable as the Acas trainer had no ulterior motives or vested interests – he just wanted people to learn.

The benefits: Reduced absence and better attendance management

There was a shared sense at CRL that the whole issue of absence management is now taken much more seriously as a result of the business having put the problem on a companywide pedestal via Acas training. The positive impacts of this have been many and varied. Firstly, managers' hopes for procedural consistency among their colleagues were largely found to have been fulfilled by the training, with CRL's newfound emphases on uniformity and structure widely cited. To quote one manager, whereas previously "there had been no script or formulae" to work from, absence management was now "structured... [with] all staff working off the same script". Processes, he said, were more thoroughly adhered to as a result. Indeed, the main perceived asset of the new policy that the Acas training had inaugurated was that it had standardised and formalised procedures, which are now being taken more seriously and applied with more consistency and accuracy as a result. Most fundamentally, the new policy was seen to have constituted a proverbial 'line drawn in the sand' in full view of the workforce. In this sense, as one manager put it:

The new policy has put polish on what we were already doing and given it importance.

It was this increased 'importance' given to the issue of absence management which many supervisors identified as the driving factor behind the reductions in absences which have occurred in the wake of Acas training. Perhaps the clearest indicator of the changing extent of absenteeism has been a drop in the hours lost to absence at CRL. Indeed, management information shows absence hours as having constituted an

appreciably lower proportion (1.5% less) of total contracted hours 4-5 months after training than they had immediately prior to Acas' involvement[5].

Another gauge of reduced absenteeism is *unreported* absences. Tracing these is an even closer measure of success of the Acas training, since their occurrence is more closely linked with the kind of breakdowns in notification and reporting processes which the training was designed to redress. It is therefore encouraging to note that there has occurred a significant reduction in unreported absences at CRL since the Acas training; companywide unreported absences reduced by 9% between 2006 and 2007 (an equivalent 0.02 days improvement per employee).

Such improvements are in no small way attributable to the levelling-out of procedural inconsistencies which seems to have begun at CRL following training. Supervisors were now said to be adhering to what are common processes, rather than "doing their own thing", and while it may be too soon for a definitive judgement, there was a collective optimism – best articulated by one depot manager – that "the drift in absence management has begun to be reversed". The most commonly advanced explanation for this pointed to supervisors' newfound comprehension of and confidence in implementing policies, there being far fewer 'grey areas' in the wake of training. Of course, genuine cultural change is a complex and long-term process, but the fact that absence is now understood and handled more progressively and consistently across the company can only augur well for CRL's wider ambition for a cultural shift towards an 'engagement ethos'.

Endnotes

1 This case study is based on interviews with CRL senior operational management; plus interviews with a cross-section of managers and focus groups undertaken with floor staff at three CRL regional distribution centres. These were conducted during March-June 2007 by Fiona Neathey and Andrew Sutherland (Acas Research and Evaluation Section) as part of Acas' evaluation programme. We are grateful for the assistance of all interviewees and focus group participants.

2 A new vocational sick pay deal; a national transport agreement for drivers; and an attendance allowance bonus scheme.

3 As with all Acas workplace training, at the end of all CRL training events, delegates were asked to complete a 2-page feedback questionnaire.

4 97% of staff rated the Acas presenter's knowledge of the subject as either 'good' or 'very good'.

5 Management information (supplied by CRL) reporting on each of these measures has been compared across two distinct time periods – namely, April-June 2006 (when pre-Step 17 absence management arrangements were in place) and April-June 2007 (ie 4-5 months after Acas' training and the implementation of CRL's new absence management policy).

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