



THE QUALITY OF WORKING LIFE.

Exploring managers' wellbeing, motivation and productivity.

CASE STUDY



CREATING A CULTURE SHIFT

Leyla Okhai – Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at Imperial College London

“If people are happy and positive in the workplace you’re going to see innovation and great results. Why wouldn’t you want that?”

Leyla joined Imperial’s Organisation Development department in 2012 initially to support disabled members in the 8,000-strong workforce. At the time the College was starting to increase health and wellbeing awareness among staff.

The aim was to change the culture – from the rather ‘closed’ community that characterises traditional academia to a more open culture in which there is space to talk about issues that might stand in the way of healthy and happy personnel that are satisfied in their job. “The first step was to start the conversation with staff – making them comfortable talking about things that were affecting them.”

Three years on Leyla says the change is striking: “A culture shift has started to take place, driven by the message sent out by the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team to managers and leaders: staff health, happiness and job satisfaction matter.”

It’s empowering for staff to know they have a support network to fall back on, and they can play an active role in encouraging colleagues to use it. Leyla: “Culture change doesn’t happen overnight. But the fact that the senior leadership team has recognised the importance of it has caused a shift.”

Leyla trained as a Mental Health First Aid instructor in May 2013 and delivered pilot training in June and July of that year. This resulted in a great interest and appetite to discuss mental wellbeing further. It also led to her putting together an action plan for the Time to Change Pledge

to be signed. The pledge was signed by the College’s Vice-Provost of Education at the time, who spoke openly about her family’s experiences with mental ill health. Her leadership encouraged others break down the stigma and continue the conversation. “Now that senior leaders have openly said that mental health is an important issue, others have bought into it. It’s created a shift in thinking.”

There are now 150 mental health first aiders who give advice and support to colleagues. They are trained on an ongoing basis to talk to people who are experiencing stress or mental ill health in the workplace – they signpost, guide and advise. Leyla has also set up Conversation Cafés, where staff come together to listen to a colleague’s mental health journey, and set up a high level mental health steering group to drive awareness and uptake of the support available to academic staff.

Imperial also has a wide range of systems and initiatives in place to promote staff wellbeing. “There are a lot of examples, from an in-house occupational health team to healthy living courses that include nutritional and weight loss advice. We also have a helpline for managers, maternity and paternity workshops and an in-house mediation service to resolve conflicts before they reach a crisis point.” Imperial also host a number of events, such as National Stress Awareness Day, Mental Health Awareness Day and an ongoing Reclaim Your Lunch Break campaign.

Staff feedback on the initiatives has been very positive. Courses are always oversubscribed; interest in becoming a volunteer is increasing. The latest staff survey showed that 80% of staff are proud to work for Imperial. Leyla is confident that a positive shift in attitudes toward health and wellbeing is occurring – and that it is here to stay.

Imperial College
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