



# THE QUALITY OF WORKING LIFE.

Exploring managers' wellbeing, motivation and productivity.

## CASE STUDY



Sunderland  
City Council



### HOW TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN TIMES OF GREAT CHANGE

*John Rawling – Deputy Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development at Sunderland City Council*

“Our workforce has halved and the organisation faces a great many challenges, yet we are still delivering high-quality, well-rated front line services. Organisations don't change – the people do.

Investing in the health and wellbeing of our workforce leads to happy and motivated employees – without whom the organisation would not have survived such drastic change.”

Sunderland City Council (SCC) is a large local authority with 4,000 staff in North East England. It provides and commissions a full range of public services for the communities of Sunderland.

Recent reductions in government funding have made the need to manage change successfully SCC's primary driver. The workforce has been halved and there has been a radical shift in ways of working. “Driving and adapting to these changes are key requirements of our employees and leaders”, says John.

#### It all starts at the top

SCC's leadership recognises that all change is challenging – and that employees need to be supported throughout these often long and difficult processes. John: “Employee engagement and productivity is dependent upon employee wellbeing – which in turn is hugely influenced by employees' experience

of management and leadership, and the trust relationships they have with each other.”

Using that as a starting point, SCC has run the Sunderland Leadership Programme for the past eight years. It operates at strategic, operational and first-line management levels and uses a psychometric tool to measure leadership styles. Participants are then given in-depth feedback by qualified psychologists so they can improve their management and leadership skills and be better able to support their teams.

#### A proactive health and wellbeing approach

SCC has a range of health and wellbeing measures in place. A healthy work/life balance is encouraged across all levels of the organisation and includes a wide variety of flexible working options, career breaks and condensed working hours.

In 2010 the council completely overhauled its approach to recruitment and deployment so that employees are placed in roles that closely match their personal strengths and personality, again using psychometric tools. This applies to all staff – from junior to senior.

“We want to eliminate the ‘square peg/round hole’ syndrome which can so damage employee wellbeing, engagement and productivity.”

To promote both the physical and mental wellbeing services the council organised

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Wellness Week, which included coaching taster sessions, hypnotherapy, Reiki, Yoga, Indian Head Massage, Breast Cancer Awareness sessions, free gym passes and health and diet information. But SCC's most innovative way to address health and wellbeing, and the one they are most proud of, is their coaching service.

### Coaching

Over the past seven years SCC have developed a coaching service based on the comprehensive use of psychometric tools. The team delivers mindfulness training and meditation as well as leadership and performance, team and individual coaching. The service proved particularly useful in challenging times: sessions in culture change and resilience are now part of team coaching when new teams are brought together or morale has dipped due to changes in teams or structures.

### Measuring the impact on the organisation

SCC uses various metrics to track if their commitment to health and wellbeing is paying off. On a macro level there are, for example, staff attendance statistics and the demand for coaching and counselling services.

On a micro level there is the progress made by individuals when it comes to, for example, adapting to and coping with change and challenge. Individual and team wellbeing are measured by the 'Distance Travelled' coaching tool – a self-rating tool that measures how an individual feels at the beginning and end of a number of coaching sessions.

And whilst the coaching service is confidential, the number of employees per service area receiving coaching is recorded. This allows the team to monitor 'hot spots': if a high percentage of the service area has a need for coaching, the team looks into potential reasons. If, for example, anxiety is a recurring theme the staff in that particular service area will be offered team coaching or mindfulness training.

Feedback from managers who received coaching is unanimous: coaching is highly valued and has helped many members of staff through difficult periods of significant change. Demand is high – even external organisations are requesting to buy the service.

### A cultural shift

The use of coaching and psychometrics to support employee development, performance and wellbeing has gradually become normalised across Sunderland City Council. The stigma of asking for help has faded. It started with the senior managers, which had a ripple effect throughout the organisation and helped dispel the myth that coaching is for those with 'problems'. It is now recognised that coaching helps you to "get you where you want to be".

John: "The attitude to health and wellbeing has shifted from 'a problem for HR' to a much more sophisticated understanding of the two-way inter-relationship between wellbeing and work."