

Improving staff retention – case studies

Stabilising retention during major change

Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust

What was the problem?

After the merger of North Essex Partnership and South Essex Partnership NHS foundation trusts in April 2017, the newly formed trust faced problems arising from different governance arrangements, operating models, ways of supporting staff and organisational cultures, and from low morale. Though retention rates were not significantly disparate, the two organisations' financial positions were vastly different.

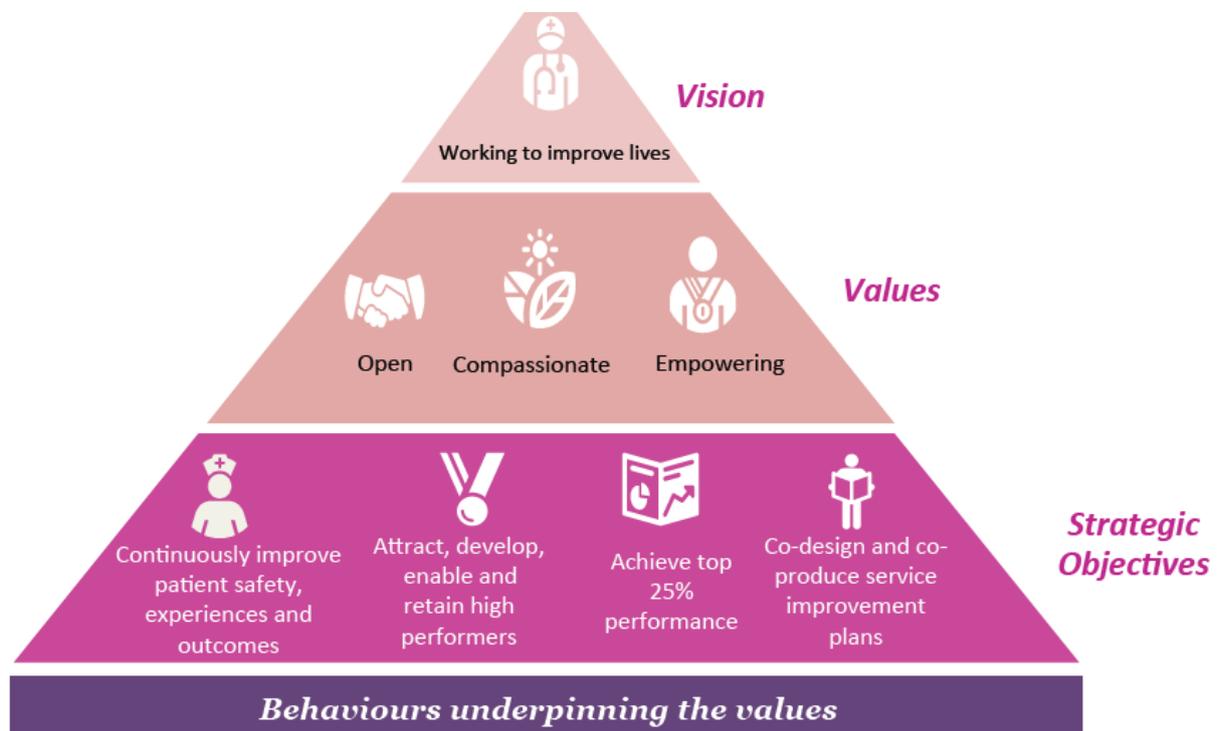
What was the solution?

An independent culture review revealed significant discrepancies in the organisations' two cultures by interviewing staff. The review's independence was important in encouraging open and honest conversations with staff. Key initiatives included:

- setting up an interim board to feed into the two existing boards, and the executive team's commitment to meet frontline staff face to face across the many sites to support the cultural work and ensure **visibility**
- co-producing new values with staff and aligning communications from the interim board and senior management to these values
- emphasising the merger's **non-financial benefits**, such as attracting the best staff from the area – the two trusts used to compete but now work together and make more clinical specialties available
- a guarantee to **protect continuing professional development funding** across the organisations
- sharing lessons learned from both organisations

- embedding the shared **vision** and co-produced **values** in the organisation’s strategic objectives (see Figure)
- as part of the strategic objective to **attract, develop, enable and retain high performers** – a **pledge from the trust** to engage with the workforce and improve engagement and retention (see Annex).

Figure: Vision, values and strategic objectives



What were the challenges?

- The trust was concerned staff might leave due to the uncertainty of the merger and might perceive the transaction as an acquisition rather than a merger.
- Working as an interim board and keeping stability in leadership; uncertainty about appointing the council of governors and potential delay.
- Staff from one organisation wanted more governance structures.
- Back-office consolidation, which started in the first week as the new trust’s priority was to protect frontline services.
- Harmonising policies and procedures.

- The public, service users and carers were uncertain whether services would be affected as part of the merger.
- Creating a new identity and culture and taking the best from two organisations with very different cultures.
- Delivering our post-transaction implementation plan in relation to workforce and culture.

What were the results?

- The merger was achieved in the target timescale of 18 months.
- The transaction costs were £1.2 million, and the transaction received a green governance rating from NHS Improvement.
- The new trust developed its vision, values and strategic objectives after wide engagement with staff, service users and stakeholders. These are embedded in the trust's reward, appraisal and recruitment processes.
- Improved Friends and Family Test scores and marginally fewer complaints.
- Sickness levels have improved from 8% (before and just after the merger) in April 2017 to 3.9% in July 2018.
- Vacancy rates average 13% compared to 17% for one of the former trusts.
- Staff survey results were better than expected as one trust's previous scores were among the lowest in the sector, with 29 scores below average. The trust's first Care Quality Commission rating is 'good' and in line with our ambition to be 'outstanding' by 2020.
- All financial targets within the financial plan were met or exceeded for Year 1, including the cost improvement programme.

What were the learning points?

- Be open from the beginning about the merger/major change being a challenging process.
- Establish the interim board (where appropriate) as soon as possible.

- The executive team and leaders need to be visible. Focus on key messages for staff and stakeholders and the 'brand' for the new organisation.
- Continually reinforce the vision, values and positive stories with staff through active communications and messaging.
- Develop values early on; communicate and engage staff and service users and carers.
- Be innovative when using external advice and support and focus on cultural delivery.
- Use NHS Improvement at each stage and take advice from others who have already made significant transactions.

Next steps and sustainability

- Embedding the engagement strategy, which covers communications, HR/workforce initiatives, organisational development, patient experience, and membership.
- Continuing to fulfil the trust's pledge to engage the workforce to improve engagement and retention.
- Evaluating and using the information from the metrics developed to monitor and measure cultural change over time.
- Analysing the data from recent internal cultural events and stakeholder review with partners and commissioners to shape external engagement and future direction.
- Working with NHS Improvement on developing benefits realisation for similar transactions in the future.

Want to know more?

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To see the other case studies in this series: visit NHS Improvement's website at: <https://improvement.nhs.uk/resources/improving-staff-retention/>

Annex

Pledge to engage the workforce and improve engagement and retention

We pledge to:

- Improve the experience of our candidates during the recruitment process.
- Understand from our employees what is important to them as their employer.
- Develop initiatives / rewards to retain the skills and experience of our employees.
- Develop our employees to provide them with the skills to do their job and to further support them in their career path.
- Have in place processes that enable our managers to develop, assess and monitor employees' performance.
- Develop a Succession Planning tool across the organisation.
- Implement Talent Management programme.
- Improve staff health and wellbeing.
- Develop a resilient workforce.
- Operate a zero tolerance approach to violence and see reduction in bullying levels.
- Improve the experience of BAME staff and other equality groups.
- Give employees a strong voice.
- Recognise and reward good work and innovation.
- Recognise the cultural needs of our workforce and celebrate our richly diverse workforce.
- Increase the number of Quality Champions.

Enabling frameworks to support the strategy:

- Communications Framework
- HR/Workforce Framework
- Organisational Development Framework

Measure

- Employee surveys.
- Sickness absence rates.
- Vacancy/Turnover rates.
- Improved retention.
- Safer staffing data.

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