Improving engagement with the chief executive and junior doctor forum

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Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh NHS Foundation Trust

What was the problem?

The trust observed low morale among its junior doctors, especially during negotiations over the 2016 terms and conditions of service for doctors and dentists in training.

What was the solution?

It set up a chief executive junior doctor forum to build relationships and communication between junior doctors and the trust board. Improving morale became a priority.

Initial aims were to:

- create an open dialogue and discuss topics most important to junior doctors
- create a culture in which they can raise concerns about training, the working environment and service pressures
- discuss areas where the trust can provide further support
- identify what could be changed or improved, and agree expected outcomes
- develop a partnership approach to implementing the new junior doctor contract to make it work in the best way possible for junior doctors.

Following the forum’s success, the trust extended its remit to developing and improving services, working conditions, education and training.

To maximise attendance, the trust:

- holds the forum monthly, after the lunchtime grand round where food is provided
- asked consultants and junior doctor trainee representatives to encourage their junior colleagues to attend.

To foster openness and engagement with the trust board, the chief executive or another executive director (usually the medical director or director of workforce) attend the forum, as well as a member of the staff engagement team and the medical HR business partner.
Occasionally the director for medical education, the guardian of safe working hours and a British Medical Association (BMA) representative also attend.

To avoid junior doctors taking only a passive role in the forum, the trust asked them to formulate the monthly agenda via the staff engagement leads so that issues important to them are discussed. The trust tries to meet a BMA or junior doctor representative a week before the forum to identify key topics and an agenda. When no specific topics are identified, it holds an open forum for junior doctors to discuss anything they wish with the board members attending.

**What were the challenges?**

The forum initially faced apathy, and attendance dipped after a good start. But the trust overcame this by persisting with the monthly meeting, by senior managers attending consistently and by encouraging consultants to support junior doctors attending.

Junior doctors may be reluctant to open up in front of their peers about their experiences or how they feel. To address this, the trust plans to trial software that allows live feedback via mobile devices, so that junior doctors can ask questions or respond to questions/polls anonymously in real-time during the forum.

**What were the results?**

> It’s good because we can talk about problems we come across and you can see that they are taken seriously. Things that were raised last month are already being addressed. For example, we now have a new microwave and fridge in the mess.

  — Foundation Year 2 doctor

The forum enables the trust to learn from its junior doctors about innovation and good practice from other organisations they have worked at. The trust has based visits to other trusts on junior doctors’ insight so it could learn more, build stronger relationships with neighbouring organisations and improve services for staff and patients.

The trust measures junior doctor morale and engagement once a year through its own ‘pulse’ survey, which provides detailed insight into morale and engagement, and the factors that affect them. The most recent survey showed junior doctors’ engagement was positive, and five enablers of staff engagement scored above the trust average: mindset, work relationships, perceived fairness, resources and clarity.

**What were the learning points?**

The chief executive and trust board’s support was important in demonstrating that the trust is committed to improving morale and engagement through the forum.
Next steps and sustainability

The forum’s aim now is to engage junior doctors in what matters most to them. Following feedback, its priorities are:

- improving on-site facilities for junior doctors (hot meals at night, car parking, accommodation)
- implementing a new bleep system, with improved filtering protocols
- reviewing shift patterns to even out workload demands.

In response to feedback from juniors reaching the end of FY2 and not yet ready to go into specialty training, the trust designed a bespoke FY3 post in collaboration with junior doctors to enable learning to continue while gaining valuable experience.

Want to know more?

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To see the other case studies in this series: visit the NHS Improvement website at: https://improvement.nhs.uk/resources/engaging-supporting-and-valuing-doctors-in-training/