

Name: Escrick Park Estate
Size: 16
Sector: Services
Location: Yorkshire and Humberside

The organisation

Escrick Park Estate is a management company that provides a wide range of services, including a holiday home park, countryside leisure facilities and tenancies of residential properties and office units. These activities have become its core business as income from agriculture has declined. The company employs 16 members of staff, along with four contract staff (a shepherd, a conservation officer and two sales staff). The majority of staff are based at two sites on the 8600 acre estate: the Estates Office and the Hollicarrs Holiday Home Park. Four estate labourers work across the entire estate. The company achieved Investors in People (IIP) status in 1999 and is now an IIP Champion.

The history of workplace dialogue

The company operates a flat management structure. Escrick Park Estate has an owner, a general manager and a dedicated manager of the holiday park. There is open and frank dialogue between staff over a range of workplace issues. One member of staff described the philosophy of the company towards dialogue as 'any time, any place', reflecting the view that staff are encouraged to voice their opinions, make suggestions and raise their concerns on a continuous basis. The general manager encourages such dialogue through daily discussions with individual members of staff. This open approach to dialogue has been encouraged by the owner of the company for many years. Recent diversification by the company into new lines of business has increased the need for dialogue around training. The skills requirements of the company have altered dramatically in recent years, and continue to evolve. The diversification strategy of the company has led to an increase in formal and semi-formal dialogue structures to accompany the long-standing 'any time, any place' philosophy.

These formal and semi-formal structures help to embed dialogue and provide linkages to the overall business strategy. Appraisals are conducted between individual staff and the general manager twice-yearly and provide a forum for raising views, communicating needs and identifying strengths and areas for improvement. The general manager holds a strategy meeting weekly at both the Estates Office and at the Hollicarrs Holiday Home Park. Whilst this is primarily an information sharing event, a portion of these team meetings are devoted to what the general manager, John Mayo calls 'Kaizen', where staff are encouraged to put forward and discuss ideas for improving the way they work. There is also a monthly meeting of all staff. This is organised around a more informal lunch

event, but acts as a forum where workplace issues, such as health and safety and training, can be raised and discussed.

How are training and skills discussed?

Dialogue around training and skills occur through all of the mechanisms, both formal and informal, identified above. Training needs are discussed in the twice yearly appraisals, both in terms of what individuals *need* to do for their jobs and what they *want* to do to develop further. The company has a clear vision of what training is needed, which is driven by the goals of its five year strategic plan. The diverse activities of the business mean that there are a wide range of skills required and individual members of staff have received training in accounts, information technology, marketing, spraying, chainsaw operating, and forklift driving and health and safety, amongst other things. However, workers are also encouraged to put forward suggestions for training – in appraisals and during informal discussions with the general manager - and to justify how this training will contribute to the business. This is also used as a basis for identifying and prioritising training activities.

The Kaizen meetings have proved a fruitful vehicle for discussing training activities. Any good ideas that emerge from these meetings are added to a Kaizen sheet and allocated to someone to take forward. One recent suggestion was to purchase a flail to go on to a trailer which would assist with activities such as hedge cutting. In turn, this meant that workers had to be trained to drive trailers with a flail attached. The monthly lunchtime meetings have provided an opportunity to discuss and provide training. Basic health and safety and first aid training have both been provided at these meetings.

What have been the benefits from dialogue on training and skills?

- Escrick Park Estate has been able to reduce its reliance on costly outside contractors by developing in-house skills in tree surgery, spraying and other activities. In many cases decisions about training in these areas stemmed from dialogue between management and workers.
- Staff turnover is very low because workers on the site feel empowered and able to voice their opinions in a supportive environment
- The credibility of the business has been improved. Staff in the holiday park highlighted the importance of Caravan Industry Training courses to the ongoing development of the holiday home business. Key staff have attended relevant courses and this is perceived to have increased sales
- Regular training days have been introduced for the whole workforce covering activities including health and safety and buying and selling

Challenges and 'top tips'

A key challenge has centred on dealing with the dramatic change in its core business activities in recent years. Dialogue around training has been a key means through which the company has navigated the change in direction from

agricultural activities to a diversified set of service products through encouraging employee involvement and ensuring their buy-in to the need for change. Both the owner and the general manager have sought to lead by example by recognising the value of staff and advocating open communication throughout the period of change. This change is ongoing and management recognise the importance of ensuring staff have the skills and training they need to adapt as a key factor in determining the future success of the business.

Management have also recognised that it takes time and effort to overcome cynicism. It is easy to say that workers have a voice and can contribute to dialogue over training but this can quickly result in dissatisfaction and cynicism if suggestions are not acted on. Delivering on commitments to training and acting on the suggestions of the workforce are essential to the success of dialogue.

Top Tips

- Back up words with actions. If people feel their contribution is valued and has an effect on the business they will continue to come up with new ideas.
- When suggestions arise, give someone ownership of the problem/idea and ensure that it has the management and financial support to be implemented
- Create a culture of open 'any time, any place' communication. Lead by example from the top by engaging in dialogue with staff on a daily basis.
- Back this up with formal structures where training can be regularly discussed
- Recognise that it will take time and effort to overcome cynicism