

# Strengthening management skills

Ray Howard, Managing Director, QHR Solutions, outlines understanding the particular HR needs of public sector bodies...

Every organisation has human resource needs; the people it employs are its most valuable asset which, if treated badly, will adversely affect the whole of the organisation. The public sector is no exception but it also has its own particular needs.

Public sector bodies rarely have the freedom of 'independent' organisations to set their own personnel systems. They are usually restricted by national and collective agreements, and predetermined systems that are often unnecessarily complicated and that have evolved, rather than being planned as a coherent whole. The public sector has to find ways to work within these restrictions to provide clear and more workable systems that reflect its specific needs. In many ways, the public sector is no different from any other sector; it needs HR systems that comply with employment law, provide fair and equitable terms and conditions of employment for its staff, and protect the organisation from potential litigation. What is different is that it must do this in complex organisations that encompass a diversity of professions with their own needs. This is a mammoth task but one that is well worth the effort because the rewards of an efficient system are high.

All organisations are subject to change but none to such a degree as the public sector. In common with any organisation, change can come from within in response to modernisation and efficiency needs, but often, it is imposed from 'the centre' to comply with new regulations and political needs. Coping with this is difficult and requires highly effective change management. It is simply not sufficient to change the structures and systems; unless the people are prepared and willing to implement the changes, they will fail. Change management will only succeed when operated within a change culture; therefore, the first step in any properly conducted change management operation is to create a culture that will accept new ways of working and strive to make them successful. The basis of this culture is to create understanding, involvement and ownership. Opposition to change is usually based on fear, fear of the unknown and fear of how it will affect the individual. The easiest way to deal with

that fear is to pre-determine that 'the change' will not work and that the status quo should remain. People must accept that change is inevitable but, by understanding the need for change, they can influence how that change happens. One of the most common mistakes made in the process of change management is to consult with staff and then completely ignore what they say. Not only is this an insult and a waste of time; it is also short sighted and foolish, as the best ideas and solutions can often come from 'the shop floor'. The people have to make the change work and can reduce it to nothing if they so wish. The only really effective way of implementing change is to convince people that it is their idea and that they, therefore, own the process. Sounds simple but, of course, it is not. As long ago as the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century, Machiavelli recognised the improbability of 'a new order of things' being implemented without opposition and angst. However, change does, and will continue to, happen and the public sector needs to make itself expert at its management.

Training within the public sector is predominantly focused on job specific qualifications. Whilst this is commendable, it ignores the wider development needs of individuals and rarely prepares people for promotion. It is assumed that, if someone is professionally qualified within their field, they will automatically be able to manage people, budgets and administration. This is quite erroneous; the skills needed to undertake these tasks are equally as important as the profession related skills. The public sector needs to recognise the wider aspects of training and development with particular emphasis on people management skills.

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