



## How can you keep staff motivated through periods of change? Peter English shares his experiences.

► **The massive changes that the NHS is currently undergoing are unprecedented in its history. Michael Schofield, finance director at NHS Sussex, points out that this upheaval is particularly unsettling because the shape and role of new organisations have taken such a long time to emerge. Is there anything a manager can do to help their team cope during such a difficult period, or is it simply a case of holding tight until things settle down?**

When organisations are dissolving, there is a danger that staff will find themselves spending a lot of time gossiping glumly with colleagues about the latest round of changes, and scanning internet job sites in search of a safer future. About 15 years ago I worked for an organisation that merged, restructured and completely revised its role – shedding 80% of its staff in the process. To my surprise, this period turned out to be one of the productive and exhilarating of my career, due in large part to the skills and personalities of the two managers that I worked for. These two

individuals had quite different styles, but I think most of us have something to learn from how they went about their maintaining their team's morale and productivity during a time of intense pressure.

### 'Andrea'

The first of these managers, Andrea, was very aware of the human dimension of team leadership. She had a sympathetic manner (her door really was always open) and she somehow made the team feel that she was looking after us. Some managers balk at the concept of 'looking after' their staff, regarding it as patronising; however the truth is that the psychodynamics of the manager/staff relationship often contain an element of the parent/child relationship. Although this can lead to problems, for example when staff feel that their manager is overly-controlling or that s/he refuses to give them opportunities to grow and develop, Andrea's approach felt supportive and helpful. Rather than promoting dependence and child-like behaviour it helped

us to focus on our work rather than spending too much time worrying about the future.

As ever, it was the little things that became significant: Andrea always made sure that there was a cake at our weekly team meeting, and that we all had a chance to talk a bit about how we were feeling. She recognised that although she often had no news to share in terms of latest developments in the restructuring, it was still important for us to come together once a week and feel supported.

#### 'Barbara'

Barbara's great accomplishment was in making us feel like a team of winners – no mean achievement when we all had uncertain futures and some of us knew that we would be redundant in six months time. Barbara took every opportunity to create a high performance culture. She did this by expecting a lot of us in terms of behaviour and performance.

occasionally open a meeting by asking each of us to describe one achievement that we had accomplished that week. I know other managers who use this tactic, and it seems to be a reliable way of creating a positive atmosphere.

If Andrea was a kindly parent, Barbara was a pack leader. The relatively new discipline of 'evolutionary psychology' suggests that a lot of what goes on in organisations can be described in terms of animal behaviour. When I first encountered evolutionary psychology it helped me to understand why having such a strong pack leader was reassuring for us – it made us feel safe even though this was a period of great insecurity. Humans aren't purely rational creatures – our feelings can be influenced by factors which speak to instinct rather than reason.

During that period of intense organisational change, the future really was uncertain, and some of us really were going to be discarded by the organisation, but we still felt like

most of our team were working very long hours – I was often in the office late into the evening, and used to regularly come in at weekends. When Barbara became aware of this she called a team meeting at which we each described, in detail, our current workload. At the end of the meeting we had re-prioritised our projects. Some had been assigned a lower priority, others had been dropped altogether.

I appreciated Barbara's clarity and directness when she said 'I need you to deliver this project before you leave the organisation – but these other tasks can take a back seat. If they don't get done, we'll cope somehow.' The sense that we had a big pack leader protecting us, but also expecting a lot from us, created a sense of loyalty and we all worked hard when other teams might have been tempted to wind down during the last months of the organisation.

A similarly focused approach, which has worked well in NHS Sussex, is for some

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Barbara had little tolerance for moaning – she would react swiftly to any hint that the team were starting to whinge or wallow in pessimism. I remember in one meeting I was voicing a rather cynical viewpoint and she turned to me sharply and said 'No, No, No, Petel!' It wasn't an uncomfortable moment – the whole team laughed – but it was certainly memorable, and it made me realise that unconstructive moaning can be corrosive to morale.

One of Barbara's great talents was navigating organisational politics. She was a high profile figure in the organisation and she constantly looked for ways to protect, and indeed promote, her team's good reputation. At board meetings she would find a way of mentioning some success that one of us had accomplished. At our team meetings she would pass on praise from the chief executive and directors. Barbara would

winners because that was the signal we were repeatedly getting in different ways from our pack leader. One way in which she achieved this was by actively looking for ways to invest in our development – a tactic which has worked well in NHS Sussex where Michael Schofield has encouraged his team to undertake development opportunities which stretch them and give them a clear sense of their own potential.

#### Microcultures

When I deliver leadership courses I often talk about the manager's role in creating a microculture. The organisation's culture might be bruising, harsh or chaotic, but a wise team leader recognises that they don't have to simply recreate this culture in their own department – they can create a safer, more orderly, local environment.

In the six months leading up to redundancy

staff to focus primarily on the organisation's transition plan, whilst others devote more of their attention to delivering the current year's agenda.

#### Summary

- Recognise that the manager's role has two aspects that are often unspoken – that of the team's parent figure, and its pack leader. If you pay attention to these aspects, your team are more likely to be productive, especially during times of intense change.
- Your team's culture doesn't have to reflect what is going on in the wider organisation. Look for ways to create a healthy microclimate. ▲

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