

Positive Communications

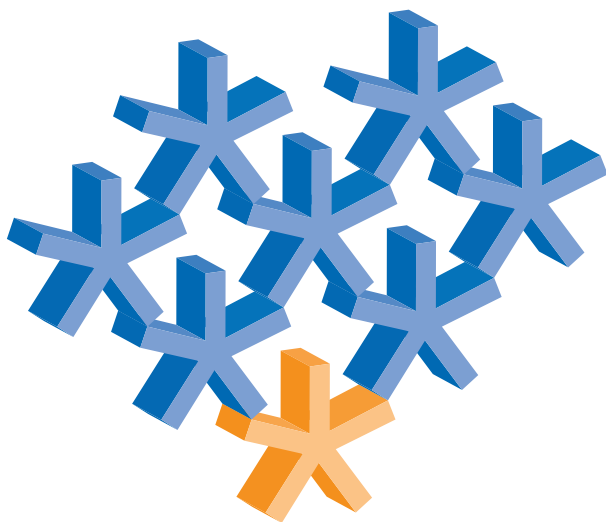
An initiative is under way to create a more positive working environment (PWE) for all staff. A group of academics and support staff is leading the implementation of an improvement plan drawn up after a major staff survey.

One step the group is taking is to produce a series of advice sheets – called *Positive Communications* – on issues raised by staff. The advice will always be brief and practical.

If you need part or all of this publication in an alternative format, eg in Braille, in larger print or on tape, please call 928 7776.

Issue Two:

How to be an effective leader



How to be an effective leader*

This leaflet is no substitute for experience in leading staff or for the new leadership and management development programme that will get under way in 2005 – the largest this University has ever seen and a direct result of feedback from the thousands of staff who took part in the 2003 PWE survey. The leaflet is just a crash course in the basics. Seasoned leaders may welcome a brief reminder of the essentials, while people who are new to the role have to start somewhere. Different leaders develop different styles, but there are some common features of effective leadership. These are summarised here.

**By 'leader', we don't just mean the Vice-Chancellor, the Pro Vice-Chancellors, the Registrar, Deans, Heads of Department, Divisional Heads and Technical and Resource Managers. We mean everyone who leads, manages or supervises groups of staff.*

Even if you are not a leader and have no aspirations to become one, the leaflet is worth a few minutes of your time: it should help you to give your line manager constructive feedback during annual staff reviews and regular one-to-ones, which work best when they are genuinely two-way.

Have a plan

What are the strategic aims for your area of responsibility, the operational objectives that support them and the detailed actions that will deliver progress over the next 1-3 years? How do your intentions tie in with the University Plan (see the Plan summary at www.bristol.ac.uk/university/plan)? Are the resources you need to put the plan into practice consistent with the resources you are likely to have at your disposal? It may be tempting to dismiss such things as management-speak, but it goes without saying that good leaders know where they are heading, have a clear idea of the route and understand what equipment they need.

You can get advice on planning from the Planning, Policy and Projects Division of Support Services (tel. 928 7963).

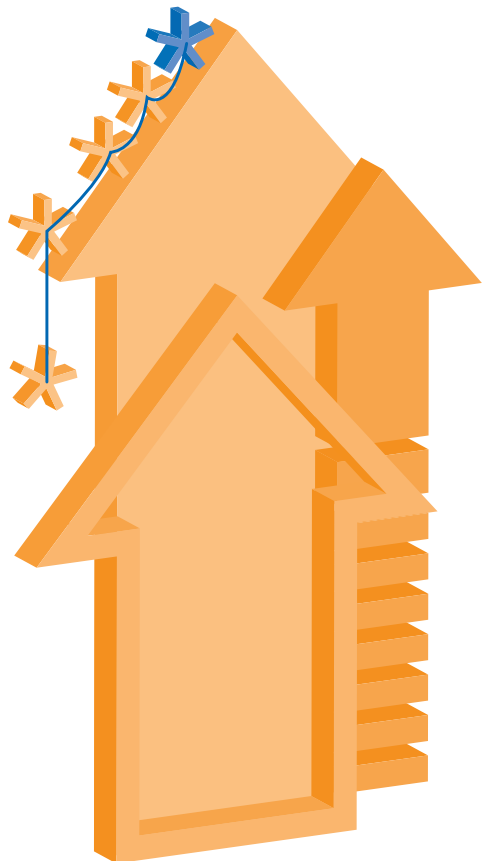
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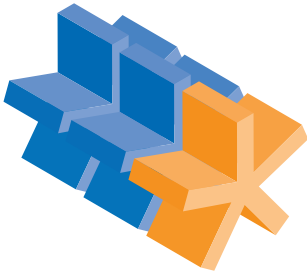
So it's important for you to have a plan for your area of responsibility, but it's also necessary for every member of your team to know about it. Any colleagues who helped you devise the plan will be at an advantage, but others may be unsure of the team's direction and feel less inclined to follow your lead. In this and other respects, the principles behind Investors in People, to which the University is committed, are relevant. In particular, everyone should understand what is expected of them and how their work contributes to the achievement of the overall plan. An effective leader will set up a framework for regular discussion with individuals as well as teams, so that progress can be monitored, performance tracked and problems picked up early.

Of course, communication must not be associated only with such ‘managerial’ concerns, important though they are. At its best, communication is driven primarily by commitment and an urge to share information and ideas, to find the best solutions, to give and receive encouragement, to show people they are valued, to praise, to listen. It’s all some way from the ‘command-and-obey’ approach that used to characterise most institutions.

Be available

Formal inductions, scheduled team meetings, annual staff reviews and regular one-to-ones are essential communication tools, especially for the sort of objective-setting and stocktaking processes described above. But good leaders also make time for people on a more ad hoc basis. They are as available as their own commitments allow – not out of charity but because they are interested in colleagues’ progress and keen to guide and support them. As well as being on hand in their offices at least part of the time,





such leaders are often seen out and about in their domain, ‘walking the floor’ and engaging with colleagues. They listen and learn. They win a reputation for openness and approachability; others tend to get labelled as ‘remote’.

Trust people

Effective leaders allow members of the team to work on their own initiative. They provide direction as necessary and show ongoing interest, but they don’t try to take over the work or to ‘micro-manage’ it. Their prime interest is in outputs. They empower staff without leaving them in the lurch – delegation, not abdication. Their relationship with their colleagues is based on trust and open communication. Calculated risks are sometimes seen as appropriate. The possibility of failure is, of course, minimised, but it is also accepted. There is no culture of blame.

Be decisive

When a decision is required and you have consulted and cogitated as necessary, make one – and be prepared to give clear reasons to justify it. People expect whoever is in charge to know what to do and why. We generally respect a decision that seems logical, even if we don’t

necessarily agree with it. Sometimes, of course, a decision has to be changed. This requires careful handling (a clear explanation and some humility, perhaps) if the leader is to avoid losing credibility.

Be consistent in your behaviour

Leaders have to adapt their style according to the skills, needs and circumstances of individuals: a new member of staff may require a different kind of response from an experienced professional. But that aside, effective leaders try to treat everyone pretty much the same – whatever their position in the hierarchy. They are respectful to all, including people who are different from them by virtue of their ethnicity, their physical characteristics or some other factor. They don’t have favourites (or at least they avoid showing it). They keep their mood swings in check. People like to know where they stand, not to have to tread warily in case the boss is having an off day.

Be fair

People are rightly sensitive to any unfairness in the way they or their colleagues are treated. When you think you have occasion to wield the metaphorical stick, first listen carefully to

all sides of the story and make sure you have grasped the issues and are justified in your actions. Explain your thinking. Be firm and clear – it's not all smiley chats when you're the boss – but non-aggressive. In particular, don't indulge in any form of bullying behaviour.

One other variety of unfairness that may be fun but is best avoided by leaders: gossiping about other members of staff.

Deal with conflict

No leader can make people get along together, but you can expect them to maintain constructive professional relationships. Intervene early if conflict arises, listening carefully to the issues, making your expectations clear and seeking an amicable resolution.

This may not be easy, so seek help if necessary. There is information about staff counselling at www.bristol.ac.uk/staffcounselling and about staff mediation at www.bristol.ac.uk/Depts/Secretary/staffmediation.htm.

Be calm in a crisis

It's one thing to be a leader when things are going well, but quite another when there's a crisis. This is not the place to go into the

theory of crisis management, but it is worth emphasising the one quality that members of staff expect to see in their boss at such times: unflappability. Panic and good leadership seldom co-exist.

Set an example

Effective leaders lead by example. They are well motivated, hard working and enthusiastic. People follow them because they command respect, not because they hold a senior position or inspire a certain amount of trepidation. The leader should be the champion of his or her area of responsibility and of the team itself – someone on whom the reputation of the whole depends and with whom it is safe.

What have we forgotten that's important?

As with the first leaflet in this series (*Making internal email a blessing rather than a curse*), your comments would be welcome. Is the advice too obvious? Is something vital missing? Let us know via pwe-feedback@bristol.ac.uk.

Advice on organisational change, management and leadership development is available from Personnel Services and Staff Development.