

Facing the Future – with real aplomb!

Introduction

“Sandwell is ahead of the game to combat the cuts”

This quote about Sandwell combating cuts came from a council worker quizzed by Investors in People assessors as we (successfully) applied for their bronze standard.

It was given as assessors sought to gauge just how much staff knew about Facing the Future (FtF), a programme of projects to transform the way we work and save money in the face of cuts to Sandwell’s cash support from central government totalling £132 million over the five years to 2015/16 – roughly £400 for each man, woman and child in our West Midlands borough.

FtF – with a £22 million savings target by the end of 2016/17 – is, thus, central to the council’s overall strategy to stave off bankruptcy, stay in business and continue serving our residents.

And central to FtF is reaching out to engage every one of our 4,000 remaining employees so they:

- know all about the programme;
- appreciate just how vital it is to all our futures; and (crucially)
- can chip in with their own ideas to contribute to it.

That’s why we’ve assembled a package of FtF internal communications channels to engage our people and we believe that package is working – and here’s why.

So what exactly is FtF – and where did it come from?

A three-year budget cycle we use has helped us balance the books since the latest cuts were unleashed.

And we’ve already shed thousands of jobs (including around a half of top managers) and reshaped some services as we strive to protect the essential things our residents need from us.

But members realised that traditional ‘salami slicing’ of budgets wouldn’t meet the financial challenge. They asked for innovative proposals that could.

FtF – launched in 2014 – was the result.

Underpinning the whole programme are five objectives to:

- help people help themselves;
- make sure we get things right first time;
- sort simple stuff quickly;
- make best use of Sandwell’s assets; and

- create conditions for growth.

Communicating FtF – why?

Given the importance of FtF to our central strategy of staying in business as a council, we commissioned external reviewers to assess how the programme had started. They gave it an amber rating and recommended steps to improve staff understanding of FtF and boost ‘grassroots’ involvement.

We realised staff’s full support was crucial to the programme and immediately drafted an experienced communications/engagement manager into the FtF team who developed a ‘back to basics’ strategy.

Communicating FtF – how?

Of course, we’re using traditional internal communications methods such as notice boards, posters, team meetings, briefings and one-to-ones between managers and staff.

But in this day and age staff expect (and have a right) to get key messages electronically. So we’re sending them weekly emails – and they have access to occasional blogs from the Chief Executive.

Staff can also key into an intranet site for:

- plain English write-ups of key projects;
- graphic examples of how FtF will save cash year by year;
- latest news;
- case studies on how individual teams are changing how they work and making savings; and
- a video of a 200-plus staff briefing on FtF by the council’s Chief Executive.

Communicating FtF – and finally.....

In addition to e-comms, we’re seeking to harness the power of face-to-face communications – traditional, yes, but also uniquely powerful when persuasively done with expert knowledge.

FtF ‘champions’ in each of the council’s main departments are reaching out to colleagues with key updates – and in the process injecting fresh impetus to the programme.

One striking example is FtF’s very own board game – a kind of municipal Monopoly, which the champions have themselves designed and developed. This uses the tried and tested format of board games – complete with dice! – to get staff thinking about the problems and challenges (and potential solutions) that local government faces (and will face with increasing severity) in times of austerity.

The game has gone down well with staff (and other councils we have shared it with) and features heavily in an FtF poster campaign across the council.

Communicating FtF

Over 500 employees attended lunchtime sessions and created a series of 'word clouds' to visualize the ideas.

Analysis of these ideas threw up a number of key themes – now captured in 14 quality circles where staff have put their heads together to tackle specific problems and recommend improvements.

In essence, we're avoiding forking out for expensive consultants by relying on staff to use their expertise to suggest better ways of working in today's financial climate.

It's paying off and the CEO has recognised outstanding employees who have put into practice their ideas to work better and save close to £250k.

We're also making the most of the circles as an opportunity to develop the staff involved. We've saved £40k by providing in-house Kaizen training to them. Feedback is outstanding with a waiting list. We've also designed a Kaizen 'Survivors Guide' booklet and e-learning module.

Communicating FtF – success in numbers

- almost 20,000 page views for the intranet site (and a record count of almost 550 on one single day);
- over 500 staff (more than one in 10 of our total workforce) have taken a direct part in FtF in a variety of ways – interactive lunchtime sessions, quality circles, 'champion' roles, service-specific FtF business planning sessions and so on;
- a council-wide employee survey revealed 64% were familiar with the programme, 61% understood what it was trying to achieve and almost half knew how they could directly contribute;
- almost 4,000 hits on social media for our FtF film;
- quality circle ideas have already found £250k cashable savings

Communicating FtF – qualitative successes

Firstly, our Investors in People assessment specifically questioned staff on FtF – and its final report highlighted positive comments such as "FtF is seen to be helping people in raising awareness of council-wide topics" and "Sandwell is ahead of the game to combat the cuts".

FtF played a big part in helping us get the standard's bronze award for the first time.

Secondly, in March 2015 external reviewers came back to assess progress we had made with their July 2014 recommendations – and moved us up from an amber rating to green ('unprecedented' in just nine months, we were told).

Specifically, reviewers found that:

- engagement with – and appetite and enthusiasm for – FtF had increased significantly;

- the programme had been firmly embedded all levels;
- the enthusiasm of staff had been garnered and staff champions appointed;
- FtF is now the primary vehicle for the council to deliver culture change, transformation and savings until 2020;
- a major aspect of recent activity had been communication and FtF's profile is much more prominent.

Individuals and teams have been motivated to submit their own examples of 'best practice' (in terms of saving money, maximizing income and transforming their services) to the FtF intranet.

FtF – where now?

In financial terms we've reached our savings target for 2015/16, 2016/17. Targets have been met. That's a flying start for FtF and we're confident, too, that it will be sustainable after that and continue to make the further savings we need.

It won't be easy. Local government is going through its toughest time financially that many can remember but it has clearly reached – and motivated and mobilised – employees as we seek to make sure that Sandwell Council not only survives local government's current problems but emerges from them as a stronger, more efficient and more responsive business.