

Merseylearn – building a learning culture at work

(a multi-union project supported by the TUC and unionlearn)

This work came about because of:

- The need to improve the skills of workers
- The need to establish common learning culture across Merseytravel's three divisions
- The need to improve industrial relations/consultation with the workforce
- The organisation was going for Investors In People and was concerned about outcomes.

The main partners were Amicus, GMB, TGWU, UCATT, Unison and three divisions of Merseytravel: Passenger Transport Executive, Mersey Ferries and Mersey Tunnels. These were supported by the Union Learning Fund (finance, contract management and support) and unionlearn North West (support).

The unions and employers entered into a single purpose agreement designed to operate alongside existing bargaining machinery. It set out the membership of a Joint Learning Forum which included Greater Merseyside LSC and unionlearn in the North-West.

Key to the project's success were the establishment and support of a successful Union Learning Representative network (the agreement sets out their roles and responsibilities). This was the inspiration that meant that workers came forward enthusiastically to learn a wide range of skills. The joint learning forum also ensured the learning needs of the least qualified were met.

Management-union relationships were improved by working together on this positive project, which led to improved communications and less resistance to change because of a partnership approach increasing levels of trust within the organisation.

Results

Although ensuring true equality of opportunity across three separate areas of one business remains challenging, the following achievements have been made since the project began:

- Staff turnover has fallen to 4% (the best for any Passenger Transport Executive)
- There has been a drop of 2 days sick leave on average and a 10% drop in the number of disciplines/grievances
- Staff promotions are up by 10%, which has led to local staff being retained
- Merseytravel has been awarded Investors In People Champion status
- Merseytravel has received national recognition of management and staff through participation in high level consultative meetings (events with government minister etc)
- The project has been expanded to the wider transport sector e.g. Merseyrail, Merseyside taxi community ensuring such workers are receiving appropriate skills training
- This work has received publicity in Trade Union and Human Resources press.
- The visitor economy is key to the long-term success of the Merseyside economy. Merseylearn is therefore also supporting upskilling the wider transport sector for 2008 when Liverpool becomes European Capital of Culture. Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) are playing an important role in engaging transport workers to up skill on customer care issues. The local Unite(T&G) Merseyside headquarters hosts much of this training on their premises free of charge.

Impact on individual learners

- Over 70% of staff are using the scheme with over 370 staff achieving NVQs and 161 National Test passes
- People are staying longer in their jobs
- Internal staff promotions have increased
- There are now high levels of morale and motivation as people feel valued
- Learners receive paid time off to learn.

Impact on families

- Family learning events are run as an important part of the project as a way of encouraging reluctant learners to participate. Learners through the project are able to provide better support to their children and grandchildren.

Impact on communities

- A better service is now provided to the travelling public. This is true both for directly employed staff such as at bus stations and the work the project is now doing with Merseyside taxi drivers.

The project was in many ways learner led. At the outset a learner survey was undertaken, which was promoted by the Joint Learning Forum and union learner representative (ULR) led. A high percentage (78%) of survey forms were returned. This helped to identify not only what the barriers were to learning for staff but also the areas people wanted to learn in. The programme was then designed to meet these requirements.

ULRs, once recruited, played a critical role in ensuring that learners were listened to and supported, particularly critical in ensuring less confident learners' needs were taken into consideration. Through regular ULR meetings Senior ULRs are able to capture the views of all representatives and the learners they represent, ensuring all learners' views are taken into consideration when strategic decisions for the project are being taken at the Joint Learning Forum.

Implications for other providers

- A strong lead is required from the organisation management, who need to be seen to collaborate effectively with unions to the benefit of the workforce
- Unions can demonstrate responsible and peer role to members inspiring confidence
- This work has shown the importance of the employer listening to the workforce, admitting when there are issues and being proactive to identify innovative solutions through working with partners
- Unions demonstrating partnership can have positive win-win outcomes.
- This work has shown the critical importance of learning agreements in embedding the learning culture at work
- Setting a clear framework for roles and responsibilities, which means problems can be sorted rather than developing and increasing, is important
- Both sides must be willing to listen and learn from each other.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

Email: liz.chandler@merseytravel.gov.uk or unison@merseytravel.gov.uk
Phone: 0151 330 1209