

Improving the 'voice' culture at Interrelate

Interrelate is a not-for-profit organisation with over 280 employees across New South Wales. With almost 90 years of operation, Interrelate specialises in improving relationships through a number of counselling and support services for families, individuals and young people. After a recent change of leadership, Interrelate undertook a process of cultural transformation to build upon the organisation's strengths and address areas of improvement. Interrelate's board of directors initiated the transformation, engaging newly appointed CEO Patricia Ocelli to lead the project. The transformation project was highly complex, with an aim to involve all staff throughout the process and address several systemic issues within the organisation.

Patricia described the organisation when she arrived: *"staff felt that the culture of the organisation wasn't quite right", and "staff were feeling less engaged with the organisation, less engaged with brand of the organisation, and less engaged with the programs that were being delivered"*. To help identify the specific cultural issues within Interrelate, Patricia met face-to-face with over half of their workforce. It became clear that the organisation was beset by a culture of fearing to speak up or act with initiative, reinforced by punitive and controlling leader behaviour, communication processes and performance management. One issue staff reported was a fear of communicating outside their line of delegation because they felt there might be negative consequences for doing so. Additionally, staff felt if they voiced feedback that was potentially contrary to the view of management they would be ignored or face negative consequences. This fear of openness and transparency also extended to managers of different regions, who felt uncomfortable with the idea of their performance measures shared across regions for fear of negative evaluation and comparison.

Upon understanding some of the cultural issues within Interrelate, Patricia understood that a major aim of the transformation project should be to open the lines of communication to enable the organisation to grow and thrive again, *"we want to free up lines of communication, and we know that everybody has that within them to be able to contribute and add value to the organisation. For us it's been about holding everybody accountable to that mantra including the board [then] transparency and those principles follow right through"*. Patricia was also careful to help ensure that the project would be owned throughout the organisation, *"rather than treating it as a project, we treated it as a new way of doing business"*. Interrelate introduced a number of systems and processes to encourage and enable staff to raise issues, concerns, and ideas. First, as an interim emergency measure, an email system was introduced that allowed staff to send anonymous feedback directly to the CEO, *"it was quite a useful way of getting a sense of the temperature at the ground. People became more confident with the email system. We got to the point where I had received 140-something confidential emails. And on average I was receiving 4 or 5 a week of*

confidential emails coming through". Patricia acknowledged a major limitation of this email system was the difficulty of following up emails lacking details, and she encouraged staff to provide at least minimal details (e.g., office location). This greatly improved Patricia's ability to respond to feedback raised in the email system, *"there were patterns in what was coming in. If enough people tell you through a confidential system that something's wrong then you can't just ignore it"*.

The confidential email system was complimented by an online portal, which Patricia used to provide feedback of issues raised in the email system, and as a source of feedback itself through posts by individual staff members. When Patricia found that individuals avoided using the online portal, they improved the system by encouraging group feedback from a representative staff member in each region. This increased the usefulness of the online portal both because of an increase in usage through the safety provided by group feedback, and because of an increased sense of representativeness and credibility of the suggestions. *"All those mechanisms were about open lines of communication and opening the dialogue so that people not only felt safe in expressing a view, but they also could see that if they expressed a view it would have an impact on the ground in terms of a response"*. Interrelate has been highly consultative with its staff, involving them in day-to-day decision making using internal surveys or face-to-face interviews. *"The whole process has been a process of consultation, feedback, engagement, incorporation and then repeating that over and over and over again"*. Staff have been consulted about topics such as branding, newsletters, communication processes, programs, training and accreditation, and appropriate workplace behaviour. Feedback from staff has been used by Interrelate to review and make changes to policies and procedures. For example, based on staff feedback, the training and accreditation committee moved from a punitive model (involving assigning "pass" or "fail" ratings to staff, which could impact their job security) to a service excellence framework developed by staff. *"We needed to have a system that actually enabled people to grow and develop, and understand where they could improve and from that feedback then improve their practice. The staff who were developing the service excellence framework went out to the regions, delivered sessions on what we were trying to achieve, engaged staff in consultation, sought feedback from them and then incorporated that feedback into the new framework"*. In another example, staff wrote examples of appropriate and inappropriate workplace behaviour aligned to Interrelate's values, which was used to write the organisation's code of conduct, *"so what you've got is engagement and ownership at the end because they were involved right from the beginning in developing the code"*. The consultation process has involved both internal development and service improvement projects. Service practice groups were formed by staff with clinical expertise to review and improve the deliverables of various Interrelate programs.

Patricia acknowledges that the consultation process is extremely labour intensive and takes significant time and effort by everyone involved. Some staff have also reported that they would like to be more discerning about what decisions they

would like to be involved in and what decisions they are happy to be made by other staff. To help manage the load, Interrelate developed a consultation timetable to help prioritise initiatives for consultation. The timetable outlines the items out for consultation at the moment and how the item may or may not affect staff, allowing staff to decide whether they would like to give feedback.

To support the consultation processes, Patricia invested in a leadership development program focused on improving communication behaviour for managers at all levels from executive to team leaders. The program helped create a culture of sharing practice, performance and resources with others in the organisation to improve performance. A working group was also formed to help improve supervision communication protocols and styles within the organisation. *“There was a sense of control around communication within the organisation. If people were emailing one another, they would have to email the recipient and cc the recipient’s manager and their manager about that particular issue”*. New communication principles were sent to all staff to encourage improved communication styles. Patricia notes that *“you can manage without necessarily having to control every communication that’s happening within your work group. Using supervision and other mechanisms to have individual time with your staff can help to know where they’re up to in progress without having to micromanage every step of the work that their doing”*.

For a successful staff consultation process, Patricia identifies that a certain level of trust needs to be placed in employees, *“often organisations don’t trust that their staff have got the answers within them. You should guide them and shape them, but you can do that knowing full well that your staff have got the capability and probably the best knowledge about how to do this and do it well”*. Patricia also acknowledges that sometimes it may not be possible to implement staff suggestions, such as due to budgetary reasons. In these circumstances, Patricia has been careful to provide clear feedback to staff why they cannot implement their suggestions within the organisation, *“we’ve provided feedback about the cost implications of doing it that way, why it had been considered, and why we couldn’t do what people were suggesting we did”*. This process helps ensure that staff feel their feedback has been carefully listened to and considered, rather than ignored.

Patricia highlights the importance of having staff at all levels be champions of the change initiatives, *“you’re not just the only person who needs to do it – you need to engage people to actually see your vision and what you’re trying to achieve, and sometimes that’s engaging those who are maybe your greatest critics”*. Patricia engaged in extensive discussion with managers to help alleviate concerns they had about potential changes, *“I needed to engage with them about understanding my view-point and understanding what I was trying to do but also support them to understand it so they didn’t feel threatened by what I was trying to do. I could demonstrate that there were other ways of them overcoming the issues that were holding them back”*.

Patricia acknowledges that some staff may not believe there is a need for change, or show scepticism towards the changes. Demonstrating her commitment to deliver promised outcomes of change initiatives was effective in helping some staff get on board with the initiatives, and was a slow, incremental process of building trust. *“It was about getting some runs on the board and actually demonstrating that what we said we were going to deliver on, we delivered on.”* Patricia believes that clear communication and follow-through of expectations and goals is important for success, *“If you say ‘I value people’s viewpoint and feedback’ then look at what actions you’re actually putting in place to demonstrate the thing that you value”*.

Several outcomes have been observed as a result of the cultural transformation at Interrelate. Compared to 4-5 weekly emails, staff have not reported feedback via the anonymous email system for over two months, suggesting they are more comfortable reporting their feedback using the alternate voice methods introduced. Staff are more likely to come forward and report grievance issues than in the past. Willingness to provide feedback is also indicated by Interrelate’s staff survey response rate, which increased from 55% to 76%. Patricia reports that with a culture reinforcing openness and involvement, staff and managers are more proactive, *“they’ve started to already put in place strategies to address whatever their issues were”*. Finally, Interrelate staff have directly reported positive feedback of the cultural transformation. In Interrelate’s latest staff survey, 74% employees agreed that Interrelate had improved over the last year, which was significantly higher than the industry benchmark. Patricia notes that staff have approached her personally to give positive feedback, *“people came to me and said ‘I’m so pleased with the work that you’re doing and how we’re engaging as an organisation at the moment’. I’d be totally wrong to say that all the problems are finished. But the fact that now people are willing to come forward and say ‘I have an issue, I have a problem that needs to be resolved’, I think that’s a positive thing. Before, we didn’t know where the issues were and therefore you couldn’t resolve them”*.

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If you would like more information please contact Voice Project.

