Case Study: Big Improvement in School Staff Wellbeing Works Wonders During Pandemic Lockdown

Brixham College in Devon is a large comprehensive school with over 1,000 students from 11 to 18 years old.

The Challenges

Mark Eager, the College Principal, was successful in getting better results for the benefit of the students' outcomes but he had other challenges…

He recognised that their was a 'lack of voice' amongst his staff. They didn't have the ability to air their concerns or be involved in decisions that needed to be made.

"As we academically raised our game and expectations, I think it inevitably had a detrimental effect on staff wellbeing," commented Mark.

"I think we were in danger of becoming so focused on academic success that we were losing sight of the fact that, for staff and students, being and working in school should be a joyous activity. It's about the experience students should be having and they feed off the experience that the staff have."

And it was the results of their 2017 Ofsted inspection that moved things along…

"They told us it was a fantastic school and we should keep up the good work!" said Mark.

"This gave us confidence to realise that if we didn't take the initiative now to improve the working experience for the teachers – which in turn would benefit our students - we'd only end up working towards our next Oftsted inspection once again.

So we all agreed to make it a better place to be for everyone concerned.

This was where and when we joined the dots together."

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The Solution

As fate or good timing would have it, Mark Solomans of Welbee was hosting a workshop in London in February 2019 on the importance of staff well-being and Mark Eager attended.

He came away really excited about what he had seen and heard, and just ten days later he signed up to Welbee.

Taking Action

Welbee's detailed survey measures and analyses how a school meets the Health & Safety Executive's Management Standards and the college started working with Welbee at Easter 2019 to get their first benchmark.

Their scores and report revealed staff feedback that was not positive.

"We didn't expect it to be fantastic but the actual results were really disappointing." commented Mark.

"As a result we put initiatives in place and worked very quickly with all members of staff. It became one of our top priorities, aiming to do the same survey again at Easter 2020."

The school leadership focused on four areas, all recommended actions in the detailed analysis and report they were provided with.

Area 1 - Make praise part of every day

"Walking around the school and talking to staff, it was so easy to focus on what hadn't been done that day, what had gone wrong, and the misbehaviour of pupils. It was also clear that we were all rushing, with our heads down, from one meeting or classroom to another.

I asked myself and others how many staff members we had praised that day. We are often good at this with pupils, but we noticed we weren't applying the same skills with team members and colleagues. I know that well-delivered, regular, and authentic praise and recognition improves engagement and performance. Yet we were missing out on this when it came to our staff.

We set a shared goal for all our leaders to catch three staff members doing something right each day and sharing this with each other. It has proved to be infectious and had a big impact. In my view, it's the fastest way to build staff wellbeing into the school culture."

Area 2 - Focus on behaviours

"Another of our big changes has been to focus much more on why and how we do something, rather than what we do. Welbee introduced us to research and a set of leadership competencies that have been proven to prevent and reduce staff stress.

We used these to look again at our school values and articulated specifically what behaviours we would expect to see from everyone in school. Starting with the senior leadership team and then working with middle leaders, we created a subset of these behaviours and carried out training to ensure everyone engaged with and used them.

They also became part of our performance management as an objective of how tasks were delivered and how we coached our leadership team and staff.
Other leaders and I do not always get this right. Though as a roadmap, it has worked really well in engaging all our staff and improving our culture. Feedback from staff is clear - they feel more than ever that they are being listened to, are more valued, and can make their own decisions.

It is not enough to simply share these behaviours. To embed them and make them part of how you do things will need training and reinforcing through praise, holding people to account, and they will need to become a part of performance management and appraisals. In just 12 months, this has had a big impact and brought a return significantly greater than the investment we have had to make."

Area 3 - View any school changes through the lens of staff wellbeing

"Before changing or implementing any new policies, procedures, and practices, we consider it through the lens of staff wellbeing by asking the question: 'What impact will this have on the wellbeing of colleagues?"

Nothing is now adopted by the school without it passing their test of what is important. They consider:

- High effort for staff and low impact for pupils or staff? Ditch these!

- Low effort for staff and low impact for pupils or staff? Not a priority!
- Low effort for staff and high impact for pupils or staff? Make these a priority!
- High effort for staff and high impact for pupils or staff? Review which are worth it!

"We also apply our in/out rule. If we are going to add something new then we need to remove something too. We use the same process to identify those things that have higher staff workload and lower pupil and school impact, and remove them."

Area 4 - Ensure all meetings are necessary and effective

"We have all attended meetings where one or more of the following happens: they start late, finish late, cover too much, cover agenda items not relevant to all staff attending, have unprepared attendees, or do not achieve a satisfactory outcome!

Meetings were raised as an area where we could improve in our staff wellbeing survey. After discussion and review, we responded by agreeing those scheduling meetings would follow some basic rules.

These included agenda, start and finish times and attendee relevance, preparation and behaviours."

The Result

After running the survey again in April 2020, here are the before and after results (compared to 2019) covering the management standards that are measured across seven areas shown to best identify workplace wellbeing.

- **Demands:** From **2.61 up to 3.05** (out of 5), moving from the **10th to 3rd school decile** (from the bottom 10% to top 30% of schools).
- Control: **2.83 up to 3.32**, **9th to 3rd**
- Manager Support: **3.33 to 3.85**, **9th to 3rd**
- Peer Support: **3.64 to 4.01**, **9th to 4th**
- Relationship: **3.68 to 4.08**, **10th to 5th**
- Role: **4.06 to 4.33**, **9th to 3rd**
- Change: **2.62 to 3.35**, **10th to 2nd**

"We were absolutely blown away!" enthused Mark Eager. "The improvements were more than we could have imagined and were significant in all areas. We were really chuffed to bits with the positive comments and goodwill!

The feedback we got indicated that people were very much on board – which made discussing new plans and putting them in place so much easier."

Real-Life Proof?

"When we went into lockdown, it paid dividends for us in those difficult times. I could guarantee the support of the staff.

If we'd been working from our original 2019 results, I would have worried what lockdown would look like for us and the expectations we put on staff to support students remotely.

But I involved all the staff and got loads of feedback. There were constructive suggestions of different approaches we could take and it helped me decide. That wouldn't have happened previously.

So I wouldn't underestimate those hidden benefits that we've found from going through the whole process."

Going forward…

"We'll continue with the surveys as it acts as a benchmark and gives us ideas about moving forward" says Mark.

"And I also want to use Welbee to attract good people to work here. There's not enough teachers in the country and there's a recruitment problem, particular in certain regions. This means that it's a teacher's market and they have lots of choice.

I think that Welbee will be our unique selling point in attracting and keeping the best staff."

And Working with Welbee?

Some final comments from Mark Eager…

"I enjoy working with Welbee because you get the personal touch and they actually care about the impact they're going to have on your organisation. They want to make a difference.

And I also enjoy working with them because it's a two-way process, you're also helping them to develop their skills and their services. I enjoy that opportunity.

To summarise Welbee? They're caring, knowledgeable, insightful, understanding and very professional."