

NEWS

NHS could learn from John Lewis about motivating staff, says Nuffield Trust

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Adopting principles from employee owned organisations, such as the major UK retail group the John Lewis Partnership, may help the NHS engage staff and deliver better services, says a report from the Nuffield Trust.

The trust, which carries out research in healthcare services, looked at the international evidence on the effects of employee ownership on performance, including the operation of four such organisations: the John Lewis Partnership; Kaiser Permanente, a US healthcare provider; Circle, a European private healthcare provider; and Central Surrey Health, a provider of nursing and community healthcare services.

It found that employee owned companies that allow staff to participate in making decisions on how the workplace is run can deliver a range of benefits, such as better productivity and performance, less staff turnover and sickness absence, greater innovation, and higher levels of motivation and commitment among the staff.

Although little research has looked at the effects of such participation on end users of services, some employee owned organisations have a high degree of customer trust and loyalty, says the report.

Chris Ham, professor of health policy and management at the University of Birmingham and one of the authors of the report, said that success in engaging NHS staff depends on their feeling valued and involved in decisions, but there was little evidence that this was happening.

He said, "NHS staff are motivated by the opportunity to deliver high quality services that make a difference to patients. But they feel that their ability to do this is being threatened by the

adoption of a more business oriented approach within the health service. The challenge for the NHS is to achieve closer alignment of the interests and goals of frontline line staff and the organisations that they work for."

Last year's "next stage review" of the NHS by the health minister Ara Darzi recognised the need for reforms of the NHS to be locally led and clinically driven and for greater freedoms for frontline staff. The NHS constitution, which is included in the health bill currently going through parliament, also pledges that staff will be engaged in decisions that affect them and empowered to put forward ways of delivering better and safer services.

Jennifer Dixon, director of the Nuffield Trust, said that the government was promoting new types of ownership in the NHS, such as social enterprises and foundation trusts, but that more needed to be done to help these develop.

Jo Ellins, of the Health Services Management Centre at the University of Birmingham and coauthor of the report, said that two factors had to be present for employee owned organisations to deliver benefits: "managing staff in ways that foster their participation in the workplace and a culture of ownership that is associated with staff having a collective voice in the organisation."

NHS Mutual: Engaging Staff and Aligning Incentives to Achieve Higher Levels of Performance can be seen at www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk.

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