West Midlands SPF Stocktake

Background
When NHS Employers took over the support of WM SPF in April 2013 there was a period of adjustment for both employers and staff side. Historically, Trust HRDs had not attended the West Midlands SPF and were not motivated to engage with a regional SPF. Staff side also had their own problems as their chair had stepped down, and there hadn’t been a process for electing a replacement staff side chair.

The first role for NHS Employers’ engagement team, with the support of national trade union representatives was to facilitate opportunities for engagement between nominated spokespersons for both employers and staff side, agree on a process for re-establishing the WM SPF formally with the West Midlands HRD network and trade unions in the West Midlands, identifying chairs and establishing a first meeting date.

Although this resulted in the WM SPF meeting again 3 times a year, with agreed terms of reference, problems continued with very low employer engagement, and agendas that were mainly trade union led and not engaging for HRDs. With a change in trade union chair there were ongoing questions from employers and trade unions about the SPF’s remit and ability to mandate approaches across the West Midlands, which led to some agenda items remaining unresolved after a number of meetings. It was at this point, NHS Employers contacted ACAS to see if there was anything they may be able to help with.

Greg Moores, employer chair said: ‘I took over as Chair of the WM SPF in July 2015, which coincided with the stocktake being completed and reporting back. The stocktake gave me an invaluable insight into the challenges face by the SPF, and the frustrations of some of its members, but it also gave me a sense of what could be achieved if we heard and acted on the feedback from stakeholders who clearly cared about the group.’

Phil Botfield staff side said: ‘The stocktake gave us an opportunity to re-group and be completely open about how the SPF was functioning, allowing us to have a collective view about what needed to change as we move forward.’

Process
- In August 2014 NHS Employers met with ACAS to discuss how they may be able to support a stock take of the regional SPF, and to clarify how much would be free of charge and when we would have to start paying for ACAS’s services.
- NHS Employers raised the issue of how the WM SPF was functioning with the employer and trade union chairs to ask if they’d be supportive of bringing in ACAS to work with the group to find out how to improve its work.
- This proposal was taken to the whole WM SPF where all members agreed to go forward with this work.
- In autumn 2014 ACAS held a meeting with the trade union chair and an employer representative from the West Midlands HRD network to explain options for a process they could go through to take stock of the WM SPF’s work.
- WM SPF and WM HRD network asked their members for agreement on the proposed way to take stock – an online survey, and an employer and trade union rep drafted questions for the survey.
- The survey was sent to the WM HRD network and the WM SPF during March – April 2015 which received 12 employer and 5 trade union responses, a 45% response rate.
- The results of the survey and its recommendations were shared with WM SPF in July 2015 at a workshop called by the new employer chair to clarify the SPF's purpose and role.
• Timing of the results was opportune as the reporting back coincided with having a new employer chair and this process has provided valuable information to enable the employer chair to start working with the trade union chair on raising the profile of the WM SPF and considering wider representation from employers other than HRDs.

Outcomes
• To clarify the purpose and remit of WM SPF to encourage more engagement from employers.
• Reiteration of the importance of relationships built at the WM SPF, information sharing and sharing good practice.
• Learning from this process was included in the Midlands and East cross partnership event on 12 November.
• Emphasis on partnership behaviours at regional SPF meetings, as those who attend display the correct behaviours.
• The group have agreed in partnership, 2-3 shared topics to focus one per meeting during 2015 – 2016 which could be linked to the national SPF’s priority areas.
• Employer chair of WM SPF attended EOE SPF to view how another regional SPF functions well and include principals in WM SPF meetings.

Lessons learned
• Much of what the stock take found out was not surprising, but it is powerful hearing the issues from the mouths of members of the forum, rather than the third party supporting the forum’s functioning.
• Involving a third party such as ACAS gave the process governance and impact, but the process must be owned and driven forward by the organisation supporting the forum’s functions, and the detail of what is asked based on members of the forum itself to ensure the right questions are asked to the right people.