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Rewards Training Recruitment Consultancy Stronger Together – A work-based learning merger

Summary

Faced with Skills Funding Agency changes to minimum contract levels and a climate where employer and learner focus was essential to success, two work based learning providers combined their operations and range of skills and products to emerge financially sound and stronger together. This case study examines how they managed the transition with support from the LSIS Improvement and Development Service.

About Rewards Training

Rewards Training Recruitment Consultancy Limited (Rewards), based in West Sussex, and was established in 1989. In February, 2011, talks began about a merger with Indigoskills; the merger took place in August 2011. The company provides training in 5 different sectors including Business, Hospitality and Health and Social Care. Most learners are on apprenticeship programmes. Employability programmes and courses in English and Maths are offered.

The challenge

The introduction of minimum contract levels by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) in 2011 affected many training providers. Smaller training providers were at risk as they were unable to meet contracting requirements. Indigoskills was affected by the contract changes and wanted to find a suitable partner in order to assure that they would be in a financial position to be awarded contracts from the SFA.. At the same time Rewards Training was interested in a merger with Indigoskills to take advantage of Indigo's expertise in the Hospitality sector and to increase the focus on employer and learner needs in the company, an ethos which Indigo had at the heart of its provision. A merger was evidently beneficial to both parties and was planned from February 2011, finally occurring in August. The merged companies trade under the Rewards banner. Although the benefits of merging were obvious to the four directors, they also knew that the transition would need to be carefully managed as they were bringing together companies and personnel with a different ethos. These issues were compounded when Ofsted inspectors carried out Rewards first inspection and judged the provision inadequate. The first reactions were defensive, staff were upset and even angry but soon these emotions turned to a determination to work together and emerge stronger.

The activity

LSIS Improvement and Development Service (IDS) allocated support to Rewards Training. There were two strands to the support, an adviser worked

with management and teams on self assessment and quality improvement and support in Health and Social Care training was given from Baldwin Training, an outstanding provider in the area. Support started in October 2011. Rewards Training had wasted no time in examining their strengths and weaknesses. In the two months before advisers arrived, they rearranged the physical space at Rewards headquarters to accommodate nine staff from Indigoskills, they identified their combined strengths, including a diversity of products on offer, a diverse range of learners in terms of age and ethnicity and a team of staff who wanted this merger to succeed. The managing director drew up a new organisational structure, starting from scratch and fitting people into teams and new roles as best seemed to fit their skill set. When the LSIS IDS adviser arrived, a priority was to produce a self assessment report that was robust and actionable. Rewards had started this process but the adviser was able to help them take ownership of the self assessment by facilitating honest and open discussions with teams or individuals where co-operation was elicited and tasks were allocated to managers or teams. The teams then presented and agreed their self assessment with the rest of the staff. The SAR was then turned into a Quality Improvement Plan that could be monitored and replanned regularly. The adviser's support helped define the staff's new roles and responsibilities, particularly at mid management level by facilitating their discussion of challenges and concerns and allowing staff to realise where their abilities lay. Meetings were not always face to face, use was made of Webcam, telephone and email as well. Baldwin's support concentrated on Health and Social Care and adopted a whole team approach. A director, the training team manager for that area and three health and social care assessors shadowed the team at Baldwin Training and shared systems. In turn, Baldwin teams shadowed Rewards offering expert advice.

The outcomes

The Health and Social Care team is confident that their training and delivery meet employer and learner needs. They have a close relationship with Baldwins and still share good practice and standardisation. Rewards Training is contracted to deliver some programmes by Baldwin Training with combined promotional activities.

All the staff who were with the two companies at the time of the merger are still with Rewards Training and working together with one vision, stronger together. They work with systems that are efficient and effective, drawing from best practice from the previous regimes.

Quality Improvement planning is working. Senior managers meet every week to check on progress, to replan and to prioritise. In addition, they have a good relationship with their adviser who often calls to see how things are going and is available as a critical friend.

The impact

The company is financially sound and more confident about future growth, providing a good contracting opportunity for the SFA.

Rewards Training's efforts have been rewarded. The company was reaccredited for the Matrix Standard in March 2012 and an Ofsted monitoring

visit in January 2012, judged the provider to have made 'significant progress' in self assessment and improvement planning.

Managing Director, Andrew Ayres says,

"Working together, Rewards and our LSIS advisers have devised a clear strategy to take our organisation forward, sharpened the quality of our delivery and planned for continued improvement"

The lessons learned

Rewards Training say that their main lesson was to recognise that the company did have everything it needed to succeed within the merged companies. In spite of the poor grade at inspection, there were still areas that had good practice that could be built on. Weaknesses could be turned into strengths by recognising people's skills, developing them and putting them in the right roles. Properly facilitated meetings, from an external adviser, helped them to examine what was wrong, listen to staff views and make a positive experience out of a negative.

The managing director stresses that change can happen very quickly especially with a good quality improvement plan that includes review by the whole staff. They enjoy the excitement of a dynamic, fast paced environment.

Useful links

<http://www.rewards-trc.co.uk/>

<http://www.baldwintraining.co.uk/>

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