Board meeting

17 July 2024

Workforce engagement: update from the lead Non-Executive Director

Purpose of paper

For discussion

Board action required

The Board is asked to receive the update and discuss the issues raised.

Brief summary

As reported to the Board in July 2023, Bee Wee has been designated as the NED with specific responsibility for engaging with the workforce, in line with corporate governance best practice. The attached report provides a summary of the work undertaken in this role and key findings for the Board to consider.

Board sponsor

Bee Wee, lead NED for workforce engagement

Workforce engagement: progress report

This is my first formal report to the Board as lead NED for workforce engagement.

We agreed last summer that I would take on this role. Preliminary work during the autumn included research into other organisations’ experience of this role, a conversation workshop with a range of staff leaders/representatives, a virtual and an in person drop-in session, 1:1 conversations with the Exec Team and planning discussions with colleagues in internal comms and People Directorate.

The role was formally launched in January 2024 with a dedicated page on NICE Space and blog. Since then, I have attended a variety of internal meetings at least once or twice: Operational Management Committee; Senior Leaders Forum; Staff Networks (DAWN, WIN, Nice and Proud, REN, Eco-NICE, Change Network); staff networks’ chairs forum; Freedom to Speak Up champions and ambassadors; all staff briefings. I have hosted another 2 drop in sessions, 1 virtual and 1 in person, and posted 2 blogs. I have not formally extended this offer to the wider workforce, e.g. the committee members, but there was opportunity to mention this at the last Committee Chairs’ Forum. So far, I have had direct approaches for 1:1 conversations from a very small number of staff members. I plan to continue to attend the staff group meetings on a 4-6 monthly cycle and to offer drop-in sessions, blogs and attendance at the all staff briefing on a quarterly basis.

Staff feedback and engagement mechanisms already exist in different forms. It has been important to work out how this role sits alongside the existing mechanisms. Close communication with Helen Brown (Chief People Officer) and her team has been crucial. During the past six months, I have fed back informally to Sam Roberts and Helen Brown themes from my workforce engagement as they emerge. It is to their credit that these are often issues that have been noticed or anticipated already, and where there is a need to do more, they have quickly done so.

The following are key points for the Board to note:

* + Staff welcome this role and see it as a positive and supportive initiative by the Board but the question of how they would know their voice has been heard and what difference this would make remain.
  + Staff would welcome efforts to ‘demystify’ the Board, what it does and how it works. They wonder if members of the Board would welcome the opportunity to learn more about some of the specific issues that matter to them, e.g. reasonable adjustments, neurodiversity, carbon literacy, etc.
  + Staff networks are lively, with deeply committed staff and strong leadership cutting across the organisation. These are inspiring meetings to attend. There is a real commitment to drive change and support each other.
  + There was very positive feedback about the Learning Hub, NICE Space and wellbeing resources available to staff. There was positive feedback about engagement with the Freedom to Speak Up champions.
  + Staff understand the need for change but struggle with the speed and scale of change, which feels relentless and disorientating.
  + Management of change has been tough, not only for those at the centre of the change but also for those whose work interface with those directly involved.
  + NICE staff take great pride in their work, so it is not always easy to accept ‘good enough’ or the need to prioritise; choosing what to prioritise can be a source of disagreement. Some teams find it harder than others to engage with the wider organisation.
  + Like the wider workforce across health and care, the impact of remote working has been mixed; for some, this has diminished the contact and collegiality they used to enjoy; for others it has provided a flexibility they enjoy.
  + NICE staff are not immune to the ‘noise’ in the wider health and care landscape and recovery from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
  + Communication is always a challenge: it is not easy to get the level and timing of communication about changes right for everybody; at individual level, timely communication about HR matters is particularly important.
  + Accessibility and reasonable adjustments for disability remain a challenge for some at individual level but there is optimism that the EDI Roadmap will help.
  + The issue of psychological safetyhas come up in different ways on a number of occasions – I think there is still work to be done in this regard as it can undermine efforts to address some of the issues outlined above.

In conclusion, this role has been a positive initiative. Staff are engaging well and we are finding ways for this to work alongside the line management and HR mechanisms. It would be helpful to focus Board discussion on 2 issues in particular:

* + how we demonstrate that this makes a difference at Board level, and
  + how to increase psychological safety across the organisation.

Bee Wee

2 July 2024