

Capacity Building Project



GOOD PRACTICE CASE STUDIES

Case Study 12

The Organisation:

Suffolk Association of Voluntary Organisations

The Challenge:

To improve staff supervision, training and support

The Response:

By introducing a staff appraisal system and being committed to staff training

Examples of Good Practice:

1. Preparing for appraisal meetings
2. Appraisal meetings
3. Staff training and development

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The Organisation: Suffolk Association of Voluntary Organisations

Formed in 1992, the Suffolk Association of Voluntary Organisations (SAVO) is an infrastructure organisation for Suffolk's voluntary and community sector. SAVO's mission is to support, inform, represent and develop voluntary and community action in Suffolk. Membership is open to voluntary and community groups and associate membership is open to all.

SAVO works in the following areas:

- Training, development and support activities including accredited and non-accredited training, one-to-one training and mentoring and facilitation services
- Information and advice on good practice
- Representation of the interests of the sector at local, regional and national levels
- Partnership work
- Services such as CRB disclosures, publications and good practice resources

The Challenge: To improve staff supervision, training and support

In 2002 SAVO achieved "Investors in People" (IIP), the quality standard that helps organisations improve performance and realise objectives through the management and development of their people. IIP sets standards for good practice that match what people can do and are motivated to do, with the needs of the organisation. SAVO was looking for the benefits that go with being an "Investor in People" including increased productivity and motivation, reduced staff turnover and higher customer satisfaction.

At the time of its accreditation the assessor noted that there were a number of areas which SAVO could improve upon. One of these areas was developing a more relevant and robust appraisal system. Whilst appraisals did take place they were not fully integrated within a clear and regular supervision system. As part of its preparation for IIP re-assessment in 2005, SAVO decided to change the format and content of the appraisals. As a small charity that encourages all staff to exercise their initiative, SAVO wanted to ensure that the appraisal system was not heavily hierarchical and did not make staff feel scrutinized or intimidated. SAVO wanted to keep the appraisal system supportive and collaborative and therefore decided not to link the appraisal system to pay increases or promotion. As a training provider and as an organisation seeking recognition as an "Investor in People", SAVO also wanted to ensure that staff training and development were emphasised within its appraisal system.

The Response: By introducing a staff appraisal system and being committed to staff training

SAVO developed its new appraisal system based on current good practice and trialed the new form just before its re-assessment in February 2005. Staff training and development were placed at the forefront of the appraisal process and SAVO's new, more pro-active Training Policy was also introduced in 2005, setting out SAVO's commitment to staff training and development. There was also an annual budget allocation for training. As part of the appraisal process, job descriptions are now regularly reviewed to

ensure that they remain relevant and up to date and each staff member has an annual Performance and Development Action Plan and an Individual Learning Plan. Appraisal meetings are informal with a view to promoting a dialogue between staff and their managers about progress at work, training and development needs and improving the relationship between the staff member and his/her line manager. A follow-up meeting is held about six months later to review progress on the plans.

Examples of Good Practice:

SAVO's appraisal system highlights several examples of good practice. Managers and staff are encouraged to prepare for appraisal meetings and meetings are conducted in an informal manner to encourage dialogue and collaboration. SAVO also has a Training Policy that sets out SAVO's commitment to staff training and development.

1. Preparing for appraisal meetings

Since the introduction of SAVO's appraisal system, appraisals are conducted annually in January with a review meeting taking place about six months later. In the lead up to the January appraisals, staff are given at least two weeks notice of the appraisal and given the opportunity to prepare for the appraisal meeting. They are provided with a copy of the SAVO appraisal form and their job description as well as guidance notes on how the form can be used. Both the appraiser and the appraisee use the same materials to prepare for the meeting.

At SAVO, appraisals are seen as part of a continuing process of dialogue between a job holder and his or her line manager. The appraisal meeting is an opportunity to spend uninterrupted quality time talking about past achievements and difficulties as well as a forward-looking discussion aimed at enhancing job performance and identifying training and development needs and longer term career aspirations.

To prepare for the meeting, the manager and appraisee look at the job description as well as any previous feedback documentation, learning plans and performance plans. Appraisees are encouraged to think about their achievements and difficulties throughout the whole year so that a constructive dialogue can take place about how the appraisee is progressing in his or her job and plans made for future work and training. Ideally, the preparation will ensure that there are no surprises at the meeting. If any issues have arisen during the year relating to performance, these should have been addressed at the time. This avoids the situation where the appraisee feels scrutinized or intimidated, even if difficult feedback is being discussed. Ideally staff should feel that the appraisal process is helping them to progress in their jobs, with the support of their line manager, not putting additional pressure on them.

2. Appraisal meetings

SAVO staff report that their appraisal meetings are helpful and supportive, both for their professional and personal development and that SAVO's appraisal system encourages dialogue and a spirit of collaborative working. The appraisal meeting is conducted in an informal manner and plenty of time is allocated (usually 2 hours) to discuss the appraisee's progress in his or her job. Chairs are arranged informally rather than talking across a desk and the purpose of the meeting is explained clearly to the appraisee. The purpose is to reach a shared understanding and agreement about the appraisee's progress at work. Ideally the line manager does no more than 30% of the talking with the line manager using active listening skills and asking open questions to encourage the discussion. SAVO managers are encouraged to be prepared to receive, as well as give, constructive criticism. By giving concrete examples, criticism is usually well received.

The questions on SAVO's appraisal form are each discussed in turn, looking at the job description. The questions include what went well and what did not go so well in the last year, support and supervision needs, training and development needs and objectives for the next 12 months. The outcome of the meeting is typed up by the line manager and the appraisee is given the opportunity to make comments or changes to the final copy if required. The agreed objectives are typed up in a Performance and Development Action Plan and planned training activities are typed up in an Individual Learning Plan.

3. Staff training and development

Staff training and development is seen as an integral part of SAVO's appraisal system. There is a discussion about the effectiveness of training undertaken in the last year and forward planning to meet further training and development needs. Members of staff are also encouraged to complete feedback forms for all training attended so that the effectiveness of training can be assessed on an ongoing basis throughout the year. SAVO also has a Training Policy which puts in writing the organisation's commitment to staff training and makes an annual budget allocation for this purpose. It spells out in writing that staff are entitled to a MINIMUM of five days training a year.

Requests for training from individual members of staff are not be refused providing there are sufficient funds in the training budget, the individual is not "monopolising" funds for training and SAVO's work will not be adversely affected by the amount of time the person will have to be away from work. In deciding whether to pursue a particular training opportunity, there should be clear reasons why the training would be of use either for the individual's role or for the individual's personal development, knowledge or skills.

Sharing the Learning:

SAVO has developed a staff appraisal system that is user-friendly and promotes good supervision, support and training of its staff. The appraisal system is well received by staff and promotes dialogue and collaborative working between staff and managers in SAVO. In 2005, SAVO re-applied for IIP accreditation and, in the words of the IIP reviewer, "passed with flying colours".

Lessons Learnt

IIP is a quality standard that enables organisations to be recognised for their commitment to their people.

Introducing staff appraisals enables better supervision, support and training for staff and supports performance improvement

Preparing for appraisal meetings ensures staff know what to expect and there are no surprises

Informal appraisal meetings encourage a dialogue between managers and staff and avoid unnecessary pressure on staff

A written Training Policy and annual training budget demonstrates your organisation's commitment to staff training and development

Questions To Consider

- Do you have IIP accreditation?
- If not, would it improve your productivity and profile and to recruit and retain good staff?
- Do you have a staff appraisal system?
- If not, what would be the benefits for your staff and organisation of introducing appraisals?
- What sort of preparation needs to be undertaken to ensure your appraisal meetings are effective?
- How formal are your meetings with staff?
- How can your managers make staff feel more relaxed in any meetings about their performance?
- Do you have a written Training Policy and an annual training budget?