

# CIPR PRIDE AWARDS 2014

## CATEGORY: INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Ensuring engagement in  
challenging times

# Q3. Internal Communications Campaign

## Brief and objectives

Great Places Housing Group is a not-for-profit housing association based in Manchester, with five regional offices, working across more than 36 local authority areas in northern England, employing around 650 staff. We manage nearly 17,000 homes and more than 30 supported housing schemes for vulnerable people.

The Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) regulates the work of housing associations to make sure they are governed properly. Governance standards are between G1 and G4, with G1 being the highest grading. Great Places was downgraded to G2 in July 2013 following publication of the severance arrangements for its former long-serving chief executive who retired in April 2013.

The communication objectives were:

- Staff to be told first before the downgrade was made public
- Employees to maintain their trust in the senior leadership
- A two-way process which allowed staff to ask questions/express their concerns
- Staff to remain engaged so business objectives would be met
- Inform staff how we planned to get G1 back
- Retain our position in the top 25 best large workplaces in the UK in the Great Place to Work® (GPTW) survey

## Strategy and tactics

A plan was drawn up which identified the channels to be used to communicate with staff at different levels within the organisation, a timetable for this and what information they needed to know.

Face-to-face was the preferred channel so staff could ask questions. Flo, our intranet site, Staffroom, our digital monthly staff magazine, and email were also to be used. More than 90% of staff have work mobiles which allow them to pick up emails. Yammer, the online social network tool for private communication within the organisation had just been launched. In an innovative move chief executive Matthew Harrison agreed to do a live Q&A session with staff, something we had never done before. This fitted perfectly with one of our values to be “fair, open and accountable”.

Senior management were to be told first. Special attention was to be paid to repairs team operatives who were not office based and to supported housing staff who work with vulnerable client groups.

# Implementation

The HCA's regulatory judgement (RJ) confirming the downgrade was due to be issued publicly at 9am on Wednesday July 31st, at the same time as trade magazine Inside Housing published the details online.

A decision was made to tell staff before the publication of the judgement that we were 'likely to face a governance downgrade'. It was felt they would appreciate the transparent approach and not break any confidences as the news was embargoed.

Assistant directors were told first at a meeting at head office with Matthew. The following day there was a managers' conference and his keynote speech addressed the downgrade.

Following the conference Matthew emailed staff saying the business 'faced reputational issues' and asked colleagues to attend meetings at the regional offices the next day. A timetable was drawn up for directors to address offices in Manchester, Salford, Blackburn, Blackpool, Oldham and Sheffield. Supported housing staff were encouraged to attend their nearest regional office with an early morning meeting in Salford for the repairs team. Colleagues who could not attend were told there would be an update on the intranet.

Once the RJ was published Matthew sent an email to all staff confirming the downgrade. The following day Matthew took part in the Yammer session, a move designed to establish trust in his leadership and demonstrate his transparent approach.

Team Talk, a short briefing document from directors for managers to discuss key corporate issues with staff was also produced and it encouraged employees to feedback.

In September, Inside Housing published its annual salary survey of housing association chief executives which referenced the severance package. The Manchester Evening News followed this up and published a story but the details were wrong. This resulted in the communications team preparing another email for Matthew to send to staff and a Staffroom article reassuring them the figures he had given were the correct ones. We also reloaded our apology to the website.

Over the coming months the communications team produced regular updates for staff on the recruitment of a new board via our internal channels. These included a video by Matthew at Christmas and more face to face briefings by directors in February.

Then in May 2014, the HCA restored our G1 status, earlier than expected, and Matthew shared the good news with staff via an email and tweeted about it. He followed this up by mentioning it in his Staffroom column.

## Evidence of real engagement or behavioural change

The briefings were well attended and around 300 staff logged on to the Yammer Q&A. 72% of employees filled in the GPTW survey, an increase on the previous year, with 82% saying they would recommend working here.

# Demonstrate integration of the campaign with other activities

An external communications plan was implemented which included a media strategy and saw an apology issued on the website, Twitter and in our residents' magazine. Local authority stakeholders and funders were also informed of the situation.

## Measurement and evaluation

Matthew had only been in his post for a short time but his honest and open communication approach built trust in him. When asked, all regional managers said the communications had been done well.

In November last year, Great Places' Quality and Performance team carried out an internal survey about how the business communicates corporately. Nearly 90% of staff thought the business was good/excellent at communicating issues that affected them.

The biggest test of engagement levels came when staff took part in the Great Place to Work® (GPTW) survey in October. GPTW is an independent organisation which ranks UK companies on what they are like as employers and how they are trusted by their employees. The result, 80% of employees fully engaged with the business, which meant we were the 12th best large workplace in the UK, retaining our position in the top 25. Providing excellent customer service is one of our two corporate priorities and engaged staff equal happy customers. In May resident satisfaction stood at 84.6%. The other objective is to be financially strong and we had a record turnover in 2013/14 of £85 million and a record surplus of £9.3 million.

## Budget and cost effectiveness

The work for this internal campaign was incorporated into our communications team's workload.

