



Make sure your employees don't land you in hot water

By Kate Russell Thursday, 19 January 2012

Compliance training is like visiting a difficult family member. You may not really like spending time with him or her, but your mother insists. Kate Russell, the 'HR Headmistress', explains how to make the dreary world of compliance engaging.

Topics like health and safety, data protection, food hygiene, and employment law usually prompt a less-than-thrilled response; we do because we have to, but no one expects to enjoy it.

The consequences of a failure in compliance training can be at best embarrassing. At worst it can result in shameful breaches of the law with disastrous cost consequences as in the recent case of Michalak v The Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust. A Polish consultant was harassed for reasons relating to her nationality, pregnancy and maternity leave. She was awarded £4m in compensation. Do I have your attention now?

As a person who thinks that employment law is just one of the most fun things you can do with your clothes on, I have recently been considering whether we might be missing a trick. Are organisations getting the best value with their compliance training? Or are we merely ticking the compliance box, when we could be getting far greater commercial results for the same time and money?

The economy is rarely out of the news these days and finances are still very tight. Budgets have been reduced or removed altogether, yet we still need to discharge our legal, regulatory or advisory compliance training responsibilities. Compliance training often revolves around meeting an organisation's policy and procedure. Having a policy is a good starting point, but the policy alone doesn't cut it; it's got to be personal - it's much more about the delivery.

As a business owner, if you can raise your game in compliance delivery, not only will you spend less time rounding up staff and herding them in, but they will retain more, experience a greater sense of personal accountability and, above all, apply what they have learned.

Last year I did some practical discipline training for a large company, whose managers initial grasp of fairness, consistency and procedure was tenuous to say the least. They have had tribunal after tribunal after tribunal. My delegates were an absolutely lovely bunch but I felt like Calamity Jane in the Wild West. However, I cracked the HR Headmistress whip a bit and by the end of the session, which was a two day affair, they had taken the points I wanted to make on board really well.

Over the last six months, I have had regular feedback from the HR Director. She can't believe the difference ... now they nip problems in the bud; they keep records; they escalate matters to HR in a timely fashion; they understand conduct and capability and keep them separate. They have improved their performance phenomenally and it has saved time, money, reduced risk. Critically it has reduced employment disputes and tribunal applications to almost nothing.

For what it's worth, these are my tips on making compliance training a really worthwhile and engaging event:

Love your topic. If you really enjoy it, you will be energetic and enthusiastic. That comes across and is enormously engaging
 Know your subject in far greater detail than you will be talking about in delivery. Don't be afraid to go off piste and talk about all sorts of things technically unconnected to the immediate topic
 Demonstrate your own expertise. OK, I usually introduce myself by saying that I qualified as a barrister etc, but that's not what impresses delegates. You have to earn respect every time you speak in front of a new group. That means sharing with them what you've done and how you've done it i.e. you can walk the walk
 Give examples to help delegates work through difficult material. I have a very narrative style and tell lots of stories, from the courts and my own experience. I work on the basis that if they can remember the stories they may be able to work back and retrieve the principles. Make the stories balanced i.e. not all scare

stories

Use questions to encourage participation and keep employees on their toes

By all means use humour, but don't force it and don't be inappropriate

Kate Russell is MD of Russell HR Consulting. To find out more about compliance training, check out her free seminar at the Learning & Skills Exhibition at Olympia on 25 and 26 January.

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