

The importance of good communication

Anu Vedi, Chief Executive of a leading London housing association, reflects on the valuable insights his organisation gained from Relationships Foundation about effective communication and relationship-building.

At the Genesis Housing Group - one of London's largest housing association groups – our core business is the provision of affordable housing for those in need, ranging from permanent and temporary homes to rent to shared ownership and sheltered housing. However, our vision is much bigger: we want to foster SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES via quality, affordable homes and services.

This commitment to building sustainable communities necessitates communicating effectively and building strong relationships at all levels and in all areas of our business. Simpler said than done! At Genesis Housing Group we have three subsidiaries, five main office sites, 600 staff, over 100 partner Local Authorities, NHS Trusts and contractors, and 100,000 residents.

This is why I invited Relationships Foundation to run a seminar for all Genesis' senior managers (30 or so) on effective relationship-building and communication.

One particularly simple illustration stuck in my mind - if you are a new business, with one client, that client receives 100% of your time. As soon as you get another client, then your original client sees his or her allocation of your time halved instantaneously. This clearly has ramifications from a communication / service-level angle and in some cases, if not managed well, may even result in the loss of the original client.

It is certainly simple and it should be obvious. But how many of us, as we strive to win new business, forget the effect that success may have on our existing client base? As the number of relationships that we engage in grows and grows, significant thought must be given to identifying our key relationships and ensuring that they are given adequate priority. This is a challenge that my managers and I face on a daily basis. I was unsurprised therefore, on receiving feedback after the seminar, that its focus on relationships and communication had struck a chord with all.

We pride ourselves on being reasonably good communicators. Indeed, we are often bound by regulatory consultation practices and procedures - which perhaps private sector organisations do not face - whilst still being required to operate in a competitive, tender-based market. To give you just one example, the Government is committed to offering greater choice to social housing tenants in order to go some way towards managing the current divide between service delivery and expectations. As such, resident consultation and the establishment of local offices, to name but two, are vital ingredients of every bid for business we submit, to every Local Authority.

In fact, examining the effectiveness of our existing communications was probably the single most beneficial element of our session with Relationships Foundation.

One exercise, where we brainstormed each of our key target audiences before breaking into smaller groups to examine the ways we currently communicate with each of them and how they might subsequently be improved, was of particular value. As one might expect, the exercise quite clearly showed that we at Genesis communicate effectively in some instances and less so in others. But interestingly, it also highlighted the disparity between one individual's perception of effective communication and another's. More food for thought, and yet one more relationship-building hurdle to be overcome!

We found the lessons we learnt as part of our self-examination very valuable and have already begun to act on some of them. Internally, we have re-drafted our communications strategy. Our management briefing sessions are being made more interactive, providing a real opportunity for senior members of staff to contribute their thoughts or concerns to me. Our induction process for new employees has been overhauled to ensure that they are given a corporate overview and structured workplace induction from day one. And to try and overcome the problems of geography, we have introduced an Intranet and are organising far more all-site meetings and activities.

With our Local Authority customers and contractor partners, we are engaging in a far more proactive customer relationship strategy including, for the first time, breakfast and lunch strategy meetings and a corporate bulletin.

Tenant consultation has always been particularly strong within Genesis and, indeed, our Tenants' Initiatives team is renowned not only for the work it does with our own tenants, but also with those of third parties. Nevertheless, we are examining our portfolio of newsletters, reviewing the way in which we obtain information and will hold our annual Tenants' Conference with renewed vigour and brand new insights.

We have also been reviewing other aspects of our communication with tenants that were highlighted during the seminar with Relationships Foundation. Overuse of voicemail by staff was identified by many as a key obstacle to effective communication. Tenants expect to be able to speak to a person when they ring, not to a recorded message. High turnover of staff among estate and housing officers is another problem. Tenants are quick to develop 'relationship fatigue' and engage less if they are

expected to get to know new staff every year. We also recognise that we may have to adopt a more pro-active strategy to ensure that new tenants are properly introduced to their neighbours in order to trigger the relationship-building process and combat social isolation.

This, of course, has to be undertaken within the constraints, particularly financial, of our not-for-profit sector. However, our seminar with Relationships Foundation was timely in reiterating the importance of effective communication, which is already at the heart of our ethos, and in offering us new insights.

There are, I would suggest, no hard and fast answers; and nor can Relationships Foundation offer a 'one-size-suits-all' solution to every need. Each individual organisation must clearly determine its own audience groups and their communication needs when building relationships. It must also determine its own solutions.

What is generic to us all, however, is that without communication, there is no relationship.

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think relationally