

EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

empowering staff

A medical insurance company based in central England has helped its business by paying close attention to the needs, welfare and development of its employees. This has increased productivity, boosted staff morale and brought reputational benefits

Tai chi and meditation sessions don't always spring to mind as the most obvious employee development vehicles. But one UK medical insurance company is convinced of their value.

Sheffield-based Westfield Health Scheme offers free tai chi and meditation once a week to its 98 staff, along with twice-weekly keep fit classes.

As a mutual company providing health cover to around 298,000 contributors, Westfield is a firm believer in the personal and business benefits of extra-curricular learning. 'Apart from anything else, tai chi and meditation help increase concentration levels, which is good for our employees' personal development but also for the business,' says Naomi Harold, corporate development manager.

The company also offers more conventional ways of developing its staff's potential. More than 70 per cent of employees have successfully taken company-sponsored studies to NVQ level since 1996, and although many have achieved business-related qualifications in tele-sales, customer care and IT, there is no restriction on them pursuing other interests not directly connected with their work.

'The idea is to help employees not just in their jobs but in their outside lives,' says Harold. 'We do personality profiling for all our staff to help them understand a bit more about themselves and the learning techniques best suited to their personality.'

The results for the business are impressive. Annual surveys of employees and customers have shown that as staff satisfaction levels have gone up, so too has customer satisfaction. This has boosted

Westfield's reputation and led to recommendations which have generated new business.

Aside from the development activities, Westfield has also striven to generate a sense of team involvement, partly through a twice-yearly exercise in which employees use role playing and song and dance to translate the company's latest business plans into a semi-theatrical presentation.

Westfield also donates £850,000 (\$1.2million) annually – about 2.8 per cent of its income – to charity, and a strong environmental policy has delivered benefits such as a 75 per cent reduction in paper use since 1997. The company also runs workshops for suppliers to help them write environmental policy statements, and is passing on its knowledge to a cutlery firm in a novel kind of company mentoring exercise.

Hardly surprising, then, that Westfield was chosen as one of Business in the Community's 'examples of excellence' in 2001. 'We may not be a large company, but we see no reason why we can't demonstrate the benefits of empowering our employees,' says Harold.

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■ staff come together twice a year to put on a theatrical presentation that is based on the company's latest business plans

comment
WESTFIELD HEALTH

Westfield is one of the smaller businesses providing mutual health insurance. With only 98 employees, it processes claims within two working days at the rate of 2000 a day. Health and safety systems have been upgraded and environmental policies for smaller businesses introduced.

Features of the scheme that stand out are:

- High customer service standards
- Mentoring scheme for environmental management of other small businesses
- High take-up of the staff development programme
- Corporate social responsibility policies are demonstrably feasible for smaller organizations.

SIMON WEBLEY, INSTITUTE OF BUSINESS ETHICS

