

Food Agency's sustainability team facilitates culture change

By training a team of sustainability advocates, The Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera) changed its organisation's culture into one of environmental awareness, resulting in huge cost savings.

Fera is part of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), and is responsible for supporting and developing a sustainable food chain, a healthy, natural environment, and protecting the global community from biological and chemical risks.

Defra, together with their facilities management provider Interserve, recognised the need to make significant changes to their facilities, but knew the most effective way was through the behavioural change of staff. Defra chose Fera to pilot the Site Empowerment Programme (SEP), a behavioural change initiative with the specific aim to deliver against government targets for waste water and energy reduction, and to enable the delivery of a Sustainable Development Action Plan (SDAP).

A team of 12 volunteers were identified within Fera to facilitate the SEP behavioural change programme, supported by training suppliers "evalu8d". The project aimed to empower staff through enthusing and engaging colleagues to reach sustainability targets, as opposed to a top-down management approach.

The SEP team of volunteers from across Fera was given flexible training and coaching from evalu8d, as well as a small budget to spend as they felt best. Their goal was to see a reduction in waste of 7% by introducing their own initiatives.

Evalu8d ran a two-day workshop to support the SEP team, centred on behavioural analysis, and this allowed the delegates to put into practice their new facilitation and presentation skills, and get assistance from the trainers.

The training firm then stayed onsite to offer individual follow-up coaching, and further top up sessions to ensure the SEP team felt confident they had the necessary skills to drive the changes Fera sought. The team felt the best course of action to meet their targets was to run waste reduction workshops with their colleagues. Feedback from the trainers enabled the team to increase the level of interaction in the workshops, leading to a higher level of engagement with colleagues.

Soon, the SEP team was asked to run workshops for the Directors, and present at an open forum. The team also organised a launch day with an Eco Gym onsite. This was set up to raise awareness of sustainability and was fully supported by senior management including the Chief Executive who took part in a cycle competition in the main atrium.

As well as engaging the senior management team, the SEP team has generated significant cost savings through its sustainability initiatives. For example, Fera has saved £10,000 a year from using less solvent volume; and £2,100 a year from reusing laboratory consumables. In addition, Fera has made savings by reducing its waste paper, technical acid, auto sampler tubes, and hazardous waste and hazardous waste bags, among other things.

These have all had a positive impact on Fera's sustainability targets, and in addition, the organisation has achieved lasting cultural change. Team-working has improved and Fera has developed a skilled team of facilitators and presenters for the future.

The SEP team is currently preparing to roll out the next phase of its energy and water workshops, and continues to be supported by evalu8d.

Paul Walker, Head of Estates, Security, Health & Safety at Fera, said, "The SEP team are volunteers from the agency who in addition to their everyday roles voluntarily promote sustainability in the workplace. The journey these individuals have been on, and changes that have been made, tell a compelling story. Having observed them at the beginning with minimal confidence or skills in facilitating to seeing them now delivering presentations and workshops with confidence is testament to the hard work they have put in as well as the training and support they have received."

Mike Wray, Fera's Director of Operations, added, "I have been inspired by the SEP team members and their impact on sustainability. Using coaching techniques, individual volunteers have grown impressively and developed into an empowered and motivated team. They have influenced behaviour across Fera, helping to embed sustainability into our thinking and piloting a new way to manage change."

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