

Modelling Excellence

YouthNet - An Example of Excellence

Success through Alignment

What makes an organisation a great place to work? In 2008 YouthNet (www.youthnet.org) won the **Best Charity to Work for Award, (Charity Times Awards 2008)**, a prestigious award received on the nomination of the people who work there.

That year they also won **the Fundraising Charity of the Year (Professional Fundraising Awards 2008), Enterprise Category (Third Sector Excellence Awards 2008) and the Open Internet Award (Nominet Best Practice Challenge 2008)**.

We were introduced to YouthNet a few years ago when their Chief Executive, Fiona Dawe attended one of our workshops with David Whyte. She has since supported one of her (now) directors and other senior managers to attend our NLP Practitioner Programme and other workshops.

One of the approaches we work with and teach is modelling. On our NLP Master Practitioner Programme, for example, participants carry out an organisational modelling project, (as well as a project modelling a selected individual ability). They model organisations that are "great" in some capacity. Over time these projects have uncovered some fascinating information and have identified some behaviours and beliefs that are common to these "great" examples.

So we were curious – would these be the same at YouthNet. What are they doing differently, that is so special? What is the source of their success?

With the encouragement of the Chief Executive and the Central Services Director (Jade Stapleton) we were given "the run of the place" and the opportunity to talk, or rather listen, to lots of the people. We interviewed 16 people (from every level and every part of the organisation).

First Impressions

The first thing anyone would notice that is very different from so many charities is their offices. Most charities suffer from guilt with respect to any "unnecessary" expenditure and their offices are all too often old, dark, miserable places – rejects from a local authority department. Nothing could be further from the YouthNet experience. The offices are spacious, open plan, contemporary with lots of glass and light – you could be visiting an architect or media company. And this is not an accident. Entering the offices you feel the buzz of the place and are welcomed warmly with a smile. The welcome board greets visitors by name.

Aligning Vision and Values with Action

To quote from their literature; *YouthNet aims to create a socially inclusive environment where young people living in the UK are engaged, informed and inspired to achieve their ambitions and dreams. We deliver high-quality information, signposting and frontline emotional support primarily through the internet, but increasingly through mobile phones, digital interactive TV and hand-held devices – the tools that are central to the way young people communicate.*

As their Chief Executive, Fiona Dawe said to us very early in our interviewing of her, ***“if the manner in which we do things does not match the aims of the organisation it doesn’t work”***.

So they consciously and purposefully endeavour to do the same inside the organisation as they do outside i.e. to engage, inform, inspire and encourage people to take action and achieve their goals and dreams. These fine words, which you could hear in many organisations, are not just aspirations at YouthNet. Consistently, the people we interviewed spoke of how the organisation as a whole, and each person actively focused on these qualities.

All of this adds up to **an aligned and congruent organisation**. We have rarely come across an organisation or part of an organisation where what they do and how they do it matches so closely their values, beliefs, purpose and vision. It is of course not perfect but **this alignment is a constant reference point for their decision making, choices and actions in relation to all stakeholders**; the staff, their clients who they call end users and their partner organisations.

In providing on-line information and advice to young people to broaden their awareness facilitate choice and more informed decision making, YouthNet seeks to do this in a way that acknowledges reality, is not teaching or preaching. This calls for emotional intelligence, creativity, quality information and timely delivery, with both a proactive and reactive approach. Further qualities applied to both the internal and external operations of the organisation.

How They Do It

As we have already noted their aims and values are a constant reference point for their decision making and the way they do things, including their policies and procedures. Expediency does not rule out.

There are high expectations. It is, as Fiona says, **“a culture that requires excellence”**. This is a high performance culture with a strong sense of service to each other and the young people using their services.

The Senior Management Team is well aware of their responsibility as role models of the organisational culture. The values are well embedded in their thinking and behaviour. (You can’t not be a role model, especially the higher up an organisation you go – the question for anyone is, what are you role modelling?)

They have a belief which permeates the whole organisation – **“if you treat people like adults, then they behave like adults”**. In the unlikely event that someone doesn’t, they talk about it and **manage the exception**. They do not duck performance management. They also, whenever possible, deal with issues in a “relational” way.

The Chief Executive has an open door to anyone and keeps contact with people by wandering around from time to time; she could be seen sitting alongside any person at their desk talking about their work.

Communication and openness is of essence. YouthNet have had to adapt their communication processes as they have grown and will continue to have to adapt. This communication and openness comes from people's **willingness and capacity to receive feedback from all directions** and for senior managers, in particular, to **not pretend that they have all the answers.**

They have regular quarterly meetings bringing all staff together. Office-wide emails keep people informed about developments. Whenever a new person joins everyone knows about it. A phrase we frequently heard was **"We are all in this together"**, highlighting the sense of collaboration and responsibility for self and others that is engendered - the organisation is hierarchical, but not autocratic.

Others descriptions we frequently heard were, "hard working yet chilled", **"a can do attitude"**, "passionate", "optimistic", "outcome focussed and target driven", "no passengers" (yet still relational). This is "a yes culture", **"a no blame culture.** However you say it, the culture, which can be described as "the way things get done", creates a buzz, a creative engagement and a willingness in staff to take risks and personal responsibility.

All these elements go together and **it takes work, practice and attention**, being applied as best they can to the everyday activities that are the things make up the culture of an organisation. YouthNet invests in the development of its people, both on the job and through courses. They recruit for attitude and have a thorough induction process. Their staff turnover is extremely low. People are growing with the charity.

So this is the YouthNet way. Whether you are talking about dress code ("wear something that looks like you made an effort") or timekeeping (are they meeting their outcomes?) or decision making (everyone can champion change initiatives or new projects through a rigorous yet open process).

And late afternoon on a Friday the kitchen becomes home to the Wine Club (and as you probably would now expect the wine is entirely optional and could be beer or tea or water or juice...). It is very easy to consider this focus on refreshments to be superficial or trivial. Don't be fooled - this is serious stuff, important to the staff and not the least bit trivial. (Ask people in organisations where their free water cooler is removed at the whim of a cost cutting initiative – the actual cost in goodwill.) The Wine Club is a precious "institution"; it is a wind down at the end of another hard working week, a thank you to people for their contribution and an opportunity for laughter.

Finally, a small example of personal initiative and humour came with a recent email sent out to everyone in the organisation (by one of the newest recruits and most junior people) reminding them how to use the dishwasher – it was a 27 part process with pictures and diagrams. Apparently the laughter could be heard around the whole place as people opened their mail.....and the point was made.

Observations, Questions and Challenges

This truly is an exceptional place to work. It is a great role model for others who want to believe there is another way to run and lead an organisation. The challenges in the future are about how they maintain this culture through further change and growth.

Meeting with the Senior Management Team we shared our findings, offered some observations and posed some questions. A few that we perceived as particularly relevant for the future were:

What happens if there is change at the top?

We believe that culture is set from the top of any organisation. This belief is based on hard evidence, academic research and 30 years experience. This is also the case in YouthNet and if there were a change of regime, one fears that this extraordinary marriage of, as one person put it "delivery and chilled", would be lost. The only way it would be preserved is if the board recruit for the same values not just for competency.

How much difference can be tolerated?

Whilst valuing difference in approach and individuality there needs to be similarity of values. As they grow they need to ensure that everyone they recruit "gets" the culture – which for many will be alien. Recruitment, induction, mentoring and training processes all need to help keep the culture. YouthNet have done well with this so far and they will need to continue to keep this under close attention.

How will you resist an increase in rules and procedures?

They need to resist the simplistic and expedient solutions to problems that result from growth. It is so often tempting to make "rules" "procedures" and increased bureaucracy – where none is needed. In fact, worse than unnecessary, such procedures will take away personal responsibility, engagement, innovation and flexibility. It is a question of balance and appropriateness with reference to the outcome one is seeking to achieve.

How are you going to maintain the quality of the communication and information flow?

As the organisation grows the communication channels will need to adapt to maintain that sense of relationship between everyone and that sense of transparency and belonging – "we are all in this together".

Reviewing our findings and these questions with the Senior Management Team they were inquisitive and very open to the conversation and to exploring the suggestions we offered to facilitate their current challenges and next steps.

In Summary

It was a great privilege to explore how YouthNet does what it does. In summary, this is our blueprint, some of the core ingredients that you might want to check out in your own organisation. So do you

- Know what you are working for – have clear values and vision
- Understand you are a role model – so be the role model you want to be
- Value differences of approach, contribution and individuality; and value similarity of values.
- Be intolerant of disrespect in whatever form
- Recruit for attitude

- Treat people like adults
- Have clear boundaries, manage by exception and manage poor performance
- Be rigorous, outcome and customer focussed – always in a relational way
- Name elephants – talk about what is not working
- Resist procedures and rules – unless understood by all to be absolutely necessary. Do not confuse “according to the rules” with doing what’s right, (MP’s expenses are a good example of this). Live with and manage paradox in preference to absolute rules.
- Work hard
- Play hard

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