

THE GOOD JOBS PROJECT 2021

Evidence for the 4 Boosts for Frontline Workers framework

Overview

The purpose of the first phase of the Good Jobs Project in 2021 was to investigate how to improve the experience of of frontline work in the city of Norwich. At Norwich Business School, University of East Anglia, we wanted to hear from and be informed by first hand experiences, so we interviewed frontline workers, employers, and also representatives from infrastructure organisations concerned with employment in the region. We listened to and then analysed what they told us to develop our 4 Boosts framework. This involves a foundation of “Respect” with 4 Boosts which build upon it. We named these Boosts based on our interviewees own words:

- “Make workers part of the conversation”
- “Care about workers’ lives”
- “Have workers’ backs”
- “Let workers connect”

While this framework was developed from the views of our interviewees, it has a lot of overlap with existing academic literature and other empirical evidence. The following document describes this overlap and explains how the actions outlined in the framework should be seen as ‘win-win’ for employers and employees.

From a foundation of respect ...

“Respect” encompasses fair pay, reasonable workload and appropriate, safe working conditions. It is not a ‘boost’ – it lays the foundation and sets the scene for good work. Many businesses want to show that they value their workers and our findings suggest focusing on relationships and conditions will help them to do this better. There is a lot of academic literature on workplace incivility and how such negative relationships affect workers through burnout and emotional exhaustion, which in turn negatively affects their service performance and capacity to satisfy customers (e.g., Al-Hawari et al., 2020; Nietzsche et al., 2018). Even without direct incivility, conditions such as insufficient pay, excessive workloads, and generally poor working conditions are all linked to staff retention problems and job dissatisfaction (Poulston, 2009; Milman, 2002; Zeytinoglu et al., 2004). Furthermore, Herzberg (2003) included pay and conditions as factors that can nullify other motivators if not sufficiently met. It is therefore vital that companies show “respect” to their workers in these fundamental areas to provide the platform for the 4 Boosts.

Make workers part of the conversation

The first boost is “Make workers part of the conversation”. This means managers should be open, approachable and involve workers in discussing decisions that could impact on their work and lives. In the infographic the arrow for this boost is shown encompassing the others, as it is an important step in also delivering the other boosts. Managers should be given time to talk with workers and openly discuss how the business is going. They should then act on feedback (or explain why not) to avoid cynicism and the accusation of ‘lip service’. Being genuinely heard at work can reduce worker stress and improve their work-related quality of life (Kristinsson et al., 2019). It also supports innovation, because workers can draw on their unique frontline insight to suggest new ways of working (Smith, 2018). In the words of Professor John Bessant in an interview conducted by Totterdill (2014, p.26): “with every pair of hands, I get a free brain”.

Have workers' backs

Next is “Have workers’ backs”. This involves ensuring workers know what to do in difficult situations with the public and that they receive colleague and manager support to feel safe at work. Frontline workers should be given early and ongoing training (formal and on-the-job) on dealing with difficult public. When incidents do occur, workers should expect colleague and manager support. Managers should avoid blaming workers. Even when mistakes are made, they should be treated as learning opportunities. Service workers are expected to perform emotional labour, i.e. acts of socially desirable emotions (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Constantly maintaining this and hiding emotions in response to rude customers can cause stress, leading to mental and physical health problems (Humphrey et al., 2015). Avoiding this type of emotional exhaustion leads to better service (Cho et al., 2016). There is some evidence that customer incivility is more damaging than supervisor incivility (Al-Hawari et al., 2020). While management are more limited in preventing the former, they can be influential in how successfully it is dealt with (Baker and Kim, 2020).

Care about workers' lives

“Care about workers’ lives” means taking into account the wider life needs and goals of the worker – e.g. flexibility around childcare, predictable shifts and opportunities to learn. This boost concerns aspirations both inside and outside of work, depending on workers’ priorities. Shifts should be issued as predictably as possible to accommodate activities outside of work. Managers/supervisors should catch-up with staff about their needs and goals, and explore reasonable options for accommodation, flexibility and support. Flexible work schedules have been shown to improve quality of work life and organisational commitment (Lee et al., 2015). Investment in career progression programs can reduce staff turnover and promote loyalty, while also being linked to increased customer satisfaction and profitability (Jackson Jr and Sirianni, 2009). Managers can play a critical role in promoting individual and organisational learning (Cohen, 2013) which aids the career progression of workers and helps move the business forward.

Let workers connect

“Let workers connect” is making sure that workers have discretion, time and support to take pride and meaning from supportive interactions with customers and colleagues. Workers should be given opportunities for unscripted interactions, with workloads monitored so that they do not prevent meaningful contact time. Linking back to the first boost, workers should be consulted and listen to on how best to use their skills. Workers and customers find social contact important (Kim and Qu, 2020). Evidence suggests that meaningful work is associated with better job and life satisfaction, as well as other factors including work engagement, life meaning and general health (Allan et al., 2019). While improved customer experience leads to business gains (Bayighomog and Arasli, 2019). There is a two-way feedback between customers and employees, i.e. happy workers improve customer satisfaction, while happy customers also improve worker satisfaction (Barnes et al., 2015). Lastly, with the increasing use of technology in the service sector, it is optimal for this to supplement human interactions, rather than wholly replacing them (Grewal et al., 2020).

In frontline service work, interactions between employees and customers are important. In order to become enthusiastic about meeting the needs of customers, frontline workers need to feel that their own needs are being met (Jackson Jr and Sirianni, 2009). The 4 Boosts framework outlines how the experiences of workers in frontline work can be improved. This is vitally important in its own right. And, as the evidence presented here suggests, it should not be seen as in conflict with other organisational goals. Improving the experiences of frontline workers is a 'win-win-win': for workers, customers and employers.

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