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GOVERNANCE

BE RESPONSIBLE

Business responsibility is not a passing fad – it's a serious concern to anyone working in FM, says *Victoria Hughes*

Think of business responsibility as an equation: sustainability + effective disclosure, or transparency + trust.

Sustainable business relies on strong governance, which demands objectivity, which requires senior management to challenge conventions.

In newsworthy corporate failures or scandals – not just support services companies – people tend hide the truth and these fabrications grow exponentially. The cause is usually poor governance, deception or wilful ignorance.

Business responsibility requires commitment first and sound management second. I recommend a modification of the well-known management concept, PDCA (plan-do-check-act), to achieve this.

We've added a final step to the PDCA process, which helps us to meet responsibility aims, improve stakeholder consultation, achieve transparency and align our projects with global issues, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals. So with an extra D for 'disclose', let's look at PDCA+D using a real-world social value example.

Plan

We partnered with housing association Peabody to create enduring social change to benefit a local community through social inclusion and cohesion, improved well-being, and greater access to opportunities.

This is why Reading from the Start, a literacy project for children (many of whom did not have English as a first language) began. The plan was to deliver a project that maximised social value. We asked: What would positive outcomes look like? Whose lives would change? We determined value was created two ways: embedded (value created in our own teams) and additional value, created for communities by improving their lives and increasing opportunities.

Do

The 'Do' phase requires testing ideas. We 'recruited' trained volunteers to support families and their children and encouraged children younger than five to make reading part of their everyday lives.

Implementation included weekly sessions at the local community or children's centre, and a free book provided monthly to each child through the Dolly Parton Imagination Library (DPIL).

We also required parents, after registering children, to read to their kids at home and attend the interactive sessions hosted by volunteers.

Look out during the 'Do' phase for the unexpected. The children's parents who spoke little English also benefited from improved literacy and making social connections.

Check

Gather data to analyse progress. Ask, 'What can we change to do it better?' Our answers were:

- Better engagement with the local community;
- Improve 'recruitment' of volunteers;
- Increase the availability of drop-in sessions; and
- Make it easier to register children.

Act

Now is the chance to improve processes. Reading from the Start is in its fifth year, but we've made adjustments to be more inclusive, to attract hard-to-reach families by working with Peabody and local communities. The result is that more than 614 children have registered and we've more than 11,000 books.

We've now begun to use the Social Value Bank to the financial benefits of the programme's social value.

Disclose

Trust in businesses is low and transparency is the solution. When processes don't work, talk about them and make changes. For example, obtaining hard data to show literacy improvement was a challenge, as there were no tests for the children to complete. We could see literacy had improved so adapted the approach with qualitative metrics.

Disclosing results and processes can also improve value to society. Increased literacy at a low cost could easily be replicated in other areas. Often, disclosure can show others what or what not to do, as someone else has already done all the legwork.

Results from Reading from the Start show that:

- 95 per cent of families now spend more time reading at home with their children; and
- 81 per cent say their children are more willing to read.

PCDA+D is not the only way for responsible businesses to deliver social change, but it is a useful guide.

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