

## **HEDENSTED KOMMUNE (MUNICIPALITY OF HEDENSTED)**

### **1. Organisations involved**

Hedensted Kommune (the Municipality of Hedensted), Denmark

### **2. Description of the case**

#### **2.1. Introduction**

Hedensted Kommune is a Danish municipality located in the eastern part of Jutland. Hedensted Kommune has 45,000 citizens and app. 3,500 employees in a variety of sectors including elderly care, education, children's day-care and administration, and thus consists of a large number of different workplaces.

Hedensted Kommune aims at promoting mental health at the workplaces, as this is considered to be the key to deliver high quality services to the citizens.

The organisational approach of Hedensted Kommune is based on the following values:

- Responsibility: for everyone and the individual,
- Dialogue: open and equal communication,
- Development: joint responsibility for seeking and implementing new ideas.

Hedensted Kommune acknowledges that people in life pass through several stages, and that each stage engenders different needs. In order to promote mental health at the workplace, the municipality therefore acts on the conviction that everybody should be treated differently in order to be treated equally. This conviction is reflected in the development of the employee policy, which is well implemented and thus rules the everyday interactions across the organisation.

#### **2.2. Aims**

To strengthen the psychosocial working environment across all workplaces throughout the municipality, Hedensted Kommune developed an employee policy that is based on the values of the municipality. The main objective of the employee policy is to promote mental health by ensuring that all employees, regardless of their life stage, are treated fairly, and by providing managers with the freedom to take decisions that fit the individual needs of each employee.

#### **2.3. What was done, and how?**

The employee policy of Hedensted Kommune reflects the overall organisational strategy and the values of the municipality, and focuses on positive aspects instead of being formulated in a negative way. Therefore, the employee policy does not contain any formal rules or guidelines, as rules are considered to restrain differentiated actions, which do not support the aim of treating people equally and fairly. However, even though the policy does not contain any rules, it does comply with collective agreements and legislation in general. The employee policy is elaborated in an untraditional way, since it is based on story-telling.

The overall employee policy of Hedensted Kommune is supplemented by two sub-policies, which are implemented at central and local level in a variety of ways. The sub-policies are:

- Life Stage Policy
- Health and Working Environment Policy.

# CASE STUDIES

These two policies were developed in collaboration with the employees. In September 2007 employees across all sectors and units of the municipality were invited to an “inspiration day”. All employees were invited to take part in the event during their working time and had to register for it. Employees were divided into small groups, in which they shared stories from their own working life and personal life that could be relevant for the development of policies within these two areas.

Based on the employee input and on subsequent discussions with the working council and management networks, ten fictive stories were written by an author. The stories make up the heart of the policy, and were communicated to employees during 2008. The first four stories were published in a newspaper called “Stories from Hedensted” which also described the motives for using story telling to elaborate the employee policy.

The stories are used by employees in the decentralised units to discuss the values of the municipality and the employee policy. Each story contains some kind of dilemma that encourages discussions about the values. Hedensted Kommune uses the story telling approach to show that different employees may have different needs, and therefore must be treated differently in order to be treated fairly.

Hedensted Kommune has furthermore employed a “house author” who visits workplaces/units to hear their stories. These stories are sent to employees with the salary statement and are published on the intranet.

## **The Life Stage Policy**

The keyword in the Life Stage Policy is *flexibility*. Hedensted Kommune believes that all people need flexibility at some point in their life. The stories illustrate how the need for flexibility is different from person to person. However, the underlying message of trust and confidence is the same across the stories.

Below are two examples of stories that make up the Life Stage Policy:

- “I was happy *and* terrified when I saw the result of the pregnancy test – positive! With only two months in my new job, I could have thought of greater things to tell my boss. With shaky voice and a bad conscience, I delivered the message. He held up his hand to stop me, and exclaimed: “I love when you come to me with this kind of news! I admit it can be impractical, but someone has to keep up the population figure within the municipality! Let’s celebrate with the rest of the team!” After giving birth to my daughter, my boss and I made a plan for my working hours, until my daughter got admitted to day care. At one time, I even brought her to work. I told my boss that I owed him a big favour, but his only comment was: “Only if I have to change her diapers – *then* you owe me one!”
- “One morning I received an email from one of my new employees with the subject: I’m sorry, but my dog is sick. The email was sent at five o’clock in the morning and the employee explained that she needed to go to the vet because her dog had become ill during the night. She also mentioned that she needed to finalise some minutes of a meeting that should be distributed the following day, and that she guaranteed that these would be ready in due time. I smiled to myself. Not because I understand what it’s like to have a dog – I have allergy! But I smiled because I could tell from the email that she was really concerned about her dog – and about her job. I wrote an email to her in which I gave my best wishes for the recovery of her dog, and asked her to give me an update when she had news. At four o’clock in the afternoon she – and the dog - entered my office. She explained that the dog was not well enough to be home alone, but she really wanted to finalise the minutes. I therefore told her: well, if you finalise the minutes, we will just invent a new term in the department: dog’s first sick day.”

The aim of the stories is to show employees how flexibility, confidence and trust may be displayed in a variety of ways. Not having to worry about maternity leave or a dog being sick is considered to have a positive impact on the mental health of employees. The stories thus symbolise the different stages of life, and show how the needs of individual employees differ. The stories also fulfil a management purpose, as they emphasise the management values of Hedensted Kommune: Managers should always show understanding towards employees, as different circumstances emerge in different stages of life, and therefore engender different solutions.

# CASE STUDIES

## **The Health and Working Environment Policy**

The Health- and Working Environment Policy rests on five main themes, which Hedensted Kommune considers crucial for promoting mental health at the workplace

- Good relations
- A healthy workplace
- A safe workplace
- A stimulating workplace
- Human resource management

The underlying principle of the Health- and Working Environment Policy is that a safe working environment, considering both physical as well as psychosocial aspects, is the prerequisite for creating trust, job satisfaction and cooperation, which is considered to be crucial for delivering high-quality services to the citizens.

This policy is also values based, and implies that all employees and managers take responsibility for creating a psychosocially healthy working environment. Each individual has a responsibility. However, it is the sum of all interactions that constitutes the secure workplace, in which all people are treated well.

The Health- and Working Environment Policy also consists of a number of fictive stories, all of which illustrate how employees and managers can take responsibility for creating a meaningful and satisfying work life, for themselves and their colleagues. Below is an example:

- “I was going through a personal crisis as my husband and I had decided that we we’re no longer meant for each other. I work as a teacher, and in order to ensure that the pupils were not affected by my personal crisis, I tried to hide my feelings when being at work. However, one day, a colleague asked if I was okay. I told her about my situation, and actually felt relieved to be able to talk about my personal problems. One day I needed to go to a meeting with my lawyer, and my colleagues agreed that I should take a couple of hours off. However, my manager had a different perspective. She said she was sorry, but she was not able to give people time off for something like that. ‘But we have always been given a day off to celebrate our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversaries, and since I’m now getting divorced, I will not ever be able to celebrate a 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, so why can’t I get time off for this important meeting?’ ‘Well, she said, rules have been changed, and people are no longer given time off for 25<sup>th</sup> anniversaries weddings, and besides that, it will be difficult to find a substitute on such short notice’. I was really sad when I left my workplace that day, but later that same day my manager called me. ‘I’ve thought about what I said about 25<sup>th</sup> anniversaries. No one throughout the municipality is given time off to celebrate their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The reason is that we want as much flexibility and as few rules as possible. We want to treat all people, regardless of their life situation, equally, and we want to base our cooperation on trust. Therefore, of course you should be able to take time off from work to go to the meeting with your lawyer. I will cover for you and actually look forward to teaching again”

The main objective of the Health- and Working Environment Policy is to strengthen the mental health of employees by allowing managers to support employees in different situations – without being restrained by strict rules.

The decentralised units are also allowed the latitude to create and implement local employee policies. This is usually done in collaboration with the employees. The local employee policies are also based on the three core values of the municipality. Again, the purpose is to ensure that decisions are made with the individual needs of each employee in mind.

## **2.4. What was achieved?**

Since the development and implantation of the employee policy, the employee turnover and the absence due to illness has decreased, and is substantially below the national public sector average. The absence due to illness has decreased from 5,3% in 2007 to 4,7% in 2009 (3, quarter), and is 1,3 percentage points lower than the national municipality average. The voluntary employee turnover has decreased 1 percentage point, and is 6,2% lower than the national municipality average.

Each year, Hedensted Kommune implements an employee survey, and in 2009, average results have increased 6 percentage points compared to the 2008 survey.

Hedensted Kommune is convinced that these results are closely related to the unique culture. This is further emphasised by Professor Verner C. Pedersen, University of Århus, who praises Hedensted Kommune for having removed all rigid rules and instead trusts managers to make the best decisions in a given situation. This is considered to be very unique in a municipality.

Abandoning the traditional rules based approach to employee policies is challenging – especially in a large organisation or a municipality. It may be difficult for some people to handle changes, and it is therefore important to ensure that people at all levels in the organisation understand the reasoning behind decisions.

In Hedensted Kommune the value based employee policy also implies a large challenge for managers. As one of the managers explains: “I know my employees well, and who to keep an extra eye on. We are delegating a lot of responsibility, but this does not imply that you, as a manager, have to be nice all the time. No matter how good the workplace is, you will experience conflicts. Today I have more freedom to make decisions, but this also implies that there is no one but me to take the rap. But I like that... Before I could just consult the employee policy to see when employees were entitled to a day off. Today, I have more opportunities to take the workload and individual needs of employees into consideration. It has been a challenge for all of us to introduce the value based approach, as we are used to a rules based workday. However, I am sure that employees will be happier, which will also have a positive impact on the daily life of our residents.”

And finally, the National Association of Local Authorities in Denmark (KL) often uses Hedensted Kommune in connection to education and inspirational activities and themes, including best practice sharing in the areas of diversity management, organisational structures and the development of employee policies.

## **2.5. Success factors**

The success criteria for Hedensted Kommune’s approach to strengthening the mental health of employees include the following:

- **Courage:** it is easier to manage by rules than by values – especially in a large organisation or municipality. However the Hedensted Kommune’s approach is based on values.
- **Management training:** managers need to understand how to live the values and implement the different aspects of the employee policies.
- **Communication:** in order to ensure that all employees understand the reasoning behind decisions it is extremely important that all managers are able to “translate” and integrate the stories of the employee policy into daily life. Otherwise there is a risk that the lack of rules will become a problem as employees may feel it is just an excuse for aggravating the working conditions.
- **Collaboration:** involve employees in the policy making process and ensure that all employees receive the same information and are invited to provide input throughout the process. This is *inter alia* done by inviting all employees to information and work group meetings.

## **2.6. Further information**

Hedensted Kommune

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## **2.7. Transferability**

Seen from a broader perspective, the development and implementation of Hedensted Kommune's employee policy may be transferred to other organisations, including other municipalities. It is a rather comprehensive process which may imply that an organisation must rethink its values and organisational approach.

The employee policy itself cannot be transferred to other organisations, as it must be developed from within and in accordance with the values of the organisation. However, the approach to develop the policy may be transferred. Other organisations may also find inspiration in the value based approach, in the idea of treating people fairly and equally, only by treating them differently and in the use of story-telling in relation to the development and implementation of an employee policy.