

Creating employee ambassadors

(Published in December 2009 by simply-communicate.com)

By Hilary Scarlett and Mike Pounsford

Natural England was created from the merger of three organisations in October 2006. The Government said "Its purpose could not be more important: to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced, and managed for the benefit of present and future generations."

To be effective, Natural England had to inform, educate and influence the behaviour of others. However the 2007 employee survey showed that employees lacked the confidence to talk about the new organisation and its policies:

Employee Survey 2007	Agree
I am confident in advocating Natural England's key policy positions to our stakeholders	16%
I am confident in advocating Natural England's core purpose to our stakeholders	33%

External stakeholder research in September 2007 revealed that they thought "staff feel somewhat confused". Although stakeholders thought communication was good in terms of an abundance of contact and documents, they felt, "Natural England is yet to establish a strong reputation as a 'listening' organisation. There's a frequent tendency to 'talk at' rather than 'with' stakeholders."

Guy Thompson, Executive Director, External Affairs commented:

"We have a broad remit and expectations of the organisation in the outside world were both extremely high and varied from the outset. We were always clear that our agenda could not be delivered alone and that it was therefore vital to bring our customers and stakeholders with us if we were to be successful in what we do."

If Natural England were to be a leader, there was a clear need to equip all 2,300 employees to talk confidently about Natural England and to be good advocates. This was our brief.

How we did it

We worked in close partnership with Thompson and a design team which included Helen Phillips, Chief Executive. We agreed that the heart of the advocacy programme would be a one-day workshop for all employees. We recognised that one workshop to suit every employee at every level in the organisation would be difficult to design but there was an important message to employees in this newly merged organisation: they were all now part of one organisation and should therefore have the same, unifying experience.

Our time was short: we were appointed in October 2007; Natural England wanted to reach as many of its employees as possible by March 2008.

We conducted two pilots of the workshop in January 2008 – the first was painful but we learned what was working and what wasn't. Following the second, we were ready to run a one-day session with the 25 leaders to equip them to play their role in hosting the session. Thompson recalled:

"Having fellow senior leaders and me in the organisation delivering the workshops was a masterstroke. It sent an immediate signal to participants that we were serious about the training, particularly given that senior leaders were all run off their feet at that stage in our transition. And, since we were all feeling our way into our roles in a new organisation, we all learned as part of the process too. It was particularly powerful to see senior managers participating in the role play exercises."

Working with a specially trained team of eight facilitators, we ran 108 workshops across England. Each was hosted by a member of the leadership team or a senior manager from Natural England. Titled **One Voice, Nine Accents**, the workshop took people on a journey.

The day started with a team-based quiz, testing areas of current knowledge about Natural England and underlining the importance of sharing knowledge across the team. A DVD (produced by Foo Films) brought the voice of the stakeholder into the workshop highlighting the wide range of expectations external stakeholders had for Natural England.



Creating employee ambassadors

Next, we played back what employees had really said (both good and horrifying!) to a 'mystery telephone caller' when asked about Natural England. We used films, posters, case studies and exercises to build employees' confidence in talking about the organisation.

The workshop ended with a light-hearted quiz, **Have I got N.E. news for you**, based on the popular British television programme. Employees were asked to guess the missing words from press coverage of Natural England and also took part in various caption competitions.

Feedback and measurement

At the close of the workshop, numbers showed that **One Voice, Nine Accents** had increased people's confidence with 90% of participants saying that they could now confidently describe the purpose of Natural England.

94% of participants could see that every employee had a role to play in influencing what outside stakeholders know and think about the organisation.

Natural England conducts regular employee surveys every six months. These receive a very high response and have shown that confidence has continued to build.

Follow-up to our workshop has included articles in Natural England's in-house magazine and e-postcards summarising its work on issues ranging from access to the coast to The Natural Heath Service. Employees are also encouraged to join in visits to stakeholders and Natural England projects.

Brand perception

The key test of the success of this work is in how external stakeholders perceive the organisation. While there is still a way to go, surveys show that stakeholders now see the organisation in a much more positive light:

85% rate the passion and commitment they see from Natural England people as good or very good. 85% would also rate Natural England employees' attitude towards external stakeholders as good or very good. Three-quarters said that Natural England employees are able to communicate its core purpose well or very well.

These numbers indicate a huge shift from how the organisation had been perceived just 18 months earlier.

Long-term success of the campaign

By asking leaders to host every one of the 108 workshops, **One Voice, Nine Accents** has gone a long way to improving internal communication. Mixing people into the sessions was not always easy but it helped to build a sense of community in each region and a more cohesive organisation. Employees are now much better equipped to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced and managed for current and future generations.

One Voice, Nine Accents demonstrates the value of sound and regular measurement - the internal and external tracking showed that the work was having a positive and noticeable impact. **One Voice, Nine Accents** also shows what an organisation can achieve in just 18 months when there is a clear goal and real determination from the leadership team.

Guy Thompson is particularly pleased with the results.

"Natural England regards the IABC Gold Quill and the PR Week Awards as accolades for the pace and energy we invested from day one in the transition to become one organisation. We're particularly proud of how quickly our people have gained confidence in advocating our purpose and policies. Our staff survey results tie with the feedback that we're increasingly getting from our stakeholders and customers that they hear more from us and see us as a bold, confident, forward-looking organisation. Given the current political and financial climate in the UK, it's imperative that our people are able to act as environmental leaders to give the environment a voice."



About Hilary Scarlett

Hilary's work has spanned Europe, the US and Asia and concentrates on the development of people-focused change management programmes and employee engagement. She is a director of [Scarlett Associates](#) whose clients include The Natural History Museum, Virgin Atlantic, EDF Energy, Deutsche Bank and the COI. She has a post-graduate Certificate in the Psychology of Change and Organisation Development and has recently been appointed as Associate of Bristol Business School, University of the West of England.

