

## Grass Roots

### Background

Grass Roots, with its headquarters in Tring in Hertfordshire, is an international provider of performance improvement services. The business, founded in 1980, now employs some 275 people across two sites in Tring and one in Wooburn Green. It is part of a group with a further 400 people working in subsidiary businesses in the U.K and worldwide.

Because of its semi rural location Grass Roots understands, perhaps more than businesses in urban environments, how important it is to develop and retain its people. The Information and Consultation processes embedded into its operation are fundamental in helping achieve this.

### I&C practices

In 2005 Grass Roots introduced an Employee Forum with 10 members elected by their peers from all strata of the business. The new legislation on Information & Consultation acted as a catalyst, but Grass Roots saw the new forum as very much in line with its company values – treating colleagues, clients and suppliers as partners; working with partners to establish and agree their needs; acknowledging and pursuing the principle of teamwork in all aspects of its business; encouraging creativity, energy and commitment in individuals and teams; and striving for continuous improvement in all aspects of its work.

Initially there was some anxiety about the legislation – a fear that it would impose something at odds with a very positive working environment, The project team was keen that any new initiative should build on the existing culture and values. It drew up an agreement very much tailored to its specific circumstances, secured support from the board and management team, and sent it to all employees for their views. The feedback received was very positive, and the final version was sent again by e-mail to all employees for them to vote on.

Ten Representative Groups from across the business were identified, and employees invited to nominate colleagues from their own group to represent them. Where there was more than one nomination an election was held. Employees are encouraged to stand as representatives in order to play an active part in the company's communication process and to extend their personal skills. Representatives stand for a two year period.

In addition to the ten employee representatives, meetings are attended by the Managing Director and Chairman, the Group Personnel Manager and, on a rotating basis, one other Board Director. The purpose of the Forum is to provide a structured mechanism for employee consultation on major issues affecting their employment; to supplement existing means of communication; to encourage a greater understanding of the business, its products and services, its clients and market places; to provide an additional means of capturing employees' views at all levels across the company; and to help equip management to respond to employees' views.

Meetings are held quarterly, with the agenda set partly by management, partly by the employee representatives. The Grass Roots Management System, the focus for the quality standard ISO9001, helps define the scope of the Forum and therefore appropriate agenda items. Issues relating to key business areas are openly discussed, queries answered and many things referred for further action. Topics for discussion include product development and marketing, retention, growth and acquisition of clients; service delivery; people issues such as recruitment, benefits, training and development, internal communications, and health & safety; continuous improvement; investment in the workplace and the working environment; and financial results.

### Involvement of employees

Employee representatives are encouraged to raise their own agenda items, and to ask the colleagues they represent for issues. A recent example raised by employees is the subject of employee shares, and a proposal is now being developed by the company in response to the Forum's request. Representatives are responsible for de-briefing their colleagues on proposals as described at Forum meetings, for consulting them on issues raised, raising their issues and concerns at Forum meetings, feeding back responses for further discussion and consultation, and communicating agreed outcomes to staff. Exactly how they do this is left to them. Much is done via e-mail, in meetings, or informally. Communication between representatives and their colleagues is relatively easy because the "constituencies" are quite small – around 25 on average – with the people sitting in close proximity.

The Forum is part of a wider strategy for communication and information for all staff, including monthly management and team meetings, a quarterly internal newsletter, a weekly internal update from the Managing Director, and an annual "State of the Nation" meeting with the Chairman for the whole company.

### Keys to success

Grass Roots highlights the culture of honesty and trust it seeks to generate as the key to the success of its Employee Forum. This helps representatives feel comfortable and confident about raising important matters at meetings. Representatives have raised a lot of issues themselves, and they get back plenty of feedback from their constituents. As the Forum develops, the company wants to see employees and their representatives increasingly raise more fundamental business issues as it seeks to encourage greater employee awareness and understanding of the operation as whole.