

Walk in My Shoes

Nick Barrett, Chief Executive, The Outward Bound Trust

One of the most draining aspects of being a CEO is when one part of the organisation inaccurately complains about another part. The finger pointing and the low rumble of discontent are damaging to trust and morale – some of the very attributes that help to drive excellent performance.

The Outward Bound Trust is an educational charity and I am fortunate to have many talented and committed staff working in lots of different roles across the organisation. As anyone well acquainted with life in a charity will tell you, these high levels of commitment to the cause can be something of a double edged sword. People will go the extra mile, but the very fact of their caring so much can sometimes be difficult to channel productively. This is never more so than when sheer commitment takes the form of finger pointing at a perceived inefficiency elsewhere within the organisation.

At Outward Bound we also face two other specific challenges. Firstly, our business units are far apart and in remote parts of the UK. Over 50% of our staff are practical people delivering personal development courses to young people in the mountains or on the sea. They neither need, nor particularly want, to read stuff about what is happening elsewhere within the organisation. They are do-ers, not readers. Secondly, the disparate units have a high degree of mutual dependency notwithstanding their physical remoteness from each other. The fundraising, the course delivery, the experiences of the participants, the profile raising and the selling of what the charity does all has a high degree of connectedness. In such circumstances, people need to trust and understand what others are doing. Internal strife is damaging, mutual regard and understanding is a key driver to improved performance.

Our response has been to launch a Walk in My Shoes initiative, enabling any member of staff to spend some time alongside staff working in a very different part of the organisation. The instructor can swop his or her fleece for a dinner jacket or ball gown and find out just how much skill and hard work is required to set up and run a successful glitzy fundraising event. All those lay experts in brand management can see just how challenging it can be to develop an effective marketing effort with a limited budget. Those all important administrators can sample life at the sharp end of Outward Bound in a freezing cold mountain stream or dangling at the end of a rope somewhere scary.

Staff can get to appreciate that the accounts department isn't made up of miserable bastards solely determined to nail the slightest discrepancy in an expenses claim. One brave soul asked joined a two-day Board bonding session and left only slightly less bemused by the reality of charity governance. And so on. It is all based on the principle that you should never criticise a man, until you have walked a mile in his shoes – and that once you have done so, you are more likely to appreciate and trust him rather than slag him off. It's also a good way of developing staff.

It is working well – up to a point. Those who have walked have learned a lot and genuinely had their eyes opened as to the efforts and commitment of others they had never met before or whose work they didn't understand. Both the host and the guest seem to benefit from the experience. Some, not all, have broadcast their experiences to colleagues, others have not. In truth the scheme is probably under-promoted and whilst its very deliberate informality has made it bureaucracy free, it has also left the initiative with less status than it might otherwise have acquired. Take up has been a bit patchy. All in all – hugely well worth doing but I probably need to push it more.

I'm waiting for someone to say they want to spend time alongside the CEO. Oddly enough, no one has asked and I have been denied the extremely worthwhile but slightly disconcerting challenge of trying to demonstrate in a practical way just what it is that I do!

About Nick

The Outward Bound Trust (<http://www.outwardbound.org.uk>)

Nick Barrett worked in international development for 20 years, first as a VSO volunteer in Bhutan and then in Kenya for a total of eight years. He then moved into other field based roles in Asia and Africa before taking up UK management roles with a number of other well known international aid organisations. He was Chief Executive of the Ramblers' Association for six years during the passage of the "right to roam" legislation in England and Wales and the Land Reform Act in Scotland. He joined The Outward Bound Trust in 2006.