

Spirit-led, ethical employment practice: Advices & queries

Introduction

In 2021, a concern arose within Lancashire Central and North Area Meeting about whether, or how, Quaker organisations, of all types and sizes, integrate the spiritual insights of our tradition into our practice as employers. It was felt that merely following 'the law' or, indeed, what secular organisations identify as 'best practice', didn't necessarily guarantee that the result was in line with our testimony.

A working group was nominated by the area meeting. With the help of the Deputy Recording Clerk, the concern was taken to Meeting for Sufferings, where it was agreed that it would be a useful endeavour for the area meeting to take a lead in exploring what Friends felt would constitute spirit-led, ethical employment practice and to use the responses to produce a practical resource. Meeting for Sufferings encouraged interested Friends across Britain Yearly Meeting to help with its development.

After much discernment and support from Friends with extensive experience as employers and employees across multiple contexts, we offer the following advices and queries for Friends' consideration. They are not intended to be a complete list or a replacement for professional expertise and guidance. We expect them to change over time. We hope that they will be used as prompts for reflection and discussion by all those who seek to incorporate Quaker testimony into their employment practice.

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Livelihoods

Spirit-led employment practice nurtures staff and creates an open and trusting relationship between employer and employees. This relationship acknowledges employees' needs for financial and emotional security, both for themselves and for any dependents. If colleagues feel secure and valued, work relations flourish and employee contributions to the organisation are optimised.

Do you offer contracts that consider the wellbeing of the employee as well as the needs of the employer?

We offer permanent and secure contracts of employment as the norm. We do not use freelance or agency staff to meet ongoing core organisational commitments. Rates of pay take account of work additional to contracted hours, work completed at unsocial hours, and the work's location.

Are your pay scales and job grading schemes transparent and the pay differential in your organisation regularly reviewed?

Grades and pay within the organisation are appropriate to the responsibilities of each employee. We recognise that percentage pay increases preferentially reward the highest paid and have a scheme for annual pay increases designed to minimise pay differentials across the organisation whilst maintaining financial incentives for internal promotion.

Are your arrangements for employee leave flexible and generous?

Maternity, paternity and parental leave periods are well above the legal minimum. Arrangements for annual leave, sick leave, compassionate leave and emergency leave are similarly flexible and generous. Phased returns to work are the norm after extended absence. Employee rights are clearly stated in employment contracts and are the same for all staff, regardless of grade.

Do you plan for employees' financial security in retirement?

We offer an ethical pension scheme in line with Quaker values and encourage all employees to join. Our employer contributions to the scheme are commensurate with the wealth and financial stability of our organisation.

Are you aware of the need for timely action when requests for information are made?

We recognise that UK law often requires information from employers at short notice and that employees with family overseas may have specific needs that require a sensitive and timely response. We prioritise the fulfilment of these requests whether they come from government or from the employee.

In times of organisational change or crisis, is your concern for employees' livelihoods and wellbeing prioritised?

We recognise that organisational change is stressful and should not be undertaken lightly. When restructuring, we are open with all employees about the purpose, methods and likely outcomes of the process. We actively invite employee input to the process from the outset and involve them sensitively throughout. If circumstances force us to reduce staffing levels or salaries, even temporarily, we consult employees about the means that this can best be achieved and make every effort to reinstate employees at the earliest opportunity.

Useful resources

[Living Wage Foundation](#)

Wellbeing

Spirit-led employment practice recognises that for work to flourish, employees need space and opportunity for refreshment and nourishment, appropriate work environments, and high-quality support.

How do you support employees to maintain a healthy balance between work, rest and relaxation?

We ensure sufficient time for employees to complete the work expected of them. We respect and protect their non-working time and space, including for those who live on-site. When staff are Quakers, there is a clear separation of employment and Quaker service. We have a flexible approach to hours and place of work wherever possible. We discourage overworking and model this ourselves. More than one person knows how to perform essential tasks so that no individual is anxious that systems will not work without them. Anyone feeling overburdened feels able to share this so that resolution becomes everyone's responsibility. Staff can take a wellbeing day – a bookable day, separate from annual leave, to focus on an activity to improve their wellbeing and reduce risk of burnout – up to three times a year.

Are working environments safe, healthy and pleasant to spend time in?

The workplace, including the home if that is where the work happens, is regularly assessed for hazards, including psychological ones. We recognise that employees are diverse and will have a variety of individual needs. Any issues are quickly addressed. The workplace feels safe and provides a pleasant, comfortable space for work and for rest breaks. We provide the equipment needed to work safely and healthily. There is appropriate space and time for rest, and for feeding babies or expressing breast milk.

Are you as concerned for the wellbeing of the employees and their dependents as you are for the task, product or smooth running of your organisation?

We signpost employees to professional, high-quality services that support their health and wellbeing and that of their dependents. We recognise that caring, compassionate managers and colleagues, who take time to enquire, listen and respond, are important in times of illness or personal difficulty too. We have a health and wellbeing plan and arrange regular training for all managers in supporting health and wellbeing. If appropriate to the size of the organisation, we have trained first aiders, including mental health first aiders. We respect employees' confidentiality. There is effective support on return from sick leave and maternity or paternity leave, including phased returns.

Useful resources

[The Mental Health Foundation](#)

[MIND](#)

[Health and Safety Executive](#)

[Mental Health in Quaker Communities](#)

Conflict

'Conflict' covers a range of situations, from people struggling to agree through to a dense, knotty situation with a complex history and long catalogue of hurts. Spirit-led employment practice recognises that conflict is a natural part of being in relationship with other people and that we all carry our own past hurts and experiences with us.

Do you recognise that active building of a trusting community is the single most important factor in mitigating and limiting the damaging impact of conflict?

We provide an employment structure in which dialogue between employer and employees is built to establish trust, enabling the views of each to be valued by the other, so that difficulties may be overcome through co-operation. We make time and opportunities to know one another in more than just work and task. We understand what helps employees to flourish and what gives them joy, as well as the pressures and stresses they face.

How well do you listen in the workplace?

A listening space is where all can speak truth without fear of judgement and where all are encouraged to listen with kindness and an assumption of good intent. We take seriously the challenges of imbalances of power. Sometimes, the approach needs to be one of equity, rather than simply equality. Tried and trusted Quaker approaches – Meetings for Listening; Threshing; Meetings for Clearness; Worship Sharing – can be modified and applied to lots of situations. Like all Quaker processes, they must be well held and elderled and have clear 'ground rules' or ways of being together. Employers and employees can access trusted third party 'mediation' by an independent person before problems have escalated.

Do you effectively address disrespect, bullying and harassment in the workplace?

Disrespect, bullying and harassment are clearly defined in policies and called out at whatever level they occur. Careful and compassionate inquiry follows. There is a clear process to follow in the event of an issue or problem. Employees are listened to, supported to understand how they might change unacceptable behaviour and are always encouraged and expected to bring an accompanying, supportive friend or trade union representative to any meetings.

When conflict arises, do you use a transformational approach?

We recognise that naming and acknowledging conflict at an early stage is essential in responding to it in a healthy way. Blame and fault are the least helpful ideas to take into a conflict situation, but we appreciate that these will often be the starting place for those involved. Only when there is a willingness to engage is it possible to begin any process. The same approach will not fit every situation and not every conflict can be resolved. The state of heart and mind with which we approach a conflict is just as, or even more important than the process we use. In any conflict situation, we try to think about what 'success' might look like. Managers are self-aware and we arrange training in transformational and trauma-informed approaches, which is refreshed regularly.

Useful resources

[St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace](#)

[Bridge Builders training and mediation](#)

[Restoring Relations](#)

Organisation

Being an employer is complex. This section offers queries and advice around the organisation of employment whilst considering Quaker values.

Do you feel equipped for your responsibilities as an employer? What do you do to ensure you are supported pastorally, practically and legally in this role?

We actively support all those who lead and manage the organisation, including trustees. When someone is appointed or promoted to a leadership role, we ensure appropriate induction and training. We allocate space and time for updates around best practice. We don't assume we always know best. We are honest about what we don't know and when we need to get advice and support. We are open to the large body of law and codified good practice from professional organisations, whilst recognising that it constantly changes and may not always be in line with Quaker principles. We consider it carefully.

Do all colleagues have clear and accurate job descriptions?

Everyone who works within the organisation, including trustees and volunteers, knows what they are expected to do. Roles have clear job descriptions which outline what each role involves, how it should be carried out and what support is available. Job descriptions are accessible, up to date and available to all in the organisation. We value each colleague's expertise and trust them to do their job without micromangement.

Have you considered multiple avenues for staff feedback, which are accessible?

We encourage staff feedback, which can take place one-to-one with managers but also via truly anonymous processes, such as a feedback box or online surveys. We recognise that unions and staff groups have roles to play in feedback to management and seriously consider their feedback as part of a clear and open relationship.

How effective are your complaints and whistleblowing procedures?

We have clear and accessible policies. They are viewed positively by staff and not as a last resort. They take account of how power is distributed throughout the organisation in order to prevent one individual filtering or blocking the raising of an issue. Our processes enable staff to use the policies without fear of negative repercussions. Managers encourage their use and avoid using informal channels for issues that require formal processes. These policies are regularly reviewed and their use is evaluated. Employees say that they feel comfortable to use them if necessary.

Are you honest about the structure of your organisation and the lines of authority within it?

Historically, Quaker testimony values equal structures and the avoidance of hierarchy. This can make it challenging to acknowledge the need for hierarchy and accountability in the workplace. We aim to be honest and transparent about the structures we have. Staff know where authority and responsibility lie, so that their psychological safety isn't compromised by the unexpected removal of autonomy or an unwarranted assumption of responsibility.

Do you have clear, open and transparent channels of information sharing?

We have considered how best to communicate decisions, taking account of the context in which staff are employed and their individual needs, so that they are always aware of any information that is pertinent to their work in good time. We have varied and transparent lines of two-way communication, which foster honesty, integrity and consistency. Difficult decisions are communicated with care and compassion.

Culture

Organisational culture is the unique set of values, beliefs, attitudes, systems, and rules that outline and influence behaviour within an organisation. We seek to foster a positive culture in line with Quaker values.

Do you foster a culture where mistakes are seen as opportunities for growth and everyone can easily request help?

We see asking for help as a strength. All staff feel comfortable flagging when they have concerns or have made mistakes. Feedback is framed thoughtfully and sensitively. Leaders and managers model this culture of not fearing mistakes and are not expected to be omniscient. We do not always get everything right and we are not afraid to admit our mistakes and apologise. We move forward together.

Do you value all employees equally as people?

We acknowledge that our employees are people with their own different challenges, needs and motivations. We treat all colleagues with respect and kindness, regardless of grade, role, the nature of their contract, length of service or any connection to the Quaker community. We take time to get to know them and learn their names and pronouns. Our policies and benefits are applied equitably.

What do you do to build an inclusive workplace? Do you recognise the advantages that a diverse workplace can bring, acknowledging that changes in practice may be needed to enable everyone to thrive?

Everyone within the organisation understands the diverse backgrounds and needs of colleagues and the people we serve, and receives regular training in relation to supporting equity, diversity and inclusion. We're mindful of our commitments to becoming actively anti-racist, acknowledging and affirming trans and gender diverse colleagues, and considering what love requires of us in the workplace.

How do you cultivate respect across the organisation?

All staff understand and value the roles of colleagues across the organisation, ensuring each individual's expertise is trusted, utilised and respected. We avoid creating an 'us and them' mentality and jumping to conclusions. We cultivate respect and understanding as our starting point for engagement, acknowledging people may approach issues from different places and may carry past hurt. We see generosity of spirit as a virtue.

Are everyone's contributions acknowledged, valued and appreciated?

We thank colleagues for their work, celebrate their achievement and acknowledge their contribution when this work is subsequently used by others. We are aware of the risks associated with award schemes, recognising that if only some staff are rewarded they may feel uncomfortable, whilst others may feel discouraged and unappreciated.

Do you have a publicly accessible document about the culture of the organisation?

Together as an organisation we have drawn up a document that reflects our unique culture and our aspirations for a better workplace. We work collaboratively to ensure it is reflective of where we want to go collectively. We are committed to working towards this positive culture, embedding it throughout our work. We revisit this statement regularly to reflect on our progress.

Management

Within a Quaker context, we think of leadership as service. This section offers advice and queries to those in management or leadership roles.

Are you willing to acknowledge mistakes, and apologise?

Humility and honesty build respect and trust. By acknowledging mistakes we encourage everyone to come forward with their struggles so that leaders and managers are aware of problems and we can move forward together.

Do you meet the staff you line manage regularly? Do you give them space to share and acknowledge their progress, discuss queries and any challenges/barriers?

We meet regularly and create space during line management to listen to our staff. We recognise that employees at all levels need this support.

Do you understand that employees have different gifts and needs?

We appreciate that individuals respond to different styles of management; some need more structured meetings with agenda and minutes, some need more informal space, some regular shorter catch ups and others longer spaced-out meetings. We find ways of managing meetings and support in ways that work best for the role, staff member and manager.

Are you consistent with how you treat staff?

While recognising that all people are unique, we ensure that all employees have access to the same support and we apply formal processes equitably. We ensure that processes don't advantage or disadvantage any individual disproportionately.

How do you manage innovation and change?

We see innovation as an opportunity to grow together, not as a threat. We are mindful that often there is more than one right way forward. We acknowledge that the best decisions are informed decisions. Decision makers take time to understand how any proposed change will affect each individual's work and its associated challenges. We recognise that imposed changes to structures and practices are unsettling and we avoid making changes without good reasons. When we do make changes, we explain our rationale and listen carefully to everyone's ideas.

Do you engage productively with unions?

We understand that unions have a constructive and collaborative role to play. We seek to meet with unions regularly and appropriately, understanding our respective roles and interests, and seek to create effective and harmonious working relations within the organisation.

Are you willing to make difficult decisions to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all who work in the organisation or whom you serve?

As employers we understand that sometimes leadership requires difficult decisions. As Quakers, we look for good in everyone but when anyone's behaviour puts others' safety or wellbeing at risk, we take action.

Recruitment, training, development and moving on

Attention to recruitment, training and staff development is essential so that employees join, progress and eventually leave the organisation well equipped and empowered for their next steps, whatever they are.

How do you promote fair recruitment?

We try to ensure that a wide pool of people apply for vacancies. Our recruitment process is transparent. The rate of pay is always specified in the job advertisement. We are flexible and creative in finding ways to enable candidates who may otherwise have been excluded to apply. We have accurate job descriptions, which are regularly reviewed. We avoid forcing staff to unnecessarily apply for roles in which they are already employed. We ensure that interview panels are balanced and fair. We anonymise applications and remove people from the recruitment panel who may have conflicts of interest. We are mindful of conscious and unconscious bias and may buy in expertise to ensure panels are diverse and make informed decisions. We offer unsuccessful interview candidates support and feedback, aware that this outcome may change their relationship with the organisation and take time to process.

Do you recognise the full cost of employment and equitably allocate resources for employee training and support?

We budget generously for high quality induction, training and support and have processes to ensure that the funding is allocated equitably and transparently. We provide mentoring, supervision or buddying and encourage employees to form peer support groups. We have an effective staff-development programme making use of both internal and external training and expertise.

Are staff development and team building events inclusive, worthwhile and enjoyable?

We invest in nurturing the workplace community and in building and strengthening collaborative relationships. We invite all levels of staff to be involved in planning and leading team events and ensure that staff can attend within their working hours. The timing, location and activities planned take account of diverse individual needs.

Do you support your employees to progress and achieve personal and career goals, as well as those which benefit the organisation?

All staff regularly review their progress towards their goals with the support of a trained and trusted colleague in a supportive, unhurried environment. This two-way discussion prioritises listening, care and encouragement and is also an opportunity for the employee to provide feedback to the employer. We respect confidentiality in this process. Records, which are accurate and not onerous, are securely kept. We invest in personalised learning plans that focus on the development needs of the individuals as well as the organisation. When colleagues progress to a new role in another organisation we view this as a success.

Do you support employees at the end of their employment, regardless of their reason for leaving their role?

When people progress within or beyond the organisation, are made redundant or retire, we always sensitively support them to prepare for this change, both emotionally and practically. We thank departing colleagues for their contribution and celebrate their achievements. We offer all those leaving an exit interview, taking the time and opportunity to listen and learn about what the organisation is doing well and where it might improve. The staff member who is leaving their role is consulted about who takes part in this conversation and, like any other formal meeting, can be accompanied by a friend or union representative. An accurate written record is agreed at the end of the interview and used to inform future practice.