

Introducing a performance management programme into a ballet company provided some unique challenges.

Performance management is a term open to interpretation, and it is generally agreed that there is no one way of managing performance; the approach depends on the context and culture of the organisation.

English National Ballet and JSB Training and Development have tested this adage to the full by creating and implementing a two-year programme in an organisation that had previously received little formal management training, and where such efforts are bound by constraints on time and resources – English National Ballet is a touring company and a registered charity.

It also encompasses a diverse range of talents. Among the 200 people who are based at its headquarters and studios in South Kensington, the roll call includes an orchestra, technical crew, dancers, management and administrative staff.

“All organisations have their challenges,” says HR director Philip Maddock. “But in an organisation that keeps regular hours, or the employees are in one place, it can be easier to structure a training and development programme.”

Tailored programme

Maddock researched the training needs not long after he joined the company three years ago. “There was a structural model for what we were going to deliver but I worked with JSB to tailor the thought processes and the programme,” he says.

The nuts and bolts of learning and development were put into place in September 2005, starting with a management development programme.

“At the first stage, once we had secured JSB, we had an idea of what we wanted to deliver, such as going back to basics on what is the manager’s role, and more detail on employment law, discipline and grievance,” says Maddock. Staff attended sessions every couple of months on areas such as management skills, interviewing skills and discipline and dismissal.

Such a continual flow of training was useful in maintaining the momentum, says Maddock, and in assessing what needed to be done next. And so the need for an emphasis on performance management appeared.

“We went through the training programme as we planned, but where it evolved and developed, and where individual managers needed the most help, was in performance management

Fine minds and pirouettes

The expectations of people coming into a ballet company are different from a few years ago

because historically that was something they had not done a lot of, so we targeted it a bit more,” he says.

The prospective pun around performance management, in an artistic organisation whose future relies on the quality of its performances to the public, is not lost on Maddock. He wanted to focus on how everyone, from the dancers to the administrative departments, did their jobs, but was also aware that a better mechanism needed to be in place for dancers who were perhaps more accustomed to spontaneous feedback during rehearsals.

“A lot of communication goes on in rehearsal, with technical terms, which

is different from asking ‘how are you doing?’ We introduced appraisal systems for administrative staff and would like to develop the system to dancers,” Maddock says.

This more formal approach is also in keeping with expectations. “The expectations of people coming into a ballet company are different from a few years ago,” he says. “People expect more in terms of feedback and coaching and development. A dancer wants to know what they need to do.”

Flexible approach

The appraisal scheme has been bolstered by a coaching programme. “We’ve done some coaching with management and non-management employees, including dancers. It’s in its infancy. Our approach is not as structured as some conventional approaches. We run two or three sessions and then re-group,” says Maddock.

He explains that the demands of touring mean that a structured approach might not work so he decided to run the coaching on an “as-needed basis”, but always with the same coach from JSB.

Maddock is keen to build on the momentum he has achieved so far. Work on diversity awareness has begun and will be followed by programmes on employee relations and more work on performance.

GETTING THE STYLE RIGHT

■ Training providers must deploy a range of delivery styles and methodologies to suit the client organisation, and this was especially true at English National Ballet, says JSB Training and Development management development director Diane Hodgson.

“We used different methodologies for participants, such as the dancers, whose primary professional modality is their bodies. For example, we used human sculptures to develop insight and awareness into key processes.”

As a trained psychologist, Hodgson was able to draw on the Gestalt theory that brings together the mind, emotions, body and spirit. It focuses on the here-and-now experience to enable people to develop and experiment with new ways of being and relating to others.

Hodgson believes that for any change to work it “has to be embodied to feel different and integrated”.