



CASE STUDY

Decision Maker:
Finance Controller

Industry sector:
Charity and education

Delivered to:
**Accounts, Admin,
Estates & Projects**

Discover Your Bounce®

For Business

National Autistic Society team away day creates a positive wellbeing focus



WORKPLACE ENVIRONMENT

The National Autistic Society (NAS) provides information, support and programmes for people with autism and Asperger syndrome. Director of Finance, Kelly Evans, looks after four teams - Accounts, Procurement, Project Management and Property Management for NAS - based in Bristol, London and dispersed in local communities all over the UK. There are 40 people in the team, who are geographically spread all over the country. With split locations, it's difficult to get them together for a team meeting, but they also have very diverse skill sets. For previous team away days, Kelly has focused on work-related themes, but it was always a challenge to devise activities which would be meaningful for everyone.

Despite their differences, everyone has been impacted by recent cuts in the third sector. With their day jobs becoming overwhelmingly busy, Kelly felt the single common theme for the team to address was stress. Instinctively, Kelly knew everyone would benefit from supporting each other and sharing best practice. She wanted to set up an away day to explore the team dynamics, their personal reactions to pressure and to learn some strategies to tackle daily stress.

APPROACH TO IMPROVE EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

To develop a plan to support the team's wellbeing, Kelly got her five direct reports involved to choose what would work best for their people. The leadership team agreed they wanted to focus on creating a supportive yet positive team culture. To kickstart the goal to help people feel better in their jobs, it was important for the team to have fun together. Kelly explored a shortlist of physical and mental wellbeing options – from clinical health experts and internal communications through to external training providers who could facilitate the away day. The team leaders chose the Engage! programme from Discover Your Bounce for Business because, when Nicky Marshall reviewed their needs, she offered so much flexibility for planning activities to suit the diverse team.

“Nicky pitched the day really well by starting with scientific facts about brain structure and the effects of stress on us. In truth the stress isn't going to go away. But after spending the away day with Discover Your Bounce for Business, the team are better equipped to handle the pressure and help each other through it. I was really proud, because I've never seen them behave so much as a team as they did that day and it has continued with the changes we have made.”

Kelly Evans, Director of Finance, National Autistic Society

Nicky set the agenda with Kelly to deliver level 1 of Engage! covering Mind, Body, Spirit and Vision in four sessions. The evening before the away day, both Nicky and Sharon Critchlow went along to meet everyone. The next morning Nicky began with scientific facts about brain structure and how stress hormones affect our mental and physical wellbeing. These helped the team understand the importance of the Engage! sessions and after each discussion, they worked through activities such as:

- Relaxation and breathing exercises to introduce meditation
- Mindfulness – including a walk outside
- Coping mechanisms to handle stressful days
- Setting goals and priorities – using the technique of identifying tasks as “rocks, gravel and sand”

The focus of the team away day was on having fun, trying out the exercises, working together and learning new skills to recognise and tackle stress. To ensure the day was a success, Sharon and Nicky observed the participants carefully, then adapted some activities to make them more relevant for the people in the room.

IMPACT ON THE TEAM CULTURE

As the day unfolded, everyone joined in proactively, starting conversations and sharing all sorts of ideas on how they could make changes at work. One facilities manager spoke with Kelly in the coffee break, confirming his initial scepticism about the focus on ‘hippy dippy’ mindfulness. In contrast, he afterwards said how much he had enjoyed the day and was planning how he could take some of the learnings back to his local team.

Since the away day, the team has introduced new tools into their weekly routines to ensure good communication with each other and share the load. Kelly has found it has been particularly helpful for prioritising work; shared goals are identified as:

- Working on the ‘Team Rocks’ i.e. the most important goals for the organisation. This is done as a weekly focus, with people taking individual responsibility to achieve them.
- Kelly’s office has become a ‘No Moan Zone’. This means the team have ten minutes to share a challenging issue out loud, but then propose a solution and receive support through this.
- Design of a ‘mindful walking route’ for any team member to take a break from their desk and purposely show the others when they might need some support. If someone is seen walking, they are asked whether they need a cup of tea, an ear to listen or some space.

IMPROVED TEAM PERFORMANCE

As a result of being more aware of different reactions to stress and individual learning styles, Kelly is able to tailor her approach to feedback and performance reviews. She has also found the Engage! tools useful in her leadership role among the directors in the National Autistic Society.

Anecdotally, Kelly reports, *“People in the team are still talking about the day, coming up with ideas and communicating better with each other. One plan is to have a ‘bring dogs to work’ day – as animals are recognised as a stress-reliever. With a closer team, we are all better equipped to handle unexpected queries coming in from other areas of the business, so they don’t add to the stress. I’ve shared some key learnings in my wider role as a leader; another director liked the ‘No Moan Zone’ idea so much, he introduced it for his team. Personally, it’s made me more aware of different people’s needs, like when I need to put points in writing or have an extra conversation to manage their workload.”*

