CIPD

Why BBC Studios wants to change the culture within the TV industry

The production company's HR team has taken a unique approach to preventing oppressive behaviours in television production

by Yoana Cholteeva 17 May 2023



Credit: Julian Dodd

From iconic dramas such as *Doctor Who*, *Silent Witness* and *Happy Valley* to *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Frozen Planet II*, BBC Studios – the BBC's commercial and production arm – has long been at the forefront of great entertainment across the UK and internationally. But what is it like to walk in the shoes of its people team?

Working for a global organisation that many look up to comes with great responsibility, global HR director Jabbar Sardar admits, “so setting the culture, values and behaviours that we expect is very important”. With such high expectations on all fronts, the HR team puts a lot of effort into attracting and retaining the best talent there is. But as the company employs a large number of freelancers that typically work on a production for a couple of months at a time before moving on, that can be tricky. Sardar says getting the culture right is imperative, as this will act as a recruitment and retention tool. “We want them to think of us as the destination for their skills,” he says.

Considering the firm has offices in 19 countries and employs people with various cultural backgrounds, rolling out a new policy can at times be “complex”, but Lisa Hardy, HR director of productions, emphasises the importance of “having a mind on the culture side of it”.

“So if I’m looking at something linked to EDI that’s UK based, it might not be the same for my colleagues in India or France,” she says, adding that the team always goes back to the questions: will the same policy work internationally? Or does it need some tweaks to fit just as well there?

But a huge part of the company’s culture, explains Sardar, is an expected level of respect and inclusivity, which is clearly laid out in The Pledge – a policy introduced in 2021 that involves most senior leaders on a production signing and sharing a statement with the crew at the start of a shoot, committing themselves to ensuring everyone in the team remains respectful and inclusive and adheres to the BBC’s values.

The idea stemmed from common challenges in the production industry, such as legacy ways of working and people not necessarily behaving in the right way. “We were wondering how to get people who are coming in and leaving

to understand how we expect them to behave and who's accountable for that. It was that simple thing – how we can ensure someone knows it's their responsibility," Hardy explains.

While The Pledge simply encourages wrongdoing to be reported to ensure everyone is properly looked after on set, Hardy admits that "when we first came up with the idea we were [unsure] how well it would go down". Indeed, putting the responsibility on to the most senior members is a big ask, so has it attracted any opposition? "The concept of The Pledge is someone signing a page to say they take responsibility to make this a good place to work… it's hard to challenge because if you say you don't want to sign it that probably doesn't sound great," Hardy muses. And in fact, the initiative has been widely embraced, with colleagues even filming themselves reading it out and feeling proud to be tasked with it.

She hopes that as The Pledge has now been introduced as standard across all BBC Studios production, and with some of the firm's shows going out to other broadcasters, it will be adopted by the wider industry. "It's a great opportunity for us… to make a real change around behaviour, culture and inclusion within the industry," says Hardy.

Billing great leadership as "a bit of a unique selling point for BBC Studios", the team decided to go one step further, introducing The Production Leaders Playbook, which aims to support leaders with basic management procedures such as recruitment, short-term contracts, whistleblowing practices and building constructive relationships.

And going the extra mile has paid off, with October 2022's staff survey results showing 82 per cent would recommend BBC Studios as a great place to work – a significant increase on 2017's 57 per cent. The vast majority (90 per cent) are proud to work for the firm, 82 per cent would recommend it to their friends and 88 per cent believe their manager genuinely cares about their wellbeing.

The stats make for positive reading and are a huge part of what Sardar and Hardy find so rewarding. Another is how embedded the HR team is in every aspect of the business. "I feel immensely proud when I see the closing credits [of our shows] because I know either myself or somebody within the wider team was involved in either recruiting or helping develop these people. It's a really proud moment," Sardar says.