

Maintaining a Culture of Care during a research animal facility closure

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Abstract

As animal facility closure is usually a protracted process because of the complexity of finishing or transitioning ongoing research in animals. As with any closure staff may be made redundant at the end of the process and this can be an emotional roller coaster and distraction. Maintaining positive morale contributes to successful outcomes. We explored ways of maintaining a Culture of Care through the closure of our animal facility.

Keywords: animal facility closure; psychological contract; culture of care; compassion; management

Introduction

The term ‘psychological contract’ is used to describe an individuals’ expectations, beliefs, ambitions and obligations in relation to their employment.^{1,2} Employees perceptions of their employers’ obligations are often set from observation of actions rather than solely through written policy. For example, being aware that there are managers that allow staff to finish early or who grant flexible working requests may lead to the individual expecting the same from their own manager. Expectations can also be set in performance and development reviews, or through company values. The quality of the psychological contract and relationship between the employee and the employer which is usually enacted through local line managers influences day to day behaviour and commitment of staff. At AstraZeneca one of our company values is ‘do the right thing’ and this can support and underpin the approach to redundancy.

Job security is an area that is often covered by a psychological contract and therefore redundancy can be seen as a breach of the psychological contract which can lead to morale issues and decreased staff commitment and engagement.

When a decision is made by an organisation to close an animal research facility this is rarely completed quickly because of the complexities of either finishing or transferring important and costly animal research. Such facility closures are often seen as high risk with concerns around increased welfare or compliance issues if staff morale is low. Therefore maintaining staff commitment and engagement through a lengthy closure process is particularly important when it involves an animal facility.

We share our experiences of closing an animal facility over the period of a year. Negative consequences can be avoided through fairness and maintaining a Culture of Care through the exit process.

Exit timeline

Our exit timeline is illustrated in Figure 1. Our staff were split across the Animal Sciences and Technologies and Oncology research teams. Staff were fully aware the year before the exit process started that the facility would be closing. In the year of exit the animal studies scaled down from 100% to zero from January to September. During this period notice was served for most staff and the majority finished work at the end of September. The final decommissioning and safe handover team consisted of 6 people and that stage of the work was completed during October to December.

Listening to staff

At the beginning of our exit, we asked the teams how they felt about the exit process, what support they were interested in and how they would like to be remembered. Table 1 captures the key themes.

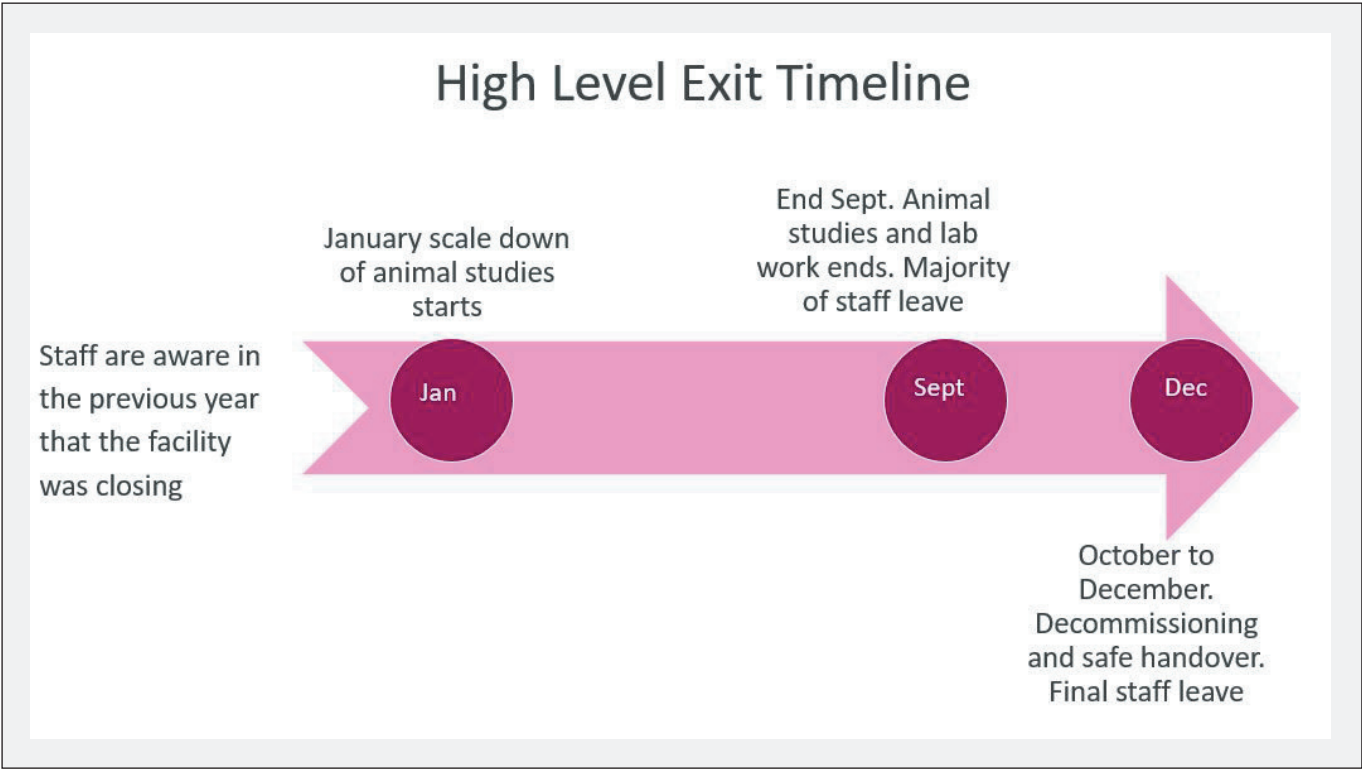


Figure 1. High level illustration of exit timeline.

Communication

Team meetings were held regularly to update staff on the transition timelines. Corporate messages were always reviewed and considered from a local perspective so that staff sensitivities around losing their jobs were taken into account. Having regular and clear communication on the progress of the transition timelines meant we could talk with every individual member of staff to understand their aspirations so we could do our upmost to support their individual preferences (e.g. found a new job want to leave early, want to retire or happy to stay to the end) whilst maintaining delivery of studies through the transition.

We discussed the potential impact on morale at our AWERB and how we could provide additional communication routes for issues during the transition. We set up a specific Culture of Care team with a point of contact outside of the exit teams in order to provide an additional anonymous feedback route to managers, named roles and the AWERB.

Support

In a redundancy situation it is important to support staff and equip them for future roles. We spoke to every member of staff and ensured each one of them was supported in a personal development activity. This included releasing time to work in another team one day a week and allowing time for staff to attend courses

Communication	Clear and up to date communication on transition timelines.
Support	General careers support (CV, interview skills), finance workshop, continued development opportunities.
Leaving a legacy	Leave a Legacy: Sharing resources/ways of working/ information across sites e.g. surgical resource, training policy, DOPS, Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body ways of working, learning and observations log processes, videos, 3Rs initiatives.
Recognition	Recognition of the role of animals in successful development of medicines from our site. Some form of presentation or booklet on the project achievements of the teams.
Celebration	Celebration meal or party.

Table 1. Staff feedback on what they wanted during the exit process.

(see section on training, reassessment and development opportunities).

With the input of our HR department, we arranged for general support to be provided through workshops on writing CVs, interview skills and managing finances. Managers provided additional support by reviewing CVs and conducting practice interviews with staff.

We also recognised the typical change stages such as denial. Space was given and a place to talk through, collectively or individually to ensure everyone was looked after on their own individual progression through the exit.

Leaving a legacy

Significant effort was made to support leaving a legacy for other sites within AstraZeneca. For example the learning from observations and events log and process initiated at our site³ was developed and launched globally across the animal facilities in AstraZeneca.

Presentations were given by the Named Animal Care and Welfare Officer (NACWO) and a cross-site NACWO group was established to share learnings from our site. The NACWO also set up shared folders where photos and videos of welfare observations were carefully catalogued and curated for use at other sites. Members of the AWERB contributed to developing stories for a manuscript.

Recognition

Whilst staff are in an exit process, care should be shown by continuing to recognise staff for their achievements and contributions. For many staff the continued recognition in all of its formats created a sense of purpose and engagement despite being in the process of transitioning the animal research and closing the facility. We continued to recognise staff for example, through AWERB awards for small cage-side improvements. We promoted the work of our AWERB for example through writing a blog for the NC3Rs website⁴ and this work also won the Culture of Care award in the internal Global 3Rs, Openness and Culture of Care awards.⁵ When we started our last study members of the AstraZeneca Senior Executive Team sent thank you emails that were shared with the teams.

We conducted our final AWERB annual retrospective review which was attended by all of our technical and research staff and we deliberately used this review as the opportunity for recognition across the establishment. We chose to look back over the last five years at: project, 3Rs, Culture of Care and Openness successes. Much of this was done in a fun and entertaining way and the event allowed the staff to

reflect on their many achievements. It was an emotional event but positively these emotions were largely of pride and a sense of significant contribution. We thanked our AWERB members by producing a memory book each with an individual inscription (Figure 2).

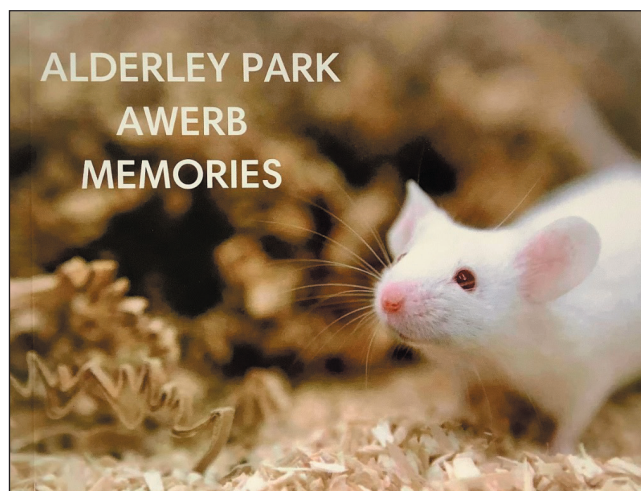


Figure 2. Front Cover of AWERB memory book.

Celebration

We worked with senior managers to organise a celebratory leaving meal and presentation. We were fortunate that COVID-19 restrictions had eased at this point. None the less a formal risk assessment was conducted and the whole evening was developed with staff safety in mind (pre-event testing, social distancing etc). This event included in person reflections and thank-you's from the senior leaders of the functions that also included photographs the teams had taken over the years. We also arranged for videos to be presented by members of the AstraZeneca Senior Executive Team, who could not attend in person, thanking staff for their contributions to the oncology pipeline, 3Rs and Culture of Care. The evening included a meal and fun quiz. Staff were presented with a memento which was a glass mouse (Figure 3) and a specially designed thank you postcard (Figure 4).

In listening to our staff we were able to honour the psychological contract of communication, support, legacy, recognition and celebration during the exit (Figure 5).

Additional activities supporting a Culture of Care

Prioritising training, reassessment and development opportunities

Training and development allows for the acquisition of new skills and knowledge helps boost confidence when looking for new roles. To support staff in finding new



Figure 3. Glass mouse memento for staff.

jobs we used two approaches one focussed on up-to-date training and assessment records and the second focussed on new development opportunities.

We had individual discussions with staff and asked them to identify their prioritised opportunities for continued or new development both within the animal research field and outside of it. Areas supported in the final year across the team included:

- Attending courses both internally and externally e.g. internal Safety, Health and Environment (SHE) courses such as mental health first aider, radiation safety, risk assessment. NACWO course, pain and severity assessment courses.
- Providing time for staff to gain new qualifications e.g. NEBOSH, project management, computer skills, IAT level 3.
- Facilitating time for staff to learn new skills from other departments e.g. *in vitro* laboratory skills in cell culture, regulatory safety documentation.



Figure 4. Thank you postcard.



Figure 5. Exit contract.

In addition, the Named Training and Competency Officer (NCO) and assessors conducted as many individual assessments of skills as possible during the transition period ensuring that all skills were maintained until the last mouse left the building and that all staff moving on to animal research roles elsewhere had up to date assessments. 4 years ago we introduced a central and easy to use electronic system for personal licence holders (PIL) to add their Standard Condition 20 records and as staff started to leave the NCO produced individual training files for them which included evidence of modular training, up to date assessments and their Standard Condition 20 records. These individual files were compiled so that company specific information was removed making them easily transferable to other establishments. Providing this support to staff meant that they did not need to worry about sorting out their Training and Standard Condition 20 records allowing them time to focus on finding other roles. Feedback was that these files helped speed up induction at the new facilities.

Team

In addition to actively listening and supporting staff in the areas they highlighted, we also brought the teams together by arranging events throughout the year-long exit process, for example a team fund raising walking and running event through February to raise money for charity, team lunches, quizzes, and an escape room challenge.

Decommissioning

The final safe handover of the building and decommissioning phase was carried out by just six members of staff across the Animal Science and Technologies and the Oncology research teams. We jointly completed a safe exit risk assessment. Decommissioning or handing over an animal facility is a complex logistical task, for example, the following areas: safe equipment and consumable moves, disposal of chemicals, disposing of controlled drugs and their records, managing switch off of IT infrastructure and security access, archiving appropriate records for the purposes of complying with the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 as well as ensuring study and project information is all stored appropriately. The team took a great sense of pride in ensuring that all stock could be repurposed for example if not across other AstraZeneca sites then with other companies or collaborators on site, or with local schools (e.g. spare stationery stocks).

Providing the environment for care and self-care

It is widely understood that a positive Culture of Care that supports staff can also lead to good animal welfare and care.⁶ This is equally (if not more) important during a significant time of change such as the closure of the facility and redundancy when animal work is still being conducted through the wind-down. As managers

we prepared for this early on and actively and regularly gave permission and time for all of our staff to focus on themselves as well as supporting their colleagues. It was important that staff were able to talk, reflect on and feel their emotions. We encouraged self-care and access to company resources for both mental and physical health.

Learning

Although we had processes in place for equipment and consumables, what we lacked was a robust system for ensuring that unused equipment or consumables no longer required were disposed of or re-purposed when they could be of use to others. We dealt with this at the time of exit however a defined process and up to date inventory would have helped.

We would recommend that any establishment has an annual deep clean of cupboards in offices to ensure all paperwork or belongings have been archived or disposed of correctly. For example, we found belongings in the back of cupboards from people who had left a number of years earlier.

Discussion

Exiting a long-standing animal research facility is usually a protracted process and has the potential to be a highly emotional and negative experience without providing the environment that allows staff to thrive and feel cared for during the exit process. For these reasons this situation is also often considered at higher risk of compliance issues. Listening to your staff in order to build new psychological contracts for the exit process allows managers to provide clarity, tailored support and the care that is needed to ensure that staff can continue to feel engaged and recognised, to be reassured they will be supported to find new roles and to leave the organisation in a way that is positive with a sense of achievement. We have shared our approach to managing the exit of our facility and the focus on Culture of Care was the primary driver during our exit. Managers and leaders (e.g. Named Roles) in this situation may feel weighed down caring for others and therefore it is equally important that the aspects discussed are applied to these individuals too. As a manager knowing that the environment has been focussed on support and care and that staff have had the best opportunities to find new roles can lead to a tremendous amount of satisfaction that can provide energy and sustain you through.

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The authors declare there is no primary data associated with this publication.

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