Leadership in healthcare: new challenges need new competencies

... so how do we develop them?

Cranfield Healthcare Management Group
Research Briefing 15

How do they manage?
a study of the realities of middle and front line management work in healthcare

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The new leadership roles

If you have a leadership role, or if your clinical or medical role is combined with leadership responsibilities, then reflect on these questions. Just indicate ‘yes that’s my experience’, or ‘no, that’s not my experience’, for each of these statements:

1. I have to influence people who are not my direct reports.
2. Leadership means being visionary and charismatic, but that isn’t how I think of my role.
3. It’s not clear who are ‘the leaders’ in this organization; obviously the most senior people are, but there are lots of others who are not simply ‘the followers’.
4. It’s difficult to get people to work together on new initiatives that cross different parts of the organization because there are no mechanisms or rewards for this.
5. I have a leadership role in which our team has to coordinate with and provide a joined up service with other professions.
6. I could be better in my leadership role if I had contributed to shaping the strategy that I have to communicate to others.
7. We expect people to act as leaders even if they have no formal leadership role, if they have the expertise and experience to take a new initiative forward.
8. People don’t always believe they have the authority to carry out the work they are responsible for leading.

If you said ‘yes’ to half or more of these statements, then you are working with the new leadership challenges of complex organizations - where top-down leadership and personal competencies are not enough. Well-led organizations need individual and organizational leadership capabilities. This means that we have to re-think our traditional ideas about leaders and leadership.

Looking at leadership solely in terms of individuals at or near the top of an organization may not give a complete picture. Leadership behaviours are more likely to be shared with and distributed across many other roles and levels of the organization structure.

I don’t think you did all this without your middle managers taking a lead too

Many critical leadership issues cannot be addressed by single leaders, however senior, visionary and charismatic. This applies in particular to challenges that require:

- collaboration rather than competition among senior business unit managers
- changes involving many different teams or units
- breaking down traditional ‘silos thinking’
- adopting cross-organization processes
Organizational leadership capacity is enhanced when the executive team is able to enact leadership effectively as a unit; when interdependent groups can identify an emerging organizational problem and pull together to deal with it; when leaders and group members in various parts of the organization readily connect with each other about interdependent work, shared challenges or shared expertise and when individuals and groups engage in dialogue with one another rather than act in isolation (Van Velsor and McCauley, 2004, p.19).

Most people think of leadership as individual competence: leaders are people with a vision and strategy, who cascade goals and targets down the organization and get commitment to these by having the right leadership style. This leads to leadership development as fixing leaders’ ‘deficits’ – adding new competencies, reducing poor interpersonal habits, helping leaders gain confidence in their leadership capabilities, and increasing personal insight and awareness. Of course, none of us want to work for an incompetent leader, and so all of this is important development for leadership roles. This is necessary, but not sufficient.

By contrast, organizational leadership requires: widespread agreement on goals, aims, and mission; the organization and coordination of knowledge and work; and an environment in which people want and feel able to contribute to the organization’s purpose because they have helped to shape it. Middle managers play key leadership roles in this context.

| Leadership | creates purpose and | Direction |
| Leadership | ensures the organization has | Alignment |
| Leadership | engages people’s | Commitment |

How to develop leadership capacity?

- Use **collaborative learning** which brings leaders who need to work together to learn together
- Help leaders explore the idea of **leadership as ‘we’**, not just the CEO/executive team
- Include **live projects** as key vehicles for learning, involving people working across different levels in the organization and across professions and other boundaries
- Provide a **safe space** where deeply held assumptions can be challenged
- Embed **whole organization learning**, in terms of changed practices and ways of working, rather than reviewing a development programme just in terms of what individuals feel they learned

**Why don’t we do this more often?**

**First**, people like to have individual deficits fixed. This is easy compared with changing the system. And developing individuals is more convenient from a corporate perspective.

**Second**, the individualistic view of leadership is not only pervasive, but it sits well with our needs in times of difficulty - the fantasy of the individual who can sort it all out or be blamed when it all goes wrong is very attractive.

**Third**, we seem to be tied firmly to the concept of individual accountability, for personal, cultural and legal reasons, although we know that the real successes (and disasters) are created by collaborations and systems and not by lone individuals.
Effective organizational leadership involves:

- Loosening control without losing control
- Showing a strong hand in order to avoid endless meetings and to ensure activities align with the strategy
- Collaborating at the top, modelling the way
- Making collaboration the norm through:
  - joint responsibilities
  - recognizing the importance of leading from the middle
  - actively connecting people across the organization
  - giving leaders at all levels clear authority to act

If you have a view on any these issues, please let us know.

Key sources


The research

This study is based on interviews and focus groups with middle and senior managers, on a management survey, and on case studies exploring how changes are managed in the aftermath of serious incidents.

Participating trusts

- Bedford Hospital NHS Trust
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