



NHS North West Leadership Academy: supporting senior leaders through change

Background: the need for strong leadership through change

The NHS North West Leadership Academy was founded by the area's Strategic Health Authority (SHA) as a 'Centre for Excellence' in senior leadership and strategy development. Its aim is to support the region's senior leaders and their Boards to be the best they can be, delivering the most effective healthcare to their local populations. It provides a wide range of leadership programmes and development opportunities aimed at supporting individual leadership development, Board development and talent management, as well as access to bespoke, high-quality leadership tools and resources to support innovation and thought leadership.

Having already designed two programmes targeted at equipping HR Directors and Directors of Nursing with a wide range of essential skills, knowledge and behaviours, the SHA identified the need for a similar development programme for Chief Operating Officers (COOs), responsible for delivering the region's Primary Care services.

Originally intended to help COOs to address the challenges of fully embedding a patient-centred approach aligned to the NHS's World Class Commissioning agenda, the needs of the target audience radically changed with the introduction of a new NHS Operating Framework. This would ultimately involve the re-structuring of the 24-strong PCT network, and would lead to major changes to the Chief Operating Officer role. It became apparent that the proposed development approach would need to be quickly revised to respond to the new and pressing need to support a group of key managers who were not only directly affected by the change, but were also being asked to take the lead in implementing it.

"Our relationship with OPP and their ability to adapt and flex their approach was invaluable in this particular situation. What we originally commissioned changed quickly and the 'Transforming Community Services' landscape and the COO role in relation to the future structures and services became very ambiguous. Rather than focusing on a defined future role it was necessary to consider the development offer on a much more individual basis, assisting those in COO roles to face the future with enhanced self-knowledge and enabling them to make the best choices for themselves going forward. OPP undertook this with great skill and sensitivity, both in the design and the delivery of the programme."

Deborah Arnot, Deputy Director of the NHS North West Leadership Academy

Thinking on our feet

This rapidly shifting environment presented OPP with a number of challenges. Our first task was to predict and encapsulate the new operating context. The project commenced with the design of a bespoke competency set which reflected the changing nature of primary care leadership across the NHS, and the key skills required to transform local services. As the work progressed it became clear that any development intervention needed to fully acknowledge the sensitivities surrounding the regional restructure and address any feelings of anxiety and uncertainty that participants had about their future. The Leadership Academy was keen for COOs to experience the programme as a source of vital individual support during a time of change and great stress – as well as an opportunity to explore their skills as transformative leaders, irrespective of the form this might take in the future.

In order to achieve this, OPP offered a development centre targeted at addressing individual development goals in an informal and supportive but constructively challenging setting. It was imperative that the 'look and feel' of the event reflected its aims, and so OPP provided a two-day residential programme that also allowed time for relaxation and individual reflection.

The solution

In order to accommodate the needs of participants and the commissioning client, OPP's solution had to seamlessly combine a practical and objective focus on current performance with an exploration of each individual's goals and future career choices. Throughout, there was less emphasis on testing and benchmarking, and more focus on 'in the moment' feedback, personal discovery, individual coaching and goal setting. All of the data gathered was kept entirely confidential and used purely for the purpose of enhancing self-awareness.

Day One: Discovery and exploration

The first day saw a stimulating programme of workplace simulations, including an in-tray exercise and two problem-solving role plays. These were framed by sessions looking at the psychological concept of 'self-talk', and its impact on leadership behaviour. This concept rests on the premise that performance can be enhanced or restricted by a naturally occurring internal monologue built around self-concepts, assumptions and pre-conceptions. By reducing the interference from negative or inaccurate self-perceptions, an individual can unlock their potential and improve their performance:

$$\text{Potential} - \text{Interference} = \text{Performance}$$

Timothy Gallwey, The Inner Game of Work, Orion, 2000

Throughout Day One, OPP's consultants facilitated touch-base coaching sessions that reviewed key themes from the day's activities, as well as the impact of any unhelpful 'self talk', providing a basis for the following day's work.

Day Two: Development and goal setting

The second day consisted of an in-depth 16PF® feedback session, and a three-hour one-to-one coaching session, which was structured around the competency set that OPP had designed. This provided the opportunity to explore the previous day's activities, drawing out any links with psychometric data, key competencies, 'self talk' themes and self-evaluations. Each coaching session concluded with goal setting and action planning, assisting participants to develop some concrete plans for the future. Based on the information gathered during the event, a confidential individual feedback report was subsequently drafted for each participant by OPP's team of occupational psychologists.

Results and next steps

Feedback from the participants who attended the development was very positive, with 80% of participants stating that the event would have a positive impact on their performance at work, all participants highly rating the levels of self-awareness it had helped them achieve, and 100% saying that they will use what they have learned back in the workplace "frequently".

When asked what they had learnt from the programme, participants expressed that OPP's work had made them open to new ideas about their own success:

- "I have learned that I have a lot to learn! The only person stopping me achieving and succeeding is me!"
- "It was time away from work to really explore leadership; it was challenging and stretching, and the allocation of a coach to work with was great!"

John Harrop of Manchester Community Health (part of NHS Manchester) participated in the programme and comments: *"It can be un-nerving to put oneself to the test in the present climate, and the programme fully recognised this in its development structure and execution. I found it to be different, stimulating and thoroughly enjoyable, as it presented challenges that were identifiable with a day-to-day reality but framed through role play and other exercises in a refreshing way. The psychometric tests and other outputs were coordinated through the Academy in a way that worked almost on a 'need to know' basis, and this kept the ownership and 'power' with the individual. Overall, a bespoke programme for COOs well designed and executed."*

Participants typically went away from the programme with more concrete plans for 'next steps', as well as a clearer idea about how to re-shape their career path. Crucially, the programme gave them a sense of empowerment, helping participants to re-frame the challenges faced and tackle their current situation with renewed strength and energy.

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t: +44 (0) 1865 404500 e: enquiry@opp.com www.opp.com