Crafting NHS leaders for the future

As health provision undergoes massive and turbulent change, the NHS needs leaders who are equipped to deal with the new health landscape and can embrace and inspire new ways of working.

The client challenge

The NHS in England is a huge, complex service, with 1.3 million people working across 500 organisations. The passing of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 and the formation of Clinical Commissioning Groups and Health and Wellbeing Boards are bringing massive upheaval and demanding new capabilities from leaders.

Past senior leadership approaches have been characterised by top-down control. Future NHS leadership will be more collaborative and facilitating, fostering closer ties with local government and other public services, and together doing more with less. The previous philosophy of targets will make way for a future defined by outcomes, public engagement and delivery of value. The NHS wanted a robust and credible way of measuring and benchmarking its top talent before embarking on development activities to ensure they had the right leadership behaviours and impact to drive an organisation fit for a dramatically different future.

The project had to provide data against a number of dimensions that together gave a full picture of people’s leadership and how they impacted on performance of their organisations. It needed to establish how people functioned in the old environment versus what was required in future and assess their ability to change and flex.

Director of NHS Top Leaders Karen Lynas chose Hay Group for our “independence and credibility”, and our “rich database of executives from diverse industries”. “We wanted to work with an organisation that had an international understanding of what differentiates good executive behaviours from exceptional executive behaviours. Hay Group has that experience and track record, and brings credibility to our programme. Using Hay Group gives participants the confidence that the diagnostic is robust, rigorous and meaningful.”

Hay Group helped the NHS and its senior leaders to gain a clear understanding of their capabilities and competencies, the working climates they create and their impact on the performance of their staff and the organisations they work for.
First, we needed to establish a firm benchmark for ‘what good looks like’ for the leadership requirements of the new NHS and identify competencies to match.

We then put together an innovative, robust, time-light yet powerful diagnostic to give a clear picture of leaders’ abilities, and how to get them where they need to be.

Participants then attended a profiling day – an in-depth context setting interview, a briefing about their data and a coaching and career planning session. We ran profiling days across the country in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol and Leeds.

In return for their time and input, each participant received two summary reports: a single comprehensive document summarising their data, strengths and areas for development and a briefer ‘passport’ report for applying for new roles.

Many senior leaders had experienced leadership development before – by many different providers – and there was a high degree of cynicism about leadership programmes and diagnostic tools. So inspiring the top talent to undertake this was crucial.

We strongly encouraged the NHS chief executive, Sir David Nicholson, and his direct leadership team to complete the diagnostic. He became a strong advocate, openly supportive of its usefulness in helping to understand leadership styles and impact.

At a recent public conference, he described how leaders need to develop the flexibility to use different ways of working in different contexts:

“We need a series of interventions to shift our ability to lead. The prize is integrated care for our communities”

David Nicholson, NHS chief executive

That profiling day is the reason that I am now in this job. It came up and I would not previously have considered it – but I thought about my session and challenged myself to go for it.

Former Chief Executive of a Mental Health Trust
Yesterday was probably the first time that I’ve been through such an intensive, well-structured approach to personal development and I found the whole approach very worthwhile. The real work starts now!

Director of Finance, Mental Health NHS Trust

The results

NHS Top Leaders has been the most significant leadership assessment and development programme in the history of the NHS – offering quality, rigour and innovation.

Some 750 people have been through the diagnostic from October 2010 to November 2012 and more than 42,000 surveys launched.

For the first time, the NHS has a macro picture of its strengths versus global benchmarks, enabling it to create a narrative about the behavioural and cultural changes needed and to plan for specific development of the most important leadership cadre. The NHS Leadership Academy has powerful insights on trends, themes, strengths and gaps across its senior leaders whether by profession, geography or role.

A wide variety of people across the NHS have participated, from medical and nursing directors to finance heads and chief executives. Some are now completing the diagnostic again to see whether they have improved. Others have requested that their entire executive team goes through it so they can discuss their collective impact.

Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with an outstanding 96 per cent of participants rating the programme good or excellent, and describing the project as “illuminating and insightful”, “extraordinarily useful in affirming my development needs”, “highlighting where I’m going wrong and where to go next”. Many participants who were initially reluctant to take part have transformed their opinion. One said: “It was a really valuable opportunity to take the time to consider what makes an effective leader and to be able to undertake this intensive level of self-scrutiny”.

Leaders are now more aware of their impact on the performance of those around them, reflecting on their personal practice and taking responsibility for the working climate they create.

The diagnostic has also opened up conversations about what leadership is needed and stimulated a much broader debate about required change. There is recognition of how leaders need to work differently and foster strengths around collaboration, engagement and influence.
Client testimonials

“The whole experience has been really positive: Hay Group understands their business very well – but ours too, so I didn’t need to spend crucial time explaining the context we operate in. They translated their language really well for us. They challenged our assumptions and pushed us on the design to create something innovative. At the beginning, we had no idea whether we’d end up doing 12 diagnostics or 2000; they were able to scale up at pace without compromising the consistently high quality of the feedback. The data has been really strong and rigorous and has defined decisions we’ve made about our programme of development interventions. Facilitators have been high quality, handling conversations with real sensitivity: they haven’t taken people’s time or confidence lightly. They have over-delivered on quality and the experience has been much more than we ever thought and has stimulated conversations across the whole NHS leadership community.”

Karen Lynas, Interim Deputy Managing Director, The Leadership Academy (Director of the NHS Top Leaders Programme)

“I’ve worked in leadership development for 10–15 years and set up many programmes myself. It’s a complicated world with thousands of tools. This project has opened my eyes to the strength of using one standard across this scale and comparing results with Hay Group’s global database has made this diagnostic incredibly powerful. Consistency across the professions and different backgrounds was always important and this project put an end to segregation. And let’s not stop there. I’d be excited to offer the diagnostic more broadly: to get it accepted across the four home nations and across all grades of leaders. I’m absolutely convinced that leadership saves lives. But there is a massive ignorance around leadership styles and how they impact on results. This diagnostic has opened up the conversation. We now have evidence that one leadership style will not sustain you. It’s incontrovertible that people need to flex.”

Peter Lees, Founding Director, Faculty of Medical Leadership and Management (Former Medical director of NHS Top Leaders)

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