



Values Based Leadership

Developing Inspirational Leaders

Interview with Aongus McGrane Head of Learning & Organisational Development NHS Blood and Transplant by John Frost



Aongus McGrane

John

What was the drive to take a values-based approach at the National Blood and Transplant Service?

Aongus

Going back a number of years we had lots of different logos, for example at one stage we were called 'The National Blood Service' and you'll still find staff that have been around a long time referring to The National Blood Service. What we wanted was for the bulk of our organisation to have a sense of one identity whilst also retaining individual elements or characteristics, in terms of customer service, because for some parts of the business it suits to have a different brand or logo – a sub brand. So we did a really big piece of work about 2 years ago where we spoke to our staff, donors and customers and did some really in depth research with them. We did this through

interviews and focus groups and we asked them to think about what our brand was. An external agency facilitated this for us and we showed them brands, we showed them what we were about and asked them to describe what we were about. After a very in depth analysis of the results we came up with three values on which to base our organisation and they are: Care, Expert and Quality.

John

So the drive then was more around establishing the brand and establishing one approach and one identity. In terms of leadership, what role did the senior leadership team play in developing that approach?

Aongus

One of the big drivers for us in the last number of years was the NHS leadership framework. We introduced tools such as 360 feedback and based all our assessments and development centres on that framework. We began to use that language of leadership in terms of behaviours and what we wanted to see from leaders, so we began to get a common language among the leadership team. And from that we rolled out the three values so the leadership team are very much on board with this and have begun to understand the language of leadership and what it actually looks like. And as a result we have a huge number of programmes and development opportunities in place for them to be able to lead the organisation forward.



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And what about from your own perspective as a leader, what effective approaches have you learnt along the way?

Aongus

For me, getting senior leaders speaking to each other has been absolutely essential. It provides opportunities for networking, to break down those silos and to get people to understand what other parts of the organisation do. In addition, encouraging people to look outside the organisation has been effective. They were already doing this in terms of their technical skills; some of the best medical people in the world work for us and they were very good at looking outside the organisation when it came to research and linking with their universities, but we also encouraged them to look outside in terms of organisational development. So, a good example of this is that the facilities team go off site once every 6 or 12 months to meet with another team and take some learning from it. Last year they went to Buckingham palace and met the facilities team there, took some learning from it and they reciprocated that for the staff.

John

That's really interesting not least because you're bringing the values to life for them without thrusting the values mantra down their necks. You're letting people play with it and have fun with the ideas, give them some motivation around it.

Aongus

It brings values to life. One of the things we were determined not to do was have a set of values just stuck on the wall because that happened before we had a proper organisational development stream within the organisation. I'm not saying it didn't have some benefit, but in the past we have

cards saying our values are commitment etc we got people to carry cards around. Which they are small tools but unless something real happens they are just like having posters on the wall.

John

That's really exciting as an idea and I can see how the organisational development work links with the leadership vision and acknowledging you have to put some time, effort and money into it.

Aongus

What I will say is that we have a Chief Executive who really took forward the OD agenda. She brought in key experts to drive the OD in the organisation and as a result the funding has remained good for us. We also do a lot of things that are fairly cost neutral because we find some of the most effective ideas are simple. One example is a parallel executive team made up of people who are almost ready to progress to the next level within the organisation. We are trying to prepare people to take on those bigger roles so we run a parallel executive team, a group of assistant directors who come together, receive all the board papers and go through them as a full board. A team observe them, observe their behaviours and interventions and the parallel executive team make decisions as if they are executives. The next day they attend a full executive meeting giving them the opportunity to see what the real decisions were. The nice part of it is at the end of the second day the executives ask what conclusions were made the day before, so it helps them learn too.

It takes tremendous trust and courage from your leadership team, it's about the executive directors driving it from the top and for them to commit to it, I think, is a tremendous accolade to them about how committed they are.