

A multilayered approach to build a sustainable coaching culture

Mid Cheshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust multi-pronged coaching initiative was heralded as ground-breaking within the NHS when it launched because of the extent of its ambition and reach. It sought to penetrate multiple layers of the organisation, transforming employees' behaviour, language and thinking, and ultimately impacting on patient care.

The Trust brought in i-coach academy at the end of 2009 to help it design and implement the initiative, which started in March the following year. It included an internal coach pool of staff from all backgrounds and grades across the organisation offering both individual 1-2-1 coaching and a series of short "Coaching Essentials for Manager Programmes". Coaching modules were included within leadership development programmes to encourage informal coaching-style conversations at many levels of the organisation, including with patients. Three years on, the Trust is well on its way to embedding a sustainable coaching culture and is seeing a range of benefits, including improvements to patient care and quality of experience.

Objectives

Former chief executive Phil Morley believed the way to improve patient care was to evoke excellence within leaders and the rest of the 3,500-strong workforce through coaching.

The multi-layered approach aimed to develop leaders who were more 'fit-for-purpose': more able to be flexible, think more strategically, to empower others to think for themselves, and to be able to take calculated risks. It sought to improve succession planning, to boost individual and team effectiveness, improving staff satisfaction and engagement and thus the quality of patients' experience.

Phil explained his intent: "I was trying to build a new language for the leaders. It was about evoking peer excellence, not dealing with poor performance. It was about identifying skills and potential rather than fixing broken people."

Caroline Horner, director of i-coach adds, "The role of these types of interventions is to shift the type and level of conversation across the organisation, whether with patients, clinicians or managers so that the workforce becomes more engaged, resilient and focused to innovate and deliver effective and compassionate patient care." In addition to helping the Trust design its coaching



Caroline Horner
Director i-coach academy

strategy and framework, i-coach partnered with the Trust's organisation development team to educate and accredit a pool of internal coaches and to design and facilitate learning programmes which enable the adoption of a coaching mindset and core coaching skills. Most recently i-coach facilitated a programme to extend the repertoire of some of the internal coaching pool to offer team coaching.



Phil Morley
former Chief Executive
Mid Cheshire Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

“Not everybody has to be a coach but leaders all have to be able to have coaching-style conversations. These could be five minutes around the kettle in the kitchen”

*Phil Morley, former Chief Executive
Mid Cheshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust*

The Context

Initially the organisation was deemed to be a poor performer, quite entrenched in its ways, not open to external experiences or scrutiny. It was soon clear that a more transformational leadership style was going to be required, particularly given the forthcoming far-reaching changes in the NHS. The senior leadership team wanted to embed a way of intervening in the organisation which could be described as positive, appreciative and collaborative, which got the best out of people, and which was sustainable, and not just about giving people

answers. It was felt that coaching was the obvious way to achieve this.

Although there was a strong sense of some of the changes ahead, the backdrop at the time in the NHS was very different to today's. At the same time, although resourcing was less of an issue, there was less openness to coaching, particularly at senior executive level. “As a chief executive, I would be in meetings and say I was having coaching and people would do a double-take, it used to be [seen as] therapy...now people are saying [coaching] is the right thing to do. It's a much more expected part of what a leader is,” says Phil.

One of the challenges in seeking to embed a coaching culture within the healthcare environment is an expectation that its professionals be experts. In organisations like this, clinicians are used to diagnosis so they have many of the listening skills they need, but their way of working means they often wanted to jump into a solution. Two-thirds of the NHS' budget is spent on long-term conditions – 60% of which are self-induced – so the implications of encouraging patients to take more responsibility for their illnesses are huge.

The Trust's approach was about getting doctors to change from presenting themselves as having all the answers, to having better dialogue with patients, saying ‘you have the power about how you deal with your long-term illness’. Coaching could not just be a staff-on-staff intervention.

In the current climate, coaching appears to be even more valuable, with leaders saying that it's vital in a chaotic work environment, because they need to be able to talk to someone else who understands the processes and can help them consciously reflect.

Meanwhile, in the current climate, coaching is even more needed. “(Leaders) absolutely need coaching more than ever in times of chaos to help them consciously reflect with someone else who can pick up the metaphors and paradigms,” says Phil.



Lisa Gresty
Head of OD and Learning
Mid Cheshire Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Success factors

The 'right' partner, a shared philosophy and a multi-level approach

i-coach's approach to introduce coaching at multiple levels in the organisation and through different 'fit-for-purpose' methods helped to give the Trust the maximum chance of success ensuring a self-reinforcing framework. Lisa Gresty, Head of OD and Learning, describes the unwavering support of i-coach as a "thinking partner" as key, acknowledging "We wouldn't be where we are without i-coach".

The Trust invited tenders from a number of organisations before choosing i-coach. "i-coach really stood out in terms of their approach as they asked questions and sought to understand our organisation and objectives offering an approach which not only tailored programmes to our specific needs but which actively included and partnered with our team, building our capability through the process."

Senior level buy-in

Caroline highlighted the importance of engaging top leaders early on and the first session focused on supporting the senior leadership to understand their role in creating the environment for coaching to thrive and to consider what might get in the way as well as giving them a taster of the skills development others would be

encouraged to embrace. This gave them some of the 'language' and could begin the journey to 'role model' what was expected. Tracy Bullock who worked alongside Phil as his deputy when the initiative began and who now leads the Trust as CEO affirms this point.



Tracy Bullock
Chief Executive
Mid Cheshire Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

"Senior leaders cast a shadow across the organisation and if [coaching] is not viewed as important to us, it will not be viewed as important to our staff... I think senior level buy in is essential when creating and developing a culture that embraces a coaching ethos... I am very bought into the initiative. Coaching is something that I have personally had a great deal of value from."

Tracy Bullock, Chief Executive, Mid Cheshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Lisa too stresses how vital senior buy-in has been. Being open about having a coach, highlighting the benefits of coaching, and demonstrating a coaching style of leadership have been key. Tracy has been an active role model in this regard, engaging manager and leaders through a number of the Trust's leadership programmes to show her support.

Powerful learning programmes which emphasise applied learning and reflection

The rigour of the coaching development programmes – and their emphasis on applied learning and reflection

as an ongoing practice to ensure skills embedded and learning practices sustained – also contributed to our success. Phil commented that the Masters in Professional Coaching he completed with i-coach has been the most powerful and impacting piece of professional development he has ever undertaken, while internal coach James Baker, Human Resources Manager, Women’s, Children’s and Sexual Health Division, commented: “[developing as an Internal Coach] has really helped my awareness of my own personality, how I interact with different people and how I behave in different situations. It has also helped me to understand the behaviours and actions of others more easily.” Lisa reports that many of the internal coaches have become more confident and enjoyed career progression, three have been promoted since becoming part of the internal coaching pool with one admitting that before doing the internal coach programme, they would never have had the confidence to go for a promotion.

“Through developing as a coach I feel I have also developed a greater level of self-awareness which has enabled me to build on my strengths and to openly recognise those areas where I feel less comfortable and that require more attention on my part. In addition to gaining a recognised qualification, I have been fortunate to meet colleagues from across the organisation that I would otherwise not have met. In turn, this has enabled me to develop a support network and to improve my own learning of other parts of the organisation.”

*Bobby Sharma Team Coach, Service Manager,
Cheshire Occupational Health Service*

An internal champion to drive the process

Another crucial factor is to have someone championing and leading the strategy, a role Lisa has taken on with vigour. Caroline says: “To build a coaching culture, you need someone who is a change agent, who is leading

it on a daily basis. Lisa’s passion about coaching and learning stands out and her active leadership of the process has been pivotal to the success of embedding coaching within the Trust.” In addition to a range of other commitments, Lisa has ensured that she knows the coaches and their individual needs; goes to the wards to gather anecdotal evidence on the impact of coaching and coach skills training; checks in with coaching clients on how they are progressing; ensures line managers are aligned and affirming of the process; and proactively seeks continued learning, supervision and professional development opportunities for herself and the team facilitating coaching to ensure consistent quality and impact is sustained.

Lisa also enlisted the support of the internal coach team to ‘market’ the service and educate the organisation of the benefits of coaching. After the official ‘launch’ of the programme and graduation of accredited coaches, the team ran ‘brown-bag’ lunch sessions to help those new to coaching understand the benefits and clarify concerns about confidentiality for example.

While a relatively small organisation in the NHS – the Trust employs 3,500 staff – there is more of a sense of community than perhaps in larger organisations. There is also more risk because you cannot afford to get it wrong. Planning how to roll-out your coaching programmes to build confidence in the service and momentum is important.

Selection to the internal pool

Also important is the dedication of the internal coaches, their constant passion and commitment to their clients and their own development to ensure an effective service on top of busy ‘day jobs’. This dedication is inspirational and offers valuable role models to the organisation.

“We’ve got a very dedicated team of people. It’s not something that is written into their day job, they come in early and work at lunchtime,” says Lisa. When considering the selection of individuals to invest in for the internal coach training, the Trust in discussion with

i-coach made a decision not to impose a “seniority” or “content knowledge” requirement, rather focusing on selecting those who were open to learning (including learning about themselves) and who demonstrated an interest in supporting others to reach their potential. As a result the pool is diverse including central function specialists, managers, matrons and clinicians. Also by including individuals across the hierarchy, the pool includes a personal assistant and a surgeon, this re-affirms the ‘non-expert’ frame of coaching. In addition to different professional backgrounds, the internal coaches have different preferences and coaching underpinnings including Person Centred, Cognitive Behavioural Coaching, Solution-Focused and Neuro Linguistic Programming which through the education programme have become more explicit and are included in their coach profiles.

Clients value the diversity of the internal pool as it affirms the perspective that they are seen as unique individuals which a variety of needs and preferences in the way they learn. Being able to “offer a choice ... is really incredibly important,” says Lisa.

Ongoing supervision and CPD

Establishing a community of practice of coaching and coaching related professionals across the organisation ensures the sustainability of the services and reduces the dependence on key individuals. In i-coach’s experience it is unusual to find a resource dedicated to overseeing coaching and coaching related initiatives in an organisation the size of the Trust. It normally requires an ‘all hands on deck’ approach, leveraging the wider coaching pool and community. However if all you do is draw on your pool and never replenish it, it will be unlikely to survive. Finding a balance of replenishing your coaching resources through regular supervision and continuous professional development (CPD) which is of interest to the group and relevant to the purpose and context of their coaching work needs to be part of the wider strategy. It is also critical to model professional and ethical practice. In the Trust all coaches are required to attend regular supervision and CPD. To lead this ongoing

supervision, Lisa invested further in her own development completing the i-coach academy Certificate in Coaching Practice and studying to be a coaching supervisor through the NHS Leadership Academy and Bath Consultancy Group. i-coach facilitated the integration of the Trust’s internal coach pool with another local NHS Internal coach pool to widen the coaching network and opportunities for support and learning in the North West within budget constraints. Even in these tough times, supervision and ongoing CPD need to be seen as “fuel in your coaching engine”, says Caroline Horner.

“Coaching prepares staff to engage in a more transformational approach and to be less fearful of the future and what will be required of organisations. [Coached] staff are generally more motivated and confident and ready to embrace the challenges that lie ahead [and] are generally more willing to take on new learning opportunities. [We’re seeing] greater commitment from staff, more positive survey results around staff development and engagement, we get fewer complaints, patient experience surveys are improving. Coaching is talked about positively. Even one of our most cynical consultants was wowed by the impact of one of our coaches.”

Tracy Bullock, Chief Executive, Mid Cheshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Coaching had the possibility to impact beyond a single conversation and this is the result the Trust is focused on delivering to ensure a cultural shift. In one example, a client, convinced that their manager didn’t like them, began coaching to explore ‘relationship issues’ they were experiencing with their line manager which they believed were also impacting on the rest of the team. The coaching explored the client’s thinking patterns and reframed some scenarios to consider their role and contribution to the situation. The client has fed back that the coaching is encouraging them to think about how a different response on their part may improve the relationship and that others in the team have noticed and commented on improved overall morale.

“Whilst we may only work with individuals, the impact of coaching is having a multiplier effect throughout the organisation. Individuals such as the client described above have fed back that a change in their behaviour or mindset is often reflected in similar changes reciprocated in colleagues and wider teams and often leads to improved working relationships between colleagues who in turn are much better placed to provide improved patient care.” Bobby Sharma, Team coach, Service Manager, Cheshire Occupational Health Service.

The internal coach service has now supported close to one hundred individual coaching clients since its launch and in 2011 only one out of 34 delegates on leadership programmes refused an opportunity to be coached. Feedback from individuals who were coached has been largely positive, with objectives met fully or partially. Some have reported that they are better able to manage themselves and feel more positively about working for the Trust. This is what some clients of the service say:

“The benefits to me have been immeasurable, personally and professionally. I have once again begun to believe in myself and have more confidence [and] now I feel I can take ownership of my working life. Coaching has inspired me to want to be a coach myself.”

Ward sister

“The chance to have time to step away from a busy role and really think about the challenges and how I can create solutions has been invaluable. The incisive questions and two way dialogue made me reflect on my approach, I found my confidence boosted. I left my coaching feeling buoyant and ready to tackle anything.”

HR Manager

“I found the process very interesting. [It] gave me time to analyse and reflect. It was effective in allowing me to confront rather than ignore issues. All in all, I found coaching cathartic and calming.”

Doctor

Team Coaching

In the first half of 2012, i-coach worked closely with the Trust to train up around half of the internal coaches as team coaches. “Some of our teams are working under huge pressure but are not working as effectively as they could, so it’s about supporting through team coaching to look at those dynamics and look at their differences and use them,” says Lisa.

Team coaches work in pair partnerships adopting a coaching stance while collaborating with the team and their leader to explore the challenges they face. They design a bespoke learning intervention to enable more effective team working and enhanced performance in a way that empowers the team to sustain their ongoing learning and performance. Team coaching frequently offers multiple perspectives and feedback on team and system dynamics and behaviours. Team coaching at the Trust is still in its embryonic stages and given the current climate some “people are more naturally suspicious about team coaching, thinking they’re for the chop”, says Lisa however she notes this is changing, and team coaching is beginning to have an impact. The Trust has great hopes for this new development.

Next Steps

As the NHS reforms progress and cutbacks take effect, the requirement for the Trust's managers and leaders in particular to become more flexible, will become more urgent.

Increasing the numbers of Service Managers, Matrons, Ward Managers and Medical Staff who access coaching is also seen as an important priority, however time is an obstacle and creative options will be needed to explore how to approach 'releasing' individuals from these high-pressured roles to benefit from coaching. A new module mirroring the Coaching Essentials Programme is being introduced on the Medical Leadership Programme as one way to shift the leadership conversations into these areas and begin the dialogue to facilitate further change.

The organisation expects to grow team coaching, and to continue to integrate coaching within leadership development, and with its parallel mentoring offer. It hopes to grow the internal coaching pool and continue with its efforts to ensure wide representation within the internal pool.

Despite the success, there is still occasional resistance to coaching, but the word is gradually spreading "People are sending their junior staff [for coaching] and they are going back more resilient and getting promoted. The ward manager then thinks, 'I want some of that'", says Lisa.

While there is more work to do, the foundations, energy and commitment are there and some unexpected results encourage the Trust to continue with their efforts. Phil shares how, as he was leaving the organisation, one of the matrons came to speak to him. "She said: 'The most powerful thing has been being part of the internal coaching pool. It's transformed my relationship with my husband and my son as well as making me a better manager at work. It's hard to describe but it's transformational.'"

Lisa too says, "Coaching is the bit that gets me out of bed in the morning. Being with someone and seeing the light bulb come on. When people say 'that really changed me, I think differently,' I think I did a good job. Particularly when it's helping with patient care, that's what I get paid for."