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Becoming a good leader — developing the skills required

By Catherine Duggan MRPharmS, PhD, Cathy Mooney, MRPharmS, Pippa Roberts, MRPharmS, Chris Green, MRPharmS, Graeme Hall, MRPharmS, Philip Howard, MRPharmS, and Richard Cattell, MRPharmS

Leadership skills are particularly important in a changing NHS. This article describes some current opinion about leadership qualities and suggests ways in which they might be developed in pharmacy staff



An old adage says, “managers do things right, leaders do the right things.” Hence, having good leaders is particularly important for organisations that are experiencing uncertainty or change, so that departments and services move with the times and in the right direction.

The NHS is an organisation facing challenging times, including the meeting of targets and dealing with cost restraints and reformation, all of which require visionary leaders. A recent letter from the new Chief Executive of the NHS urged trust managers to identify and develop leadership capabilities within their own organisations.

This article describes some current opinion about the qualities good leaders should

possess and gives an overview of ways to develop them.

Leadership qualities

“What makes a good leader?” is a common question. Opinion has identified a good leader as a person who is able to take opportunities to change things, confidently exercise initiative and has the ability to experiment and make mistakes. Further qualities identified include having self-belief, a broad perspective and a capacity to tolerate loneliness.

Panel 1 (p194) summarises some of the qualities of a good pharmacy leader identified by the authors at a workshop about leadership skills in practice. The workshop took place at last year’s joint Guild of Healthcare Pharmacists and United Kingdom Clinical Pharmacy Association conference.

Developing leadership

There are various ways to develop leadership qualities, including:

- Learning from challenges
- Attending training programmes
- Performing job assignments
- Learning through relationships with others

Learning from challenges The positive effects of failure can be learned through experiencing problems. In order to make the most of this approach, an individual must be put in a position of risk, where work is not easy and the outcomes are unknown. Potential benefits of this approach include that it can be particularly effective at stiffening an individual’s resolve and releasing otherwise untapped sources of energy in challenging situations, such as job loss or restructuring. However, it must be remembered that experience of failure can leave people scarred and that they may then retreat into denial and cynicism, which is damaging to all involved, particularly the individual.

Attending training programmes Valuable learning opportunities can be provided from attending both informal and formal training programmes. These enable people to share valuable experiences and develop new networks. There is, however, a danger that completing training courses can be seen as a right of passage, whereas they should form just part of the whole leadership development process.

Some leadership courses work on the assumption that leadership can be taught. In others, leadership is viewed more as a skill to be developed in those in whom key base qualities have been identified.

Catherine Duggan is associate director of clinical pharmacy for development and evaluation, London South East and Eastern, **Catherine Mooney** is director of governance and corporate affairs, Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, **Pippa Roberts** is director of pharmacy, Countess of Chester Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, **Graeme Hall** is assistant chief pharmacist for clinical services, University Hospitals of Leicester, **Philip Howard** is clinical pharmacy manager, Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust and **Richard Cattell** is director, South West Medicines Information and Training, Bristol.

Panel 1: Key qualities of a good leader

Personal qualities	Work/life balance qualities	Professionalism	Strategic qualities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Charisma ■ Passion ■ Being assertive ■ Active listening ■ Communication skills ■ Motivating skills ■ Flexibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Getting the job done ■ Self-management ■ Managing others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Being consistent ■ Being fair ■ Empowering others ■ Being exemplary ■ Being aware of the bigger picture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Vision ■ Being able to communicate the bigger picture ■ Political awareness

Performing job assignments Key elements of any leadership development programme are job assignments that allow individuals to learn skills as they work. They are generally regarded as the most important single factor in leadership development, but this is dependent on exposure to the right kinds of experiences. It is worth noting that people learn most by doing things they have not done before.

Learning through relationships with others Relationships with other people are of key importance in developing leadership skills. Wide networks allow for information sharing, learning about career options and pathways, and help in gaining insight into personal strengths and weaknesses. Mentoring others is a particularly useful method of developing leadership qualities and also provides opportunities for identifying potential leadership qualities in others (ie, mentees). Knowing how to identify the qualities and skills of a "good" leader can help to identify strengths and weaknesses in ourselves and in others, as well as in identifying training and development needs.

Pharmacy approach

During the GHP/UKCPA leadership workshop mentioned earlier, one of the key tasks for participants was to identify various assignments that they could use within their organisation to start to develop leadership skills in members of their team. Published research suggests that such assignments should include and provide:

- Small projects and start-ups
- Small "jumps" in responsibility
- Small strategic assignments
- Course work or coaching assignments
- Activities away from work and with new people

Panel 2 lists some examples of the job assignments suggested. It should be noted that not all of these examples will be suitable for all departments or trusts, because the ideas came from individual participants and

therefore reflected the needs of their trusts and the skill mix available to them at the time. However, the examples provide a useful overview of the types of job assignments that could be used in a pharmacy setting to develop leadership potential in others.

It should be noted that time was taken to ensure that each assignment should provide

staff with experiences and jobs that fit into the five criteria listed earlier. In practice, the next step is to try to map the outcomes of each assignment with the required qualities to ensure that the appropriate learning experience was gained.

Conclusion

Good leadership is particularly important in times of change, such as those currently being experienced by many NHS organisations.

Among the approaches to developing leadership qualities is mentoring, which is set to be covered in more detail in the July/August issue of *Hospital Pharmacist*.

References

1. Handy C. The language of leadership. In: Syrett M, Hogg C (editors). *Frontiers of Leadership*. Oxford: Blackwell;1992. p7-12.
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Panel 2: Examples of activities that can be used to aid leadership development

- Empower a senior directorate pharmacist to develop a business case for various aspects of service
- Rather than stepping in, engage a mid-grade pharmacist to resolve conflict between consultants and GPs over prescribing changes
- Step back and empower a member of the pharmacy team to lead a service change (eg, moving an aseptic unit)
- Engage a pharmacy technician as a dispensary manager with specified and agreed targets (eg, to reduce the number of drug charts in the dispensary)
- Give a senior pharmacy technician responsibility for operational policy during a "new build" process (eg, in relation to working across sites or sectors)
- Make networking and presenting (eg, posters and oral presentations at group meetings and external conferences) part of daily life for junior department members and others
- Engage a team of mid-grade pharmacists in managing conflict (eg, occurring in wards and dispensaries)
- Task a member of staff to attend management meetings and provide detailed feedback, thereby increasing their political awareness
- Task a member of the team to change a database (To do so, they will have to work with the IT team as well as engage with a wider political agenda and local implementation issues.)
- Engage staff in relevant public relations activities (eg, describing the benefits of a proposed or newly-introduced robot to other staff at the trust and, on behalf of the trust as a whole, to the wider community)
- Task a senior directorate pharmacist with developing the case for changing a medicines use policy
- Empower junior staff to develop a policy, including holding discussions with service users, sharing the consensus with staff members and building it into the policy (This will enable the development of various transferable skills, from political awareness to ensuring local implementation.)
- Empower band 7 and 8a staff with being pharmacy representatives at high-level meetings, thereby "getting them on board with the pharmacy message" as well as allowing them to experience the wider agenda and where pharmacy fits in
- Task a senior member of the team to develop contingency plans for disasters (This involves working with staff in other disciplines as well as pharmacy staff.)
- Task a mid-grade staff member (or group) to undertake serious untoward incident reviews, enabling them to use root cause analysis training in practice and assume responsibility
- Empower mid-grade staff with involvement in disciplinary meetings