

Guest editorial

Creating and sustaining a learning organisation in the NHS

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Transforming NHS organisations into learning organisations will require a degree of cultural change. The concept of a learning organisation is not about training alone as many of those working in the NHS believe. It is about developing and utilising the skills, knowledge and abilities of all NHS employees to ensure their optimum performance, while at the same time making life rewarding and fulfilling for individuals.^{1,2}

A culture that values learning and ongoing development of staff will ensure that services continue to meet the needs of patients, new service developments and policy changes. Learning should become a process of continual improvement and innovation – an ongoing cycle of action and reflection. To ‘maximise the opportunities for quality improvement . . . we need dynamic and vibrant organisations which can seek out the requisite knowledge and embrace change positively, to transform their patients’, clients’ and local communities’ experiences of health and social care’.³

So do you recognise this description as applying to your organisation? If not, you might wonder what you can do and where you can start.

Look at whether the factors necessary for effective learning are in place in your healthcare organisation or healthcare team – as given in Box 1.^{4,5} All of the factors are linked and feed into each other. They can be grouped into three categories: the philosophy and vision, the learning strategy and the learning mechanisms that practically demonstrate a learning organisation in action. There will inevitably be under-development in some areas and this should be acknowledged and addressed over a realistic period of time. Healthcare organisations need to examine their stance and approach to these issues in order to reflect their learning culture development programme as part of their organisational development plan.

We are faced with a colossal retention crisis in the NHS – of doctors, nurses, allied health professionals

and other staff. Building on these factors for effective learning and investing in individuals’ learning as an integral part of the strategy for the whole organisation, will be one of the best retention measures that the NHS could adopt. Staff would feel valued, and they would have confidence that their professional development would be supported and enhance their careers.

Everyone has a part to play in creating a learning organisation, however senior or influential you are in your own work setting. You might be an individual

Box 1 Factors necessary for effective learning to take place

- Shared vision
- Leadership
- Empowerment of the workforce
- Culture enabling the learning from mistakes
- Consumer focused
- Commitment to teamworking
- Knowledge management systems
- Education, training and development needs analysis
- Appraisal, performance and personal development plans
- Identified and protected education and training budget
- Opportunity to apply new skills and knowledge
- Sustaining change and improvement
- Time for learning and reflection
- Feedback and evaluation

Reproduced from *Towards a Learning Organisation Toolkit* commissioned by the Shropshire and Staffordshire Workforce Development Confederation.¹

practitioner who can influence colleagues in your team at your workplace, or a middle manager who can create a learning culture for the non-clinical support staff. You might be a training and development manager in a hospital or primary care trust who can interpret the NHS requirements and learning resources in a way that benefits the whole workforce, or you may be in a position to lobby for the trust's steady conversion to a learning culture. You might be a member of the trust board and in a position to shift to a more positive learning environment where good practice is actively promoted and funded.

So . . . what are you waiting for? More legislation?

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