

Creating clarity about how a senior team should lead

The challenge looked like one of team effectiveness. What emerged was more fundamental: the existing senior leadership structure was trying to do too many different jobs in the same space.

THE SITUATION

An NHS Foundation Trust provides physical and mental health, learning disability and adult social care services.

Within its forensic services, the Senior Leadership Team was operating in an environment of significant complexity and pressure.

The team brought together experienced and committed senior leaders responsible for maintaining safe services, supporting staff, responding to operational demands and providing leadership for the future.

But there was a growing recognition that the way the team worked together needed to change.

The ambition was clear. In 12 months, leaders wanted clearer communication, greater accountability, better teamwork, more collective problem-solving and a stronger ability to anticipate issues rather than continually respond to them. Above all, they wanted to become more strategic while creating a culture in which people felt safe, trusted and empowered.

THE FRICTION

Initially, the work focused on strengthening the effectiveness of the existing Senior Leadership Team.

But once the team created the space to examine how it was actually operating, a more fundamental issue emerged.

It struggled to define a meaningful collective purpose for the SLT as it existed today. Much of the conversation about purpose went back to why the team had originally been established rather than what the service now needed from it.

The reason gradually became clearer. One leadership forum was trying to fulfil three different functions: setting strategic direction; managing operational delivery; and providing quality, governance and assurance.

That created duplication, repeated conversations and blurred decision-making. Immediate operational pressures and crisis management also crowded out the space needed for medium- and longer-term thinking.

The problem wasn't a lack of capable or committed people. The friction was in the system they were trying to lead through.

Sometimes the friction isn't within the people around the table. It's created by the way the table itself has been designed.

THE FOCUS

Rather than arriving with a predetermined leadership model or generic team-development programme, we designed a facilitated process that allowed the team to diagnose its own reality and work through what needed to change.

Across four facilitated sessions, the work moved progressively from purpose and relationships to leadership coherence, governance and implementation.

We created structured opportunities for leaders to:

- talk honestly about when the SLT was and wasn't working well
- explore the experience staff were likely to have of senior leadership
- surface duplication, avoidance, unclear accountability and communication breakdowns
- examine difficult conversations and team dynamics

- test whether the existing SLT had a sufficiently clear collective purpose
- define what effective senior leadership needed to provide for the service
- clarify decision-making, ownership and communication
- translate insight into practical changes in how leadership would operate

The process wasn't always comfortable. The first away time in particular generated challenging conversations. But the group stayed with them rather than retreating to safer territory.

That mattered, because the breakthrough came from allowing the original question to change. Instead of asking "How do we make this SLT work better?", the team began asking: What leadership does this service actually need - and how should we organise ourselves to provide it?

Diagnose before you prescribe.

THE DIFFERENCE

A different leadership architecture began to emerge.

Rather than expecting one large SLT to combine every senior leadership responsibility, the team identified the need for three clearer but interconnected spaces:

- Strategic leadership - setting direction, connecting the service to wider Trust and NHS objectives, horizon scanning, anticipating risk and opportunity and maintaining focus on the medium- and longer-term future.
- Operational leadership - translating strategy into practice, managing performance, workforce, resources and delivery, and responding effectively to the immediate and ongoing realities of running the service.
- Quality and governance - providing evidence, assurance and learning about whether services are effective, efficient and delivering the quality of care required, while informing operational and strategic decisions.

The team used the analogy of a three-legged milking stool. Each leg has a different purpose. Each is equally important. And none can work effectively in isolation.

That distinction created a basis for greater clarity around purpose, membership, decision rights, communication flows and accountability. It also shifted the conversation from individuals to roles.

Changing a leadership structure also affects identity, status and belonging. For some, the emerging model created a genuine sense of loss and uncertainty. That couldn't simply be designed away on an organisational chart; it needed conversation, compassion and time.

WHAT CHANGED

By the end of the facilitated process, the service had moved from trying to improve an overloaded leadership forum towards a clearer way of thinking about how senior leadership should operate.

The work created:

- greater clarity about the different purposes of strategic, operational and quality leadership
- recognition of the duplication and ambiguity within the previous arrangements
- clearer thinking about decision-making, accountability and communication
- more space for strategic leadership rather than allowing immediate operational pressures to dominate
- a stronger focus on roles and organisational need rather than status or individuals
- recognition of the interdependence between strategy, operations and quality
- greater willingness to surface and work through difficult issues
- a practical foundation for developing clearer terms of reference, membership, decision rights and communication flows
- a stronger shared understanding that leadership effectiveness depends on how the different parts of the system work together

Importantly, the process did not begin with the answer. The answer emerged because the team was prepared to examine the problem properly.

What started as a programme to improve the effectiveness of an SLT became something more significant: a redesign of how senior leadership could work together to provide the service with greater clarity, coherence and focus.

THE AQR WAY

Find the friction. Focus on what matters. Measure the difference.

Sometimes the friction isn't within the people around the table. It's created by the way the table itself has been designed.

Creating better team performance therefore isn't always about developing people to work harder within an existing structure. Sometimes it means creating the conditions in which capable people can work together more effectively.

Diagnose before you prescribe.

01 QUESTION

Test whether the existing team is designed for the work.

02 CLARIFY

Separate strategic, operational and quality leadership.

03 CONNECT

Build a team-of-teams with clearer flows and ownership.