

Stepping up the search for leaders

A few thousand spent on developing leadership skills could save millions.

Report by Gareth Huw Davies

AFTER 30 years in the NHS, Tony Lunt belonged to that big pool of middle-ranking executives who are looking for the next, possibly decisive, promotion to take them into their fifties. However, becalmed in an assistant-director post in Coventry, the 48-year-old was not at all sure he had the leadership capabilities to take that next step up.

Then his employers offered him a place on a leadership course. One year later Lunt is interim director of performance and information at Coventry Teaching Primary Care Trust and he believes his prospects have been transformed. He said: "I have been offered a promotion here already, and I have been shortlisted for directors' jobs elsewhere, which I would probably not have been considered for last year. I was at a point in my career where I was unsure about whether I had the skills to move up to director level. I believe I am now far more marketable."

Ros Taylor, one of Britain's leading business psychologists, is not surprised by Lunt's candid self-assessment of his improved prospects. Beyond her own professional satisfaction — she coached Lunt — Taylor believes British industry and the public sector is full of similar, untapped, leadership talent, with huge demand from a frustrated workforce that is waiting to be led and motivated.

A survey she commissioned last year pointed to the effects of the leadership deficit — 77% of respondents said their boss was "not interested in them"; 79% claimed their bosses did not set clear objectives; 89% said their boss lacked the ability to innovate and was unreceptive to new ideas. In another recent study, a majority of respondents in public and private companies said their most important professional adviser was an accountant, while only 7% identified consultants who developed leaders as the most important professional advisers in their business.

"Organisations spend millions on automation and new IT," said Taylor. "Why don't they realise they need only spend thousands to save millions by sharpening up their leadership assets?"

Taylor's new course on the science of leadership is aimed at bringing on the missing leaders in organisations. Key to her approach is improving the potential leader's interpersonal skills, by giving people an insight into how their behaviour is seen by others. She uses psychometric tests, a mixture of standard personality questionnaires and aptitude assessments, to help people understand their leadership style, so they can judge where they need to make changes in their approach.

Psychometric tests are hardly new. Taylor's argument is that they should be used everywhere in the public sector. "The tests are being taken up by public bodies, but they are still not widely used. They should be mandatory," she said. The public sector, however, could argue that it is stepping up its search for those missing leaders, and bringing on those it has already identified. The NHS has its Leaders Academy, and local authorities run a number of leadership programmes, including the Local Government Leadership Centre, backed by government money.

In 2005 Swindon council, then one of the worst-performing local authorities, sent all 184 of its senior managers on a course to turn them into better leaders. The council is convinced the exercise led to its improvement in the annual Audit Commission's comprehensive performance assessments (CPAs). However, many of these courses are either responses to extreme situations or aimed at existing managers and leaders.



Taylor's argument is that leadership training should be widened beyond this small number of sometimes elite courses, and become part of a public body's culture. It is up to any organisation to look for hidden leaders. "They might discover that people who seem pretty ploddy in their job are actually leaders in their spare time, doing fabulous stuff in local societies and voluntary bodies," she said.

Taylor said even councils that achieve top scores in the CPAs should look beyond merely delivering good services. "Councils should move beyond the level where the voters have simply stopped criticising them, to the point where they say the council is wonderful, and people are queuing up to work for it.

"Leadership is vital here. It is about generating ideas, and empowering people to do things they might not have thought about. It's about the freedom to come up with ideas and do things differently." Taylor thinks a large council employing 20,000 people might, typically, contain 2,000 leaders, who may or may not have been identified.

Her advice would be to hire a team of four consultants for a council of this size. They would run programmes with staff in work time, with regular follow-up evaluations. "This may cost no more than £30,000 or £40,000 a year," she said.

Tony Lunt said he had tried several improvement courses in the past. "But I tended to put the book away in the drawer at the end, and carried on as usual.

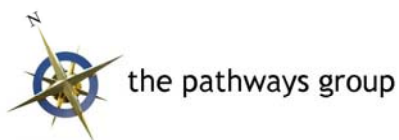
"What I am finding now is I am unconsciously applying new things and then, with reflection, realising I actually picked that up from Ros Taylor or from one of our discussions."

Strands in the year-long course, in which Lunt did monthly, three-hour, one-to-one sessions with Taylor, included self-assessment of his management styles and an examination of how well he interacted with colleagues and understood and used their skills. There were also sessions on dealing with "difficult" people.

"I certainly found our things about myself I didn't know," said Lunt. "The course showed me that I had a propensity to want to get the job done, which led me to working too much on my own, rather than using the skills of the people around me."

He said his primary care trust was discussing extending the series of courses. "We want to use coaching as an active part of our development programme.

"I have been in the NHS for 30 years, and this is the most cost-effective investment I have ever received."



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