



My Reflective Account

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The Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust (WAST/the Trust) is a unique organisation. Unlike health boards, WAST serves 3.1 million patients over 8,000 square miles and it is expected that WAST will interact with every Welsh citizen at some point in their lifetime. In addition, WAST is one of few NHS Wales organisations that deals with every other health and care provider in Wales. It does this with over 3,500 dedicated members of staff and hundreds of volunteers.

Its digital strategy, 'Disruptive Excellence' promises to build the digital capabilities of the Trust slowly to stabilise, optimise and sustain digital. Starting with strengthening the infrastructure and digital foundations, to building confidence in staff, to automating processes and building 'intelligent' data and systems. The strategy promises to do this all while keeping user needs in mind to build upon the long-term framework's core objectives to a) provide the right care in the right place at the right time, b) help patients more easily access our services at the right time, and c) help patients and staff to stay healthy. But who are the stakeholders involved in its success, and how to engage with them?

The Stakeholders

Since 'Disruptive Excellence' is a transformational strategy for an organisation, the first group of stakeholders are its staff. Given that the Trust employs more than 3,500 people, this group will be split into separate audiences based on their remits; road crews, contact centre staff, fleet, support services, corporate services, and executive management. There's also the addition of volunteers, who support WAST to deliver its urgent and emergency services.

These groups will be significantly impacted by the implementation of the digital strategy. If legacy infrastructure is changed, or new software is procured, it's these groups that will need to adapt and learn new ways of working. These stakeholder groups will also be involved in the implementation of new digital products themselves, taking projects from concept through to delivery. The challenge is to get their buy-in to champion the digital activity to ensure its success.

In addition to its staff, the people WAST serve are an equally important stakeholder group. For ease, I have combined the general population and patients into a single group and will refer to them as users. This group will likely be consulted and asked to participate in the development of new/improved digital services. In addition, they will need to adopt any digital advancement that changes the way this group interacts with the service. A real-world example is a push to use the NHS 111 Wales online symptom checkers instead of calling NHS 111 Wales, it's a pan-Wales behaviour change comms piece that is asking people not to automatically reach for the phone when they want advice.

There are also the Trust's commissioners, the Emergency Ambulance Services Committee (EASC), a joint committee of the seven health boards in Wales, and Welsh Government, specifically the Minister for Health & Social Services. This group of stakeholders are the decision makers and hold the ring around WAST's services. Without their buy-in for service-wide improvements, the strategy cannot progress. Then, there's the seven health boards inclusive of all their health and care services (GP surgeries, Dental, Social Care). Since WAST interact with every other health and care provider in Wales, to progress its digital strategy there may be a requirement for the interactions and processes with the health boards and their services to change.

And finally, the partner organisations of WAST, for example the Emergency Medical Retrieval and Transfer Service (EMRTS) and other emergency services providers (Police/Fire and Rescue). Whilst these groups will not be critical to ensuring the strategy's success, there may be an ask to adapt to a new way of working and/or sharing information during its implementation.

Engaging with Stakeholders

During the recent industrial action of ambulance service Paramedics, I played a role in effectively engaging with the groups identified above to keep them abreast of the organisation's mitigation plans, new working policies and to give important strike updates.

Before commencing any engagement activities, I took the time to consider their unique characteristics/stereotypes. For example, road crews, likely the most difficult group to engage with, encompass all front-line workers that respond in some capacity to 999 calls. They are out of the office, busy responding to urgent and emergency incidents, with little access to digital devices. Their stereotypes are that typically, these members of staff work shifts, and they could be rostered to work any day of the week during the daytime or night-time. Additionally, when they take a scheduled break, the breaks will be in the team room of a corporate building or station. So how do we engage with this group?

To find an effective engagement method, I find it helps to understand the stakeholder's environment. Whilst on a Project Board to implement a new consultation tool within the Clinical Support Desk (CSD), I was tasked with communicating its progress with the clinicians in the CSD team, and so I spent an afternoon sat with different clinicians within their working environment to build a rapport and understand how they work and find effective ways of communicating with them. Therefore, by joining road crew colleagues in their environments it may be possible to achieve the same. Perhaps there's a digital device used regularly that has the ability to share messages, perhaps there's a time before/after their shifts that they're most relaxed and able to digest new information, or perhaps there's an opportunity to sensitively engage with this group during their breaks. In the context of the industrial action, I organised internal webinars hosted by the executive management team at a convenient time for most staff days in advance and gave notice to road crew Managers to circulate the event with their teams. This meant that staff across the organisation could plan to attend with the advanced notice and it gave my team an opportunity to promote it widely spanning a few days.

With regards to stakeholder groups like the commissioners, for example, I sought advice and support from experienced senior leaders. My first port-of-call was to request a meeting with the Trust's Director of Partnerships and Engagement who is well-versed in engaging and influencing decision makers to enlist her support.

When you understand the stakeholder groups unique characteristics and you've identified where, when and how is best to drum up engagement, there are many communication

methods to make sure that there is an awareness, understanding and support for a project among them. I also learnt during the industrial action, that by engaging with the groups separately, it shows consideration for the group (makes them feel important) and it's possible to ensure that only the information relevant to them is shared, otherwise there's a risk they'll switch off to your updates.

Reflecting on Engagement Methods

Multi-disciplinary

Going back to the example shared earlier, of implementing a new consultation tool within CSD. After spending time within their environment, I realised that the usual communication methods adopted by the Trust were not going to be effective. The communications (my) team rely on intranet access and Yammer use, and this team lived within their consultation software. However, they worked long shifts in an office environment surrounded by their teammates. So, the Project Board and I explored using champions, i.e., clinicians who approved of the software upgrade and would champion it to others, keeping their colleagues updated and being on-hand to answer their questions.

This worked really well with regards to achieving a wider acceptance of the upgrade, and it has since become a powerful behaviour change tool at WAST. One that's even referenced within the organisation's digital strategy because peer-to-peer engagement is a strong method. However, on reflection, we relied heavily on this small group of individuals to deliver key information to a large group of people. Now I realise there was no way to ensure everyone had received the update.

The beauty of multi-disciplinary working in this context was that the champions were supported by a team of multi-skilled experts, and the two-way communication that naturally evolved between the Project Board, the champions, and the clinicians meant there was transparency throughout the implementation which consequently built trust.

Inter-disciplinary

A communication method that is often successful is a succinct explainer video. They're easy to digest, can be fun, and are highly engaging. My colleague and I developed an animated video together to be showcased at the CEO Roadshows (where the Chief Executive travels across the country to give updates of our performance and KPIs to staff) to drum up engagement for the organisation's purpose statement. We needed people to provide feedback on the statement as it was being developed. In the context of the Roadshows, the video worked particularly well, especially because we'd used a Welsh accent for the voiceover which proved to be a nice touch. And the video achieved what it set out to do; gather valuable feedback.

By inter-disciplinary working, we carved a powerful communications piece to connect with the audience. We didn't need to concern ourselves with individual roles, or all the nuances of the Trust, just to combine our expertise to deliver a highly engaging and persuasive explainer video.

Other methods

Other engagement methods that have been a repeat success are:

- 'WAST Live' webinars, whereby staff ask questions to the executive management team. Two-way communication and an opportunity to ask burning questions to the decision makers of the organisation is a hit.
- Recruitment events in the same building as clinical conferences. Discussing current vacancies and routes into the service with lots of people already with the relevant qualifications was genius.
- Creating smaller online communities relevant to stakeholder groups so they may interact with each other, start conversations, and receive important updates without being bombarded with irrelevant information.

During the recent industrial action, however, I shared a toolkit with our external stakeholders (excluding the public) with key information and requests for their support to share updates with our service users. It was clear, concise, and a one-stop shop for information. However, I foolishly hadn't produced a Welsh version. Unfortunately, it

resulted in a complaint into the Trust because we hadn't upheld our duty to the Welsh Language Standards. So, whilst the engagement method clarified the organisation's position and explained our approach to the impending strikes, it hadn't been an effective method of stakeholder engagement because it was incomplete.

Upon reflection, I have realised that no matter what engagement method is used, the goals to achieving a successful implementation is having enough engagement tactics to ensure stakeholders are informed, to set, manage and meet expectations, and finally to prioritise two-way communication, avoiding the constant push of messaging.

Engaging Everyone

Of course, when engaging in two-way communications, there is a duty to ensure everyone's opinions are heard. I make sure to offer everyone an opportunity to feedback whether it's in small engagement sessions, via a designated email address, or via surveys for example. The risk of dominant individuals or professions preventing full expression of opinion from quieter or less assertive people is groupthink, whereby people don't want to upset the balance. A purposeful engagement session has questions and challenges and ultimately gets those being engaged with to consider the impact on them, how their roles may change or what they expect they'll like/dislike, to lead to a general consensus. Less-lucrative engagement is when there's no participation because people are prepared to accept the conclusion, regardless of how they feel about it.

In conclusion, the key takeaways from this reflection to implement the digital strategy are:

- Know your stakeholders and their unique characteristics/stereotypes to understand where, when and how is best to drum up engagement.
- Engage with your stakeholders separately.
- Use communication methods wisely to make sure that there is an awareness, understanding and support for a project.
- Prioritise regular, relevant engagement and two-way communication.
- Purposeful engagement is met with questions, challenges and active participation from all.