

Croydon Health Services NHS Trust creates an internal-coaching culture

New skills promote organizational change and performance

Ali Abington



Ali Abington is director of Abington Coaching and Evaluation, Leighton Buzzard, UK.

On 23 March 2011 Reflexion Associates delivered the opening session of the Expert Internal Coach program, accredited at level 5 by the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM), to managers at Croydon Health Services NHS Trust.

Three months after the program ended, in March 2012, Reflexion Associates commissioned Abington Coaching and Evaluation to carry out an independent, solution-focused evaluation of the work. The aim was to capture perceptions of progress from the perspective of some of those involved and to explore their thoughts around potential for future growth – both as individuals and in the terms of the development of an internal-coaching service at Croydon, London.

This case study gives an overview of the program and presents some of the key findings.

About Croydon Health Services NHS Trust

Croydon Health Services NHS Trust provides health-care services from a number of community, specialist clinics and hospital-based settings throughout Croydon and surrounding boroughs (www.croydonhealthservices.nhs.uk). Formed in August 2010 through the integration of Croydon Community Health Services and Mayday Healthcare NHS Trust, the trust is an integrated-care organization. This means that clinicians work with general practitioners, commissioners, patients and carers to develop new models of service that support the provision of care closer to home, reduce the need for hospital visits and improve continuity of care for people with long-term conditions.

The trust employs around 3,500 staff and delivers services to a population of more than 340,000. Its vision is to be a provider of high-quality, safe and compassionate care for local people.

Supporting staff through integration

“The integration process in 2010 raised a number of questions for the organization,” explained Courine Stewart, the trust’s workforce-development and organizational-development manager. “What *were* our capabilities? What were we expecting from our staff? How could we prepare them for this new way of working?”

“At the time we were also going through a restructure and there were service demands as well, because of the cuts. We recognized that there were going to be challenges for managers and staff and wanted to support them in dealing with these changes.”

The author wishes to thank Croydon Health Services NHS Trust for their kind cooperation in the development of this case study.

Courine Stewart felt that coaching would be a good model to adopt, because it would enable staff to see where they were in relation to moving forward and to think about manageable ways of achieving that.

She decided to introduce coaching to the organization through a two-prong approach. The first element was to design and deliver an in-house leadership program incorporating basic coaching techniques for managers; the second was to deliver an expert-coaching program where key individuals would be trained in advanced-coaching techniques to support both staff and managers across the trust. The approach was endorsed by the executive team of Croydon Health Services, whereby Courine Stewart commissioned Jenny Garrett, founder of Reflexion Associates, to deliver the Expert Internal Coach program – a degree-level coaching qualification accredited by the ILM at level 5 – to a group of seven managers from different services across the trust.

Towards a credible internal-coaching service

The program is interactive and highly practical, involving three one-day workshops, assignments, practical coaching sessions with clients and action-learning sets.

Participants come away with a deeper understanding of coaching theories and tools for applying coaching in the workplace. The program offers them a framework for ongoing reflective practice and professional development, as well as a toolkit of coaching approaches and models to tackle any coaching conversation. Participants are also given the tools and templates they need to establish an active organizational-coaching culture and set up and deliver an effective internal-coaching service.

The course was delivered by Reflexion Associates founder and director Jenny Garrett, herself an experienced coach. “The program is designed to give participants a solid foundation in core coaching skills,” she said. “The main aim is for them to increase their knowledge and confidence so they can create an internal team of coaches in their organization – one that can provide a confident, credible, ethical and professional service to support improved performance, change and leadership development.”

Impact of the program on individual participants

As one might expect, the program objectives outlined above are clearly reflected in conversations with participants about their personal hopes and aspirations at the start of the program. Developing and validating skills as well as understanding what is meant by coaching and what differentiates it from other interventions such as counseling emerge as common themes.

In terms of process, an underlying message – indeed a real highlight – is the value participants place on seeing their tutor in action as part of the program, always modeling good coaching herself, even when in teaching mode, and creating what they felt was a safe environment in which to learn and practice their skills.

What personal progress do participants feel they have made as a result of coming on the program and what impact is this having on their effectiveness in the trust?

Two key themes emerge:

1. a heightened awareness of personal style; and
2. the value of being able to apply their preferred coaching approach(es) straight away, in day-to-day interactions with colleagues and clients.

Managing the coaching process

Something that really came across in the evaluation was how helpful it had been for participants to understand about the different aspects of coaching, recognize where personal boundaries lay and manage the overall coaching process.

“Participants described how, with a heightened awareness of their personal style, they had come to use a more collaborative, less directive approach, with a definite shift in emphasis from ‘me’ to ‘them’.”

One person explained how she had come to realize that as a coach, options and choices were available to her. She spoke, too, about the importance of losing preconceptions ahead of coaching sessions.

The same individual also described how, as a result of the course, she was now taking a different approach to the way she set up interactions with individual managers – looking at what support was needed and deciding whether this would be provided through a more structured coaching contract, on an incidental-advice basis or by simply introducing some open questions.

Another participant explained how helpful it had been to clarify the difference between coaching and counseling, adding that she now knew how and when to draw on her existing skills and knowledge in other areas. She likened this to having an internal supervisor as opposed to a superior one.

“It’s brilliant,” she said. “I now know how to keep my role separate, but I also know how to use my knowledge when it is appropriate. I feel very comfortable with that.”

She described how, working with one client in a therapeutic sense, she had been able to flip to coaching mode on a different matter altogether, resulting in a positive outcome for the client. “We recognized that that was separate and we worked in a completely different way,” she explained.

More collaborative and less directive – from “me” to “them”

Participants described how, with a heightened awareness of their personal style, they had come to use a more collaborative, less directive approach, with a definite shift in emphasis from “me” to “them”.

“I think my coaching training – and seeing my trainer in action – led me towards knowing how directive I am,” said one participant. “I think I am pulling back more and more . . . which allows people to be more individual.”

How might others tell? The same individual gave a simple response. “I think they will have noticed that I am asking them what they are going to do, far more than before. I have always been quite an active supervisor. For example, I might have said, ‘Well, what theory would you connect that to?’ Now I say, ‘Well, where do you think you would go with that?’ If they say, ‘I don’t know . . .’, I will say, ‘Do you think it would be useful to know?’ whereas before I would have said, ‘Well, it comes from here . . .’ and given them the details.”

Coaching skills and techniques

Some participants reflected that the coaching had given them an awareness of skills and techniques that they were using already, such as building rapport, active listening and reflection. Others noticed themselves applying their learning from the program to do things differently, for example being less harsh on themselves after coaching sessions.

“I keep going back to what Jenny said,” said one. “As long as the client is happy with it and going back and getting benefit from it, that is all that matters.”

Participants also spoke about how they had learned to appreciate the value of silence and thinking space.

One individual described how she had invited a member of staff to consider approaching his work in a different way. “He was thinking about it – I could see it was a struggle. I asked him if he would like to go back to how he had worked before. He said, ‘I know now . . . I do not want to go back to working that way.’ It was good that I gave him that thinking space, and we have scheduled some time to explore the issue. I do not think I would have been so intuitive without having had some insight into space, because my own personality is to just get it done!”

“I never liked silence,” said the same individual. “It is about me and my confidence, really. Silence used to tell me that if there is a gap, I need to fill it. I have progressed in understanding silence and giving the person time and space to think. I appreciate that individuals have more in them in terms of solution than they think. Even now, I have to remind myself to leave something alone and let the thinking space work.”

The same participant also spoke about how she had learned to reframe experiences and turn them into learning opportunities. In fact, by using this technique with an internal client and seeing the progress made, she was able to ask for feedback from another client, which turned out to be not nearly as bad as she had imagined.

Others described how they had changed their approach to questioning. One said she was making a conscious effort to keep her questions simple. “I am very focused on, ‘How am I asking this question?’” she said. “Is this helping the person to reflect on what he or she needs to put in place to move forward?”

Helpful coaching approaches

Of the coaching models introduced during the program, three emerged as particularly useful to participants:

1. OSKAR (Jackson and McKergow, 2007) (solutions focus);
2. GROW (Whitmore, 2009) (coaching for performance); and
3. Socratic questioning.

When invited to cite their preferred approach, they had little hesitation in selecting a particular model, for reasons such as personal fit; simplicity and effectiveness with clients. That said, participants did not always stick to one model and were open to exploring others. One person who said she tended to use GROW added: “I might try the OSKAR approach. As Jenny Garrett said, it is OK to go between the two, as long as you know where you are and you are managing the process.”

All said that using their chosen approach had made a difference to the way they work and to their interactions with clients. One participant described how she had used GROW in a particularly challenging team meeting where, against a backdrop of uncertainty and demotivation, she had begun to wonder how she was going to turn things around.

“The program offers a framework for ongoing reflective practice and professional development, as well as a toolkit of coaching approaches and models to tackle any coaching conversation. Participants are also given the tools and templates they need to establish an active organizational-coaching culture and set up and deliver an effective internal-coaching service.”

“There is every sign that the program has made a significant impact at individual level and that the building blocks are in place to move towards provision of a more formalized internal-coaching service at Croydon.”

“I had never coached a team – it had always been one-to-one – and you have got the team dynamics and everything else going on. But in my head, I had GROW. I used that and it turned out to be a good approach for them.”

One participant found solutions-focus thinking particularly helpful because, in her area of work, she tended to spend a lot of time on the problem.

“I do find I bring in solutions-focus tools,” she explained. “I feel that works for me. It is that small-step process. It is about the person gaining that insight . . . it helps him or her to focus on moving forward.”

Another said: “I use bits of OSKAR often with managers, because I think it is a positive approach. It allows managers to be up where they want to be, to see where they want to go and to work towards it.”

The person for whom Socratic questioning had been so valuable said: “I loved all that. That is a skill I keep coming back to. It is so powerful. It stops me thinking I know it all. It stops me being the one who knows.”

Making a difference to clients

One participant had noticed that managers she had coached had a sense of empowerment and greater confidence in the way they managed. Another spoke of the progress she had made beyond the coaching.

“People I coached during the program still come back to me,” she said. “They feel they can just pop in and share how they are progressing. They feel comfortable and safe. They have seen how they are growing. They are not having coaching but they talk about it in their teams and they are doing it for themselves now.”

Participants spoke about how coaching had given people ownership and described the difference it made, introducing possibility and giving people time to reflect. One spoke about how, as a result of the program, she had come to realize that for one particular client, coaching was more appropriate than therapy.

“It was a defining moment,” she said. “It is still having an impact. . . That person is taking more responsibility and you can see the self-confidence rising. People surprise themselves because they have been given time and encouragement. All competition is taken away because I am not the expert on them, they are. You have got to have an intrinsic belief in people finding a way if you supply the tools and settings. I think I learned that by watching my tutor. It was lovely having such a good example.”

The impact at trust level and beyond

Conversations with participants suggest that a number of changes have taken place as a result of the program. Heightened awareness of personal style has led to greater levels of confidence in participants. This, coupled with the successful use of well-recognized coaching models, has resulted in increased confidence in their own areas of expertise, a perception that they have empowered those with whom they interact and, as a direct consequence, a sense of greater effectiveness in the organization.

Keywords:
Coaching,
Solution-focused evaluation,
Organizational culture,
National Health Service,
Managers,
United Kingdom

One participant enthused: “The program gave me a different perspective to working with my key stakeholders.”

Another said: “Before [the program] we used to have a discussion. Now, rather than having a conversation to air the issue, I will ask open questions as well, to get people to think about the solution and what approach they might take.”

The potential for wider impact – the ripple effect, as one individual described it – is huge.

“When people feel empowered,” she said, “they tend to think in more reasonable ways as well, because they have got the space to do that. Generally, people feel more secure and comfortable. That has a knock-on effect on everybody around them.”

Closing thoughts

There is every sign that the program has made a significant impact at individual level and that the building blocks are in place to move towards provision of a more formalized internal-coaching service at Croydon.

“I know people are still coaching and keeping up their skills,” commented Courine Stewart.

“We are all using coaching individually,” echoed another participant. “We are trained now, and are using our skills because you could start applying them straight away.”

“Managers can see that there is a group of people to provide and invest in coaching in the organization,” explained another participant. “We are demonstrating that we have the time to meet and listen to staff. As a trust, one of our promises to the people of Croydon is that we say we will have the time for you. It means that, although we are very busy, we take time out to make someone feel they are the only person.”

And of the program itself?

“It is a wonderful experience being on the receiving end of it – consistently – and thinking you could do that,” said that same individual. “I would say to anybody, ‘Even if all you get out of it is the experience of being with a coach, go and do it, just so you know what coaching can and should be like’.”

Jenny Garrett is pleased with the way the program has been received. “There is no better reward for a coach than when your client has gained the skills to begin to coach himself or herself,” she said. “I am delighted that those at Croydon have embraced coaching in a sustainable and independent way and look forward to seeing them progress even further in the future.”

So coaching is happening, it is working and, for those who have been through it, there is no going back. Clearly, at Croydon, this program has been something of a success.

References

Jackson, P.Z. and McKergow, M. (2007), *The Solutions Focus: Making Coaching & Change SIMPLE*, Nicholas Brealey International, London.

Whitmore, J. (2009), *Coaching for Performance: GROWing Human Potential and Purpose*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London.

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com
Or visit our web site for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.