

Case study for NHS Leadership Academy

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Aspirant Director of Workforce Programme: Bridget O’Kelly

Bridget O’Kelly is only eight weeks into her new role as Director of Organisational Development and Workforce Transformation at Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust and is already finding the lessons learned on the Aspirant Director of Workforce Career Development Programme useful in her new role.

“On Day 1 the role of the Human Resources Director was explained in terms of four broad elements: working in partnership across the region; the executive responsibilities of the role; the personal leadership elements; and lastly the relationship you build with the Chief Executive. I have found it really helpful to remember these and to approach and reflect on the role in this way,” said Bridget.

“I am also drawing on the knowledge elements that were shared on the programme as well as the experiential learning, sometimes consciously and sometimes on reflection.”

Bridget was in the first of three cohorts of 15 people chosen to complete the Aspirant Director of Workforce programme, between July 2016 and September 2017. Each cohort completed a two-day workshop, two Action Learning Sets, four hours of individual and bespoke career development coaching and a workshop focusing on organisational development within the NHS.

The programme was sponsored by NHS Employers and developed through collaboration with NHS England and the HPMA, it built on the work they had led on developing the role remit and map of influence. NHS Leadership Academy’s Executive Search Team successfully won the tender to deliver the programme which was designed to identify, develop and deploy senior HR leaders who were close to being suitable for Directorship within the NHS. In a bid to improve talent management the programme aims to help aspiring directors of HR and workforce to raise their aspirations, broaden their understanding and develop their readiness for both interviews and the role.

Four of the people on Bridget’s cohort have already succeeded in obtaining director level posts, and the fact that this group now has a network of like-minded people to draw upon is also useful.

“It’s good to have another cross-section of people in different geographical areas that you can drop a quick email to, and to know people from outside your patch. The action learning sets which were part of the programme and the possibility for informal interactions with colleagues have helped create a supportive group across the country,” she said.

Bridget also found the programme helped with the process of application, in particular in her case as an internal applicant: “One of my specific needs was to think through what it means to step up to a Director role in your existing Trust – the advantages and challenges - and to be able to articulate this clearly during the application process.

“I had support with my application and a mock interview at the Leadership Academy. The feedback was very honest and supportive. The coaching I received was fantastic throughout and enabled me to put my best foot forward at every stage of the process. It felt like I had a ‘wing man’ and someone who was on my side.”

Apart from the knowledge content and coaching elements of the programme, Bridget felt that being selected in the first place was also a boost.

“Being selected for the programme says to the interview panel that here is someone who has been chosen for a national programme and identified by the Leadership Academy as being close to operating at director level. As an interviewee this also gives you confidence.

“I was also impressed by the quality of the speakers on the programme. There was a visible level of investment from senior figures in the NHS from the outset. They spoke candidly and honestly to us and the fact that they contributed so much to the programme was evidence of the NHS’ commitment to us a group.”

One final thing that impressed Bridget was the flexibility of the programme. The structure was a good one, and there was a willingness to adapt it to the needs of particular cohorts and individuals where necessary.

“The framework was really tailored to our needs,” she said. “For example, in response to a request from our group, a session on organisational development for HRDs was arranged for two cohorts. The fact that we as a cohort took an active role in developing the programme was one of its real strengths.”