

How to lead in difficult times

Kent, Surrey and Sussex NHS Leadership Academy Briefing

There's been much more joint working recently. And lots of love for the NHS. But in practice, you may be finding things difficult.

You can feel like you don't know where to start, or overwhelmed - especially if people are looking to you to take a lead.

And these may include people you don't know, who may not particularly even like you.

So what can you do, to help yourself, and others?

Leadership is about how you behave and act

First thing is to understand that your leadership isn't about your job title, or band. It's about how you BEHAVE, and how you ACT, and how you give permission to others in your team to do likewise.

So start as you mean to go on, and get to know your team. Call, don't email, and let them know about you and your background so that it's a two-way conversation.

Agree what you're dealing with

The next step is to agree on what you're dealing with.

Some things will be known, or predictable. These are within your control, as far as anything can be. Delegate these, with good and regular feedback.

Concentrate on the stuff that's less clear, or predictable - situations that are new, where things are sub-optimal, or involving lots of people - i.e. that's COMPLEX.

Ask questions

Good news - you don't need to have the answers. When things are complex, your job is to ASK QUESTIONS, especially of your subject experts, and get others to do likewise.

NB These people may well be at a lower band to you, and might need encouragement to speak up.

And listen to the answers. The more information you have, the better the decisions you'll reach.

Also, asking questions helps other people change their own minds (SPOILER ALERT - YOU CANNOT CHANGE PEOPLE'S MINDS FOR THEM).

Take small steps

Also good news - if something's complex, you don't have to solve the whole problem all at once. Take small steps, see what happens, adapt - lots of short-term planning.

Work with your team so that you all really understand what your task is and what it means to everyone in the team. What are their pressure points? Spend all the time you have at the start on this if you can - it's time well-spent.

And keep reiterating the task - don't assume everyone understands/remembers the same thing, even if they're using the same words

This also means spending time with people to build relationships and trust - you won't get far without trust. Trust is the starting point for influence.

ACT. Do real work - experiment, try things out, start anywhere and follow it everywhere - and expand what works and ditch what doesn't.

Supportive behaviours

There are some behaviours that really help here. Firstly, give yourself and your team time to stand back a bit, so that you're not always on the dance floor - get up to the balcony. You'll help your team more if you make time to look at what's really happening.

Support and enable others in your team - give them leeway to experiment in small ways with new ways of working, so that they feel it's safe to do so.

Make sense of things for others - with the stories you tell, and in the way you describe things so that people shift the way they think about things. Never underestimate how quickly things can change.

And finally

Look after yourself - have a coalition of the willing, a few people who think the way you do, who've got your back. Don't do this on your own.

And persevere - this stuff takes time, and it's hard. But always understand that it's your leadership that can and will make the difference.

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