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Lessons in leadership from... Vijaya Nath

Our series in leadership continues this month with former King's Fund leadership guru Vijaya Nath.

Jyoti Shah Series Editor

It would be unwise to deliberate about leadership – especially in the health field – without sounding out Vijaya Nath, whose name is synonymous with the art of leading.

As Director of Leadership Development at the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, Vijaya has more than two and half decades' worth of experience in the field. Much of this has been in the health sector. She had made her mark as Director of Leadership Development at the highly respected thinktank The King's Fund.

Coming from a medical family, Vijaya had always been drawn toward medicine. Her father is a practising doctor and her husband a senior biomedical scientist. However, her path was more about the curiosity of what and why people did what they did, and how this led to the best results. She felt that although doctors were trained in clinical excellence, this did not necessarily translate into true leadership characteristics.

Vijaya is a graduate of modern languages and politics. She has a MA from the Institute of Education in London, holds a postgraduate certificate in education (adult learning) and is a European Mentoring and Coaching

Council-accredited coach. Her list of coaching clients reads like a *Who's Who* in healthcare.

What makes Vijaya's approach to leadership so compelling is that she is direct in her approach about what leadership is and what it demands. 'There are swathes of professional people including scientists, phlebotomists, nurses, allied health professionals, as well as doctors, who are involved in the patient's journey but are not taught how to lead. I am drawn to this gap in clinical leadership,' she explains. 'The challenge for the NHS is that we want the outcome without the input.' Having worked in the private sector, she recognises that other industries invest in leadership but – under the umbrella of financial constraints and lack of resources – the NHS wants better patient care without investing in the people who deliver it.

The other challenge, she believes, is getting doctors out of the job that they are comfortable with and encouraging them to embrace a leadership opportunity. 'Why would doctors walk away from their clinical role unless leadership means better patient care and making a difference to patients?'

she asks. Exercising clinical leadership generates resistance and pain and is seen as the enemy by some clinical staff.

A consistent and emerging theme is one of value – it is a normal human need to feel important and valued. 'It doesn't matter what job you do in healthcare, you should feel valued,' says Vijaya. Yet, as low morale abounds, it is clear that staff are not feeling this – which is a major challenge to any organisation, let alone one that is under such pressure. 'After all, the greatest asset in the NHS is its staff. Healthcare is still compassionate, but we save that compassion more for our patients than we do for each other.'

Vijaya accepts that this generation of doctors has the courage to face the reality of modern medicine, which demands leadership from the outset. There is a paradigm shift with the belief that the NHS can still be fixed. 'More of these clinical leaders talk about portfolio careers than any other generation I have seen in the NHS and there isn't the same mindset of medicine or surgery being a career for life. Working with their non-clinical colleagues means they can help the NHS serve generations to come,' explains Vijaya with pride.



‘Leadership in the NHS has the greatest rewards, and must be celebrated. In other industries, it’s about the share price, which may fall... but the NHS is all about saving lives. There cannot be a greater reward or privilege.’ She talks about the need to celebrate what we do right. ‘There are millions of episodes of great care but they don’t make the headlines. Yet a single adverse incident will. That needs to change. We must learn to celebrate success,’ she says with optimism. With extensive experience of other health systems around the globe, she is qualified to claim that the NHS is still the best health-care system in the world, even with the drawbacks. ‘Many would like to emulate the NHS,’ she says. Her passion for the NHS is clear and her desire to better the people and the systems more so.

Large organisations like the NHS recruit the best that they can, but not all medics share the character and value sets of their employing organisation, which Vijaya believes is a prerequisite for clinical leaders. ‘Leaders need insight to lead. Therefore, not all doctors will be able to lead; nor may they want to do so. Identifying talent is crucial,

as is coaching them throughout their career. This is a one-to-one conversation and the investment that the NHS needs to make. Spot the next leader and nurture them.’

But the real heroism of leadership involves having the courage to learn from

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other people, even if they are junior to you. ‘You never know everything,’ she says. ‘So, ask yourself what can I learn from other people?’. She is most excited by this generation of young doctors who in this digital age have information all around, leading to endless opportunities and possibilities about what they can initiate (if allowed).

Focusing on the criteria for success in the

Vijaya’s 5 favourite things

1. Mountains
2. Sea and beach – especially when empty
3. I love books – I read everything
4. My family
5. I love that I still get surprised daily

Who do you think is an amazing leader and why?

Kate Granger, who did what she set out to do and did so quietly.

NHS, she is under no illusion that leading requires sheer hard work and recognition that what one does matters to the organisation and to the individual patient – what she calls the ‘ripple effect’. Hard work is in her genes and she recalls her great-grandmother, who, together with her parents, continue to inspire her.

Vijaya does not only believe in the word *vision*. Rather, she wants individuals to ask themselves ‘Why does this matter? What are we doing this for?’ so that they can engender a purpose that fuels their ambition.

With this comes reflective practice. Every NHS worker should learn to reflect on their experiences and learn from them. Vijaya talks about her own mistakes in the past but realises that it is often only with hindsight that they are called mistakes; they did not feel wrong at the time. However, it is through reflecting on them that she learns from them. This, Vijaya explains, is important for individual development so that each person can be the best that they can be. ‘Find your voice,’ she says, in order to be braver about asking people how you can be better. She realises that this is easier with age, as asking

such tough questions needs confidence as well as a large dose of humility.

Leaders also need a sanctuary, which is not necessarily a physical place, but a moment that serves as a pleasant distraction to ground one's day. With growing pressure on people working in the NHS, such sanctuaries as 'going for lunch or having a walk' are seen as expendable luxuries. These become more, not less, important in failing organisations because a demoralised, beleaguered workforce is unlikely to embrace change and help the organisation to recover.

For this, Vijaya accepts that to be the best at work, you have to have a personal life that is the best that it can be. 'The personal and professional "you" cannot be separate. You must know what is important to you.' For Vijaya, this is her family. 'A healthy organisational culture is critical for the best possible patient care. Happy staff = happy patients.'

Vijaya believes that clinical leadership is a concept that is well-established in healthcare, although clinical leaders are not so well established or supported. Taking leadership to the next level is about not just patient participation but rather the concept of patient leadership, which The King's Fund is actively exploring. Patients bring something fresh and new to how healthcare systems are built. This is about how much power we can divulge to patients and how we can embrace them as leaders, which she knows is a thorny topic. A complete re-balance of power and hierarchy is looming on the horizon and Vijaya believes it is not long before patients lead clinical organisations. Is the medical workforce ready for such a radical change?

Something to say?

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