

Leading healthcare change

Are we helping enough?

Everyone is familiar with the transformation mantra in Irish healthcare – and few would disagree with it. But are we doing enough to support those leaders and senior managers who will actually make transformation possible? A new approach is needed in this most testing of all environments.

Vincent Barton



Those who make it their business to study health system reforms internationally often feel like Irish weather forecasters: you look at all the possible elements and trends... and there is a good chance you can find almost any grouping of them happening somewhere on the chart simultaneously. Perhaps the only constant is tension: Centralisation v Regionalisation; Insurance Funding v Fixed Budgets; Regulation v Free Market; Professional Freedom v Managerial Control.

In such a climate, the premium on having superlative leadership, combined with excellence in senior management capability, is obvious. The ability to see beyond the fog of daily events and to inspire a really capable managerial group to deliver on that vision is vital. For some time now it has been recognised by expert commentators as varied as Peter Drucker, John Harvey-Jones or, most recently, Gerry Robinson,

that the managerial challenge in the healthcare environment ranks as one of the most testing that can be found in any sphere of operations.

The hot topics in Irish healthcare over the last few years are familiar to us all: Accident & Emergency services, waiting lists, the need to roll out developed Primary Care networks, shortfalls in services for the elderly, the need to reorganise our acute specialty networks, planned radical changes to the consultant Common Contract, sweeping national structural reform of the former Health Boards and a series of high-profile lapses in quality assurance and patient safety.

One item which has not featured much, if at all, is the issue of development of senior leadership and management capability. Looking back over the last decade, and right up to the present day, you find that programmes in the health service to promote personal development

and to identify and foster high quality managerial capability are by and large patchy and embryonic, at best. There are very honourable exceptions to this. Particular mention should be made to the work of the former Office for Health Management and of a number of third level or university courses which seek to produce a cadre of modern managers and leaders for the 21st century health service.

There are also many extremely capable leaders and managers operating within our health system whose daily struggles need to be both recognised and rewarded. The problem is that in a health service with over 100,000 staff they are always overstretched and definitely too few to make the difference we all seek.

The health sector is arguably one of the country's biggest single areas of economic activity. Add on the intimately related education and research spheres and it certainly dwarfs any other domain. And yet this importance has not traditionally been reflected in our approach to leading and managing the system.

What can we do? Firstly, we should put in place the infrastructure to professionalise health service managers and management. International experience is interesting here; most European countries have had such structures in place for years. In France, for example, The Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Santé Publique combines senior management training and qualification at national level with a public health research role. In the UK the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement has as its core mission the provision of leadership development, with a view to having a direct impact on health outcomes. It is important we establish similar organisations in Ireland, well-resourced and open to both health and non-health disciplines.

Secondly, we need to engage perhaps the single most pivotal group in our delivery system, the clinicians, in both the leadership and management agenda. For 15 years now there has been in existence a Clinicians in Management programme. But this has never really got traction. As far back as the Buckley Review in 1997, lack of progress in this area was being criticised. Interestingly, some of the more

innovative developments in this area in Ireland have actually happened outside the formal national programme. The ongoing Common Contract discussions provide an opportunity to get the contractual enablers for this objective in place, but will not be enough on their own. A new approach and a real commitment to bringing the talents of clinicians into the managerial mainstream needs to be found, one that owes less to the world of industrial relations and much more to the drive to transform our health system.

Vincent Barton is a Director in Prospectus. He formally worked in the Department of Health and Children and also spent time as Ireland's Health Attaché with the EU in Brussels.

Contact Vincent by emailing vbarton@prospectus.ie

Article at a glance

Excellent leadership and senior management capability are a prerequisite in driving through health system reform.

The increasing professionalisation of many aspects of the health system has not always been accompanied by a similar approach in leadership and management development.

We can look to other countries to see examples of how this is being done.

A completely fresh approach to our Clinicians in Management programme is a critical component.