

Developing Leaders and Developing Leadership: Midwives' experiences of a profession-specific programme in the English NHS

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Heads above the Parapet: a study of the role and social identity of midwifery clinical leaders

Exploring the career narratives of midwifery leaders, using observation of a leadership development programme, in-depth narrative interviews, and online interaction.

How do surrounding professional group and organisational discourses impact on the construction of midwifery leaders' career narratives?

NHS Leadership Development

Recognition of the importance and value of clinical leaders in recent years, but challenges remain for these hybrid professional-managerial leaders.

Critiquing leadership development in healthcare:

- Limited access to development opportunities
- Poor timing in relation to career trajectories
- De-contextualised leadership development programmes
- Development programme reliant on skills, trait and competence-based models

The result:

- Developing leaders rather than developing leadership?

Findings: opportunities and challenges

Timing: first experience of formal development for the majority

'If I had done this course years ago, I think it would have been so much more helpful to me... If I was 10 years younger, I'd be looking to where I would be going next. I would probably be thinking, right, do I want a consultancy post?'

'Very good timing, I think... because of the role I'd just stepped into... I knew I'd got a lot to learn, a lot to grow into, and I was hoping this would help me'

'I was doing my supervision course, got the secondment into the lecturer practitioner post, so obviously getting an idea of the politics around education and that sort of thing – so I think at that stage, that would have been a good time'

Learning: internal and external learning opportunities

'What it did was help me to develop resilience. Helped me to tap into the strengths I already have, and maybe just work on the limitations'

Coaching: 'And that wealth of experience that she's got. So she, you know, understood exactly where I was coming from... That time was really good, to be able to just get away and think, oh actually, it's not as bad as I think it is'

Peer support: 'Networking with others, meeting with other matrons and heads of midwifery... Learning about what challenges they were facing and how they were dealing with it... Without the course, maybe I wouldn't have had that opportunity'

Keeping the Learning Going: personal and contextual challenges

Maintaining networks: 'We did email back and forward, and whatever, but I think we've all gone back to our own places now. We've all got back into our own work'

Being back at the coalface: 'It's the same old frustrations of time, resources, and you just start to do something and somebody pulls the rug from under your feet... You have a plan in place, of where you want to go, and then something will come out of the blue on top of it'

Support from the programme provider: 'I've not heard anything from them for a while... There was a flurry initially, and then it's quietened down now, really'

Conclusions:

The timing of the programme reflected criticisms from elsewhere in healthcare leadership development: participants were often coming toward the end of their career, and identified the importance of appropriate timing for development opportunities.

A range of learning opportunities was identified, and these reflect broader literature suggesting the importance of attending to personal development alongside the acquisition of skills and competences. The importance of undertaking leadership development programmes alongside peers and learning from coaches appeared highly significant.

Individuals who undergo leadership development programmes struggle to maintain their learning and enthusiasm if organisational support is not ongoing, emphasising the importance of a joined up learning-workplace interface, with opportunities to implement new learning within the day-to-day role.