



## NCVO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT Good employment practice case study

### Developing a leadership programme at our organisation

*Jenny Hilliard is the Assistant Director Human Resources at [Asthma UK](#). She spoke to us about the implementation of a leadership and organisational development (OD) programme that is currently being rolled out to managers nationwide.*

#### 1. How did this come about? What brought this issue to light?

A new chief executive joined the organisation about two years ago and led the development of a new three year rolling strategy. Effective leadership is core to Asthma UK's ability to deliver this strategy, which requires the organisation to:

- develop a greater 'customer' culture reflecting an intention to be influenced by the experiences and priorities of people with asthma
- [become a learning organisation](#) by investing in individual development but translating that into organisation learning, strategic innovation and continual improvement.

In 2008, a staff survey was conducted with questions directly related to both leadership and management. Results showed that 69% of respondents had confidence in the organisation's leadership and just 31% thought that managers across the charity treated people consistently. This data added weight to an existing commitment to strengthen the organisation's leadership capabilities and enabled the senior management team to 'sell' the idea of a leadership development programme to staff on the basis that this would address their feedback whilst also driving the business forward.

In the past, leadership development had been focused on formal, traditional learning methods and had not given sufficient weight to sustainability nor had sufficient flexibility to adapt to the learning needs of participants. A programme was designed with the intention of providing managers with practical tools in an experiential way, with opportunities for learning to be sustained during managers' day jobs through integration into related project activity.

#### 2. What were the aims?

To build a community of inspired and effective leaders who vigorously lead the continuous improvement of the organisation.

The programme was aimed at all managers within Asthma UK comprising:

- The Chief Executive and Executive Directors – the Executive Team.
- Assistant and National Directors.
- Managers.

### **3. Who was involved?**

Firstly, Asthma UK went out to tender to secure a consultant to design and facilitate a programme that met business needs. Jenny explained that managers needed to be fully behind the programme which led her to assemble a voluntary panel of nine managers representative of each directorate and across management tiers whose purpose it was to:

- appoint a consultant whose approach and values were congruent with organisational values and culture
- adopt responsibility for ongoing timely reviews and evaluation of the programme
- act as internal champions for leadership and management development.

This panel was used to assess three potential providers who each attended a two hour pitch that included a short presentation demonstrating an understanding of Asthma UK's vision for leadership and compatibility of approach based on their own values, previous relevant experience and methodology and a 45 minute taster session.

Following the tender process, the panel unanimously agreed that one of providers demonstrated a holistic approach to leadership and organisational development using experiential methods that seemed a good fit with the charity's objectives around leadership development and ensuring learning is sustained by integrating the programme into people's day to day work.

### **4. What did you do? How did you plan it?**

Once appointed, the provider held individual meetings with each member of the Executive Team and ran focus groups with the Assistant/National Director group and managers. The purpose of these discussions was to understand the needs of managers across the different tiers and to prioritise those needs focusing on the critical few that will add the most value.

In addition to these discussions, HR had previously led workshops with senior managers to explore priorities for each directorate over the next three years in implementing the new strategy. These workshops looked at the three main priorities for each directorate, what needed to change in order to address these priorities and the people implications associated with this.

### **5. How was it designed? What format did it take?**

Based on the main themes emerging from these discussions, the provider designed a programme consisting of five two day modules to run over a period of approximately nine months. A summary of each module follows:

Module 1: 'Valuing leadership and management', aimed at clarifying 'what good looks like' for effective leadership and management in Asthma UK.

Module 2: 'Leading change and improvement in times of anxiety and ambiguity', aimed at increasing capability to lead and manage continuous change and improvement.

Module 3: 'Cultivating high performance', aimed at increasing capability to create the conditions for high performance at Asthma UK.

Module 4: 'Working partnerships', aimed at increasing capability to work together and serve the charity's customers.

Module 5: 'Building influential relationships', aimed at increasing the charity's capability to influence others.

## **6. How was it delivered?**

In order to inform all staff (including non-managers) about the programme and encourage buy in from an early stage, the panel recommended a launch event which took place in June 2009. In the run up to this event, the panel designed an all staff activity where people were invited to identify an inspirational leader and put a picture of them on a 'leader board' in the main office accompanied by no more than 50 words explaining why they find that person inspirational. Numerous entries were received, which were reviewed by the panel in three categories – most inspirational, unusual and controversial.

The all staff launch event comprised:

- Introduction by the Chief Executive to clarify the context, rationale and perceived benefits of the programme.
- An explanation from two panel members of the tender process and an introduction to the provider.
- A brief overview of the programme from the provider including his own background in leadership and organisational development.
- Prizes for the three winners from 'leader board'.
- An all staff activity where people were asked to pick out their top five leadership qualities from a selection of 20 picked from the 'leader board' summaries. These top five qualities from across the organisation were linked into the content for the first module which followed a week later.

The staff event was followed by three separate smaller group sessions with managers to talk through their hopes and fears about the programme and to offer further clarity on the process and the content for each of the five modules.

## **The modules**

The modules are currently being delivered by the provider. Participants are mixed in terms of level with Directors, Assistant/National Directors and managers attending modules together in three streams to ensure manageable groups. In between modules, the Executive Team meet to review how each module went, talk about organisational issues that were raised during discussions and how these will be taken forward and agree content for the next module.

In addition in between each module managers meet with their peers for a learning review. These peer learning reviews are run as [action learning sets \(ALS\)](#) and they offer the opportunity for managers at the same level to review and share their learning in confidence and talk through/offer support to each other on specific challenges or issues that they are dealing with. Members of the panel have been trained in facilitation skills to lead these review meetings. The organisation intends to eventually roll the ALS module out across the charity beyond the leadership and organisational development programme. They have been effective in helping to sustain the learning from each module and maintain momentum.

Learning from the modules is also being sustained through separate project work completed by discrete teams of managers across the charity who are working on progressing organisational issues raised during the streams, for example on how Asthma UK can become a learning organisation.

## **7. What went well in the implementation?**

1) All managers are going through the same programme meaning they can hold each other accountable in terms of outcomes. For example, during the first module, participants made a commitment to use a simple model for structuring meetings and reviewing processes based on identifying the purpose, outputs and process for each. This is now being used across the charity helping people to achieve change by ensuring everyone is clear on what they are trying to achieve. Processes and meetings with no clear purpose or outputs have been dropped, minimising wastage.

2) Leadership and organisation development together – the experiential nature of the programme in which theory is minimal means that learning can be applied to real issues, e.g. asking what do we need to do to become more customer focused or how do we become a learning organisation?

3) Being able to involve all staff members through things like the 'leader board' was beneficial in ensuring all staff understood what the programme aims to achieve and were involved in the process by offering their views and feedback. Each module is preceded by an all staff activity linked to the content of the module and there is feedback from the Executive Team following each module on how staff feedback will be used.

## **8. What barriers did you face?**

The impact of the recession has led Asthma UK to reduce the programme from five to four modules during the budgeting process for the current financial year. This final module may be added back into the programme at a later stage.

Evaluation measures are hard to get right but it is worth putting time into perfecting them at the beginning of the planning process in order to establish what value a programme such as this adds to organisational effectiveness.

Time seems to have been the biggest barrier. Everyone understands the need for a leadership and organisational development programme but at the beginning, there were reservations about the amount of time this would involve, ie five two day modules with peer learning, project work and time for individual reflection in between each one. As the programme has progressed, people have come to appreciate the value of their learning in enabling them to become more effective in their work and also the need to spend time reflecting on how to implement their learning and sharing this with colleagues.

## **9. What would you do differently?**

Given concerns over the time commitment and the importance of reflection and shared learning to sustain momentum, greater investment in the promotion of collaboration and shared learning is required.

Ensure that evaluation and the definition of clear, tangible success criteria is well thought through at the very beginning of the process.

## **10. Any future developments in the pipeline?**

The organisation understands that new people will join and that some will have missed aspects of the programme for example due to maternity leave. The HR team are in the process of addressing this so that there is consistent understanding of the learning coming out of the programme across the management community. Although the charity would like to invest in leadership and organisational development every year, budgets are limited and it is therefore intended that there will be a greater emphasis in the future on in house facilitation, shared learning and action learning.

## **11. Final comments/advice for others?**

Get managers involved, for example by forming a panel to input into the design process and ongoing communication around the programme. Be clear about the extent of their involvement and ensure you keep them informed of developments.

It is often challenging finding time to reflect but this is essential if the learning is to be sustained. Senior managers need to lead by example by giving people protected time and opportunities to implement their learning and make the changes discussed during modules.

Ensure the content for each module is relevant and that people can see how it applies to them in a practical way. Use experiential exercises based on real case studies or organisational issues and use time during modules to drive forward working on the business.

Involve all staff in activities that relate to the programme and include them in appropriate ways in communication. Ensure the activities you design are fun and engaging and use them to create debate within the organisation.

Make sure you are clear up front about what the programme needs to achieve – what change do you want to see and what do you expect to be different in say 6, 12 or 18 months time?