



## **Making Space – more focus on our big challenges and opportunities**

Which comes first? The chicken or the egg?

Is it clutter which stops us from seeing the important issues in our work and lives? If we could declutter our e mails, diary, texts, meetings, office desk, book shelves etc would we be in a better place to give attention to what really matters and to tackle our big challenges and opportunities?

Or is it the other way round?

Does lack of clarity about what really matters – or even fear of the big challenges and opportunities – result in us letting clutter distract us? If we really know what we are trying to achieve at the deepest level does it become easy to channel our energy and know what to give attention to and what to leave alone.

Essentially this was the design question we asked ourselves when we set out to develop a Making Space programme aimed to help NHS Wakefield District ‘release time and talent to focus on the too difficult health challenges’. How would we balance the decluttering or ‘attic clearing’ approach with a deeper focus on clarifying core purpose and priorities and improving dialogue and performance around these.

Previous work across the organisation had highlighted frustration felt by people at every level with the time spent dealing with the high volumes of e mails and meetings – which often felt unproductive. ‘If only we could control the number of meetings.... If we didn’t copy everyone in on e mail.....If only we could reduce the number and length of papers which get limited use...’

As we began to shape an approach to help find a way through this we were acutely conscious of the risk of adding more clutter to the system with ‘another development programme’. Yet we knew that something was stuck in the current system and wanted to make an intervention which would get momentum and help lots of people take action in a positive way together. Working with our OD partner in Wakefield and using experience from the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement linked to research by David Allen we started to build an approach which involved Directorates working on their own Making Space challenges. We acted as catalysts by facilitating four short (2.5 hours) whole- team sessions over a six month period.

Initially the interest and focus was in 'attic clearing' and we began by sharing some tools and approaches to stimulate suggestions on how to create more space. Seemingly small changes could make a big difference. For example marking e mails for action or information; acknowledging and addressing the number of meetings without clear agendas and follow-up actions; tackling the habit of late starting and finishing of meetings which one Director calculated resulted in two to three hours of lost productive time each week; creating Directorate 'protected time' at a point in the week where diaries would be kept clear of meetings.

Our pulse-taking feedback indicated that these changes were making a difference – even though the approaches were all adopted on a voluntary basis by individuals.

But as the programme progressed we began to see a shift in the question which people were asking against the original aims. 'I think we're getting better at managing our time but are we really using this time more productively to tackle our difficult challenges?'

This focus was heightened by the political context following the change of government and announcement of more change in the NHS.

So the focus seemed naturally to shift to the 'core purpose and priorities' dimension. We continued to use the short facilitated sessions but noticed a change in the quality and depth of dialogue and attention as groups wanted to give more attention to impact, outcomes and effectiveness than time management. Now the dialogue was about crystallising priorities, joining up projects, listening to each others' ideas and challenging mindsets – with a desire for more external focus on health outcomes than internal processes.

As the formal programme draws to a close the feedback indicates that it has been most valued at different levels but most markedly – and perhaps most importantly – through the 'space' created through the sessions themselves.

No more and no less than this.

Not the time management techniques (though these help); nor the sharing and updating of priorities and progress with each other (though these are also important); but simply having time to reflect and talk honestly about what really matters to us.

A useful lesson for work and life.

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