

Watch and learn: what the NHS has got to learn from other industries says Health Service Journal

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It's all too easy to assume that working methods that are successful in other industries may not be applicable to healthcare but, just as with people skills, some systems are transferable, says Matthew Shelley

Increasingly, the health service is being urged to tap into other sectors for fresh ideas on how to generate innovation and change.

In April NHS England chief executive Simon Stevens summed up his vision for the service by saying: "The NHS needs to become the best at harnessing the best, whether spreading good ideas from within, learning from other industries, or cherry picking from other countries."

'Improvement must be everyone's responsibility and this needs to be in the organisational DNA'

One company in particular believes the way it turned around its business could be a valuable lesson for a challenged NHS. When Unipart, a major manufacturing and logistics company which employs 8,000 people, faced a "do or die" situation, it was able to make changes that almost completely eliminated customer dissatisfaction.

But how much can really be learned from other industries? Just because something works elsewhere does not necessarily make it right for healthcare.

Change to survive

Mr Stevens' vision is not about "cutting and pasting" methods from elsewhere, insists Amanda Molloy, head of healthcare at Unipart Expert Practices. Instead, a distinctive approach is needed. "Our advice to the NHS is to work with the best, but to find its own way of doing things," she says.

That is exactly what Unipart did in its darkest days, and now it is a global evangelist for continuous improvement through staff engagement.

Ms Molloy reflects: "We had to change to survive. We had one customer - who wasn't happy - and a workforce that was disengaged. So we started to look at the best in the world - companies like Toyota and Honda. No one organisation did it all, so we learned from them and then created a complete system of our own."

'The NHS cannot afford to ignore outside influences'

The result was a process of continuous improvement known as the "Unipart way", which was rolled out across the business. This is now spreading far beyond, via its Expert Practices consultancy business. Unipart's emphasis is now on developing the right skills within an organisation to bring about transformational change, while engaging the workforce.

Ms Molloy is acutely aware that within the NHS there are many grand organisational development programmes run by outside experts that wither away. This is because they are unsuitable and fail to take root in the minds of employees or the culture of the organisation, she says.

Ms Molloy has seen great examples of excellence within the NHS, but argues that improvement must be everyone's responsibility and this needs to be in the organisational DNA.

For this to happen it is essential to:

- have a fully committed leadership team;
- have safe, repeatable, reliable and capable processes that add value to patients, and which are under control and continuously improving;
- ensure every member of staff is engaged and capable of delivering improvements;
- have places to go and learn (Unipart has a “corporate university” for its employees); and
- have an organisational structure that actively seeks out shortfalls, bottlenecks and problems, then deals with them in a sustainable way.

“[The process] is not an add-on, it’s the essence,” explains Ms Molloy. “It starts with induction, it’s built into contracts and is a part of daily experience and practice. We put a great deal of work into creating a culture where people really believe that the company is not afraid of problems and challenges but seeks them out in order to improve.”

She recalls a warehouse visit by 15 NHS executives who went away “buzzing” after meeting frontline staff and their sense of purpose.

One obstacle, Ms Molloy has found, is the misconception that radical approaches from elsewhere will not work for them.

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“We took the ‘Unipart way’ into logistics and they said it wouldn’t work there because they were different [to manufacturing]. But it did. The fact is, I have never found a service or an industry where it doesn’t work.”

The message is clear: whether it is coming from Unipart, John Lewis or from US surgeons, the NHS should not ignore outside influences; indeed, it should be seeking them out.