Doing Transformational Change in the English National Health Service in the Context of 'Big Bang' Redisorganisation: Findings from an Evaluation of the North East Transformation System

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North East Region

• 74,000 NHS Staff
• 2.5 million population

North East Transformation System

• No barriers to health & well being
• No avoidable deaths, injury or illness
• No avoidable pain or suffering
• No helplessness
• No unnecessary waiting or delays
• No waste
• No inequality

Virginia Mason Production System (based on the Toyota Production System)

Research Design

• Case study design
• Mixed methods
• Qualitative research: document analysis, semi-structured interviews, observation, focus groups
• Quantitative research: Interrupted Time Series (ITS) analysis

Receptive contexts for change
Impact of 2012-13 NHS Changes on NETS: Stratagems Adopted

Variable impact across 14 study sites
- Work ceased (because of merger)
- Stalled (diversion of resources)
- Slower pace of change (insufficient resources)
- Proceeded as planned (mature, resilient organisations; change embedded)

Illustrative Quotes (1): Commitment and consistency of purpose

"The most important thing is to have that organisational commitment and the leadership and the consistency of purpose really to just keep going at it and be prepared for it to take time. It's quite difficult in circumstances where, you know, people are coming along and saying you have to reduce your budget by 25% over the next four years or something."

Illustrative Quotes (2): Survival

"We're going through incredible change. We were striving to become a community foundation trust...and hoping to be one of the first in the country. Now we're unable to do that for reasons completely outside of our control, so it's another change. We were planning on becoming an organisation in our own right where we would be in complete control and in charge of what we were striving to achieve. A huge risk to that is whichever organisation we end up being part of, what's their view on Lean and our philosophy and way of working?"

Illustrative Quotes (3): Combining the threads

"I found the visit to Virginia Mason absolutely inspirational... What it did was it showed me what a hospital can become with the consistent application of this methodology and entwining it with their leadership and management development strategy and their OD strategy. So it's like a rope. Each of the threads is strong but actually when you interweave it, it becomes even stronger."

Illustrative Quotes (4): Embedding the change

"I think it's slow embedding. It's not been whom barm we are now displaying these behaviours. It's a slow embedding of the process. It's the same with the quality system. A lot of staff have been through improvement activity...and they become quite passionate converts. It's about displaying the behaviours but is a sustained journey. Initially the Trust committed to 10 years. I don't think we could do it rapidly; it's not something you embed as an organisation in rapid or a fixed time."
Illustrative Quotes (5): VMPS or other Lean methods

We were signed up to NETS...and whilst we have got a commitment to do Lean management techniques and make savings and efficiencies wherever we can, we just weren’t using the VMPS.

[Director of Corporate Development, acute hospitals trust]

Continued...

I know we will keep pure to the model [VMPS] and I want to keep pure to the model because there must be a reason why Toyota despite their blip has been the most successful car company in the world...and the totality of the approach isn’t applying Lean techniques in an ad hoc way, it’s the way it’s linked with their people management approach...

[CEO, mental health trust]

[NIQT Lead, mental health trust]

Critical Factors in Maintaining a Commitment to NETS

• Stable leadership
• Long-term commitment to, and investment in, large-scale training programmes
• Widespread acknowledgement by staff of a need to adopt different working practices
• Choice of method – VMPS or non-VMPS – not a determining factor

Generic Learning Points for Transformational Change

• The precise choice of Lean method may be less important than to what purpose it is being put and the fact that one exists
• Allowing flexibility over means while being tight about ends may be optimal when (a) the whole system is at risk of major change, and (b) embedding takes time
• At a time of major upheaval, a top-down led approach carries risks if it can’t be maintained; engaging individuals at all levels in leading the change effort in a distributed model may minimise the risk
• Change has to be embedded in the work, not occur somewhere else and be imposed

Last Word

Medicine is a social science, and politics nothing else but medicine on a large scale.

Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902)

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