Peer-to-peer coaching and mentoring scheme for trainee doctors

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Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS Trust

What was the problem?

Trainee doctors in the NHS have little time to think about personal and professional development. Sickness rates among the trust’s trainees were high and staff survey results disappointing.

What was the solution?

The trust set up a peer-to-peer coaching and mentoring scheme for trainees to help them develop skills such as resilience, stress management, goal-setting and task prioritisation. Coaching techniques enable the individual to determine what is important to them and achieve their full potential. Feeling supported, valued and heard improves their resilience and their experience of working.

The programme teaches trainees basic coaching and mentoring skills so they can offer peer support to colleagues and be more effective in future roles – in education, management and leadership. Trainees meet monthly to learn coaching techniques and spend one to two hours acting as coach and pupil, supervised by a trained executive coach. The meetings are held out of hours and attendance is voluntary. The coach offers advice and support at each session and further support is available from a coach supervisor attending quarterly.

Trainees learn a range of techniques to enrich guided conversations directed at achieving their goals. They acquire transferrable skills that develop their emotional and conversational intelligence, confidence and resilience. In addition to this programme, the trust offers trainees one-to-one coaching with a trained coach.

What were the challenges?

Operating out of hours makes it difficult for trainees to attend consistently. The trust needed an adaptable and flexible approach to session planning, so it could provide a basic introduction or advanced techniques to different people in the same session. Involving experienced, enthusiastic trainees when setting up the programme enabled it to split the sessions into introductory and advanced groups when needed. It uses word of mouth, induction events, regular emails and posters to promote the sessions among trainees.
The programme had to gain trust and recognition from the board and the postgraduate centre management team. The trainees themselves were key to this: they demonstrated their achievements from a pilot study, and used convincing and influencing techniques learned from coaching.

The financial cost is payment of the trained coaches and supervisor (0.5 PA shared).

What were the results?

In six months the trust reached 16% of its trainees in a broad range of specialties: Foundation Years 1 and 2, anaesthetics, acute care common stem, surgery, paediatrics and radiology. Feedback was excellent.

Typical comments included:

- “Gave me a totally new perspective on communication skills.”
- “It will change my approach to colleagues and the way I interact with others.”
- “I would definitely recommend coaching and mentoring service at RCHT for other trainees.”

The trust continues to monitor participants’ comments and record external feedback. It asks trainees about the impact of coaching on their day-to-day work and career progression (completed audits, presentations, publications, exams and jobs secured) towards the end of the year. The postgraduate centre management team was sufficiently convinced by the results to continue funding.
What were the learning points?

Trainees do not participate in a formal coaching course, are not examined or qualified, and cannot call themselves coaches at the end of the programme. Instead, the trust helps them acquire new skills to support and encourage each other, improve the way they communicate and structure their thinking. This is the first step to becoming an excellent teacher, trainer, mentor and leader of the future.

Next steps and sustainability

As word spreads, the trust hopes to extend the programme's reach, attracting more trainees and making it an essential part of their local experience. The trust will gather objective evidence of the programme’s impact as it expands, including successful career milestones.

Evidence and feedback are vital to secure continuous funding, which comes from the postgraduate training budget. The backing of local medical education and postgraduate centre staff is crucial for providing the venue, administration and publicity, as well as for promoting the scheme among trainees and supervisors.

Want to know more?

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To see the other case studies in this series: visit the NHS Improvement website at:
https://improvement.nhs.uk/resources/engaging-supporting-and-valuing-doctors-in-training/