Promoting change through peer review

In 1995, the Learning Network for Peer Review of Nursing Services was set up by seven trusts to improve nursing services through peer review. Becky Malby and Steve Manning describe how it works.

Organisations, whether in business or public service, are becoming ever more complex and prone to constant and unexpected change. People within the NHS are continually striving to adapt to new policy priorities, developments in practice, political and local changes. The purchaser-provider split and competition for nurse leaders with organisational learning can only be realised by using a deliberately chosen network of individuals with appropriate balance and mix of backgrounds for learning which, when combined, is likely to find better solutions for the critical issues facing the firm. Learning in network is thus the key.

Each trust put forward three nurse representatives – one from board level, a middle manager or project leader, and a nurse in a clinical leadership role.

Key principles

The network has adopted a learning approach to nursing service review and has been guided by six key principles:
- It is important to reflect by doing, rather than by simply thinking retrospectively. This brings experiences alive and gives learning real meaning.
- For learning to be effective, participants need to share the thinking and values which underpin it.
- The learning environment should be one of collaboration, not competition.
- Participants in the network must be keen to learn from others and support others in an atmosphere of trust and openness.
- To achieve change, people need to be aware of underlying assumptions, norms and accepted practices in the organisation, and to be encouraged to imagine other options.
- The process should enable learning to be put into practice and 'weighed up' in the particular circumstances of each organisation.
- People at all levels in an organisation should contribute to improving organisational practices and enhancing performance.

Peer review

Peer review in this context is rather like 'holding up a mirror'. The aim of the review team is to help the organisation gain a better understanding of its strengths and weaknesses, opportunities for improvement, priorities for action and future potential.

The review entails one individual asking questions of another, to explore organisational and professional beliefs, behaviour, practices and outcomes. It also incorporates observation of practice and discussion with individuals, including patients, who come into contact with nurses. It may also include focus group discussions.

The image that emerges of the reviewed organisation usually comes as no surprise. It helps the organisation, however, 'to see the wood for the trees' and focus on the main priorities for action. The individuals involved benefit in terms of enhanced knowledge and skills. Experiences, ideas and initiatives are shared and review participants usually stay in touch with one another after the review to share information and support. Comments have included:
- 'It was fascinating to see the inner workings of another trust - I have been able to make helpful comparisons.'
- 'There is great value in sharing experiences and expertise at senior nurse level.'

The process

The review process took place over a period of about a year and involved the following steps:

Step 1 A shared framework for review was developed during a two-day workshop.

Step 2 This framework was used as the basis for a self-review within each organisation, the results of which served to sharpen the focus of peer review.

Step 3 Peer review teams were established, each comprising four individuals from different trusts with a facilitator, and a programme of reviews and network meetings.

Step 4 Terms of reference for each peer

Box 1. The trust nursing teams involved

Birmingham Children's Hospital
Essex Rivers Healthcare
Heatherwood & Wexham Park Hospitals
North Staffordshire Hospitals
Royal Hull Hospitals
St Mary's NHS Trust, Paddington, London
South Manchester University Hospital
review were agreed between the organisation to be reviewed and the review team. These incorporate aims and objectives, assumptions, 'ground rules', and respective roles and responsibilities.

**Step 5** Skills development – all network participants were involved in at least one review other than their own and participated in a workshop to develop review and feedback skills.

**Step 6** Peer review visits were made to each organisation over two to three days, giving immediate verbal feedback and discussion, and a brief written report was presented.

**Step 7** Learning took place through sharing of experiences, issues, ideas, initiatives and ways of tackling problems, both at and between network meetings. Each meeting incorporated topical issues, concerns and interests, as well as peer review business.

**Step 8** The process and its outcomes are continuously evaluated.

**The review framework**

The framework for review developed by the network comprises a series of key themes, explanatory statements, an outline of 'areas to explore' and associated questions to prompt and guide discussion. The key themes are:

- Client-centred care
- A strategic approach
- Practice development
- Personal and professional development
- Staff motivation and satisfaction
- Roles and responsibilities
- Clinical outcomes.

**Peer review models**

Each organisation approached the process differently and the following models for self-review emerged:

- A review by the trust’s participants in the network
- A review by teams of nurses drawn from across the trust, simulating the process of peer review
- A review by means of focus group discussions, facilitated by network participants from within the trust
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- Self-review on the part of various teams of nurses across the trust, sometimes confined to those to be included in peer review.

Each peer review was tailored to the trust being reviewed, probing the findings of the self-review. Some reviews covered all the framework themes while others focused on a selection. Most covered a cross-section of clinical areas and nursing teams.

In one trust the review focused on one directorate and in another it covered an example of a patient 'journey' through the hospital. Some reviews focused on one hospital site while others covered several sites within the trust, enabling differences between them to be explored.

Comments included:

> 'I learnt a surprising amount about the organisation, its successes, its problems and its culture.'

> 'Although the process might appear just to skim the surface, there is sufficient information gained to focus thinking and provide a jumping off point for the future.'

**Learning and outcomes**

In addition to the personal development of participants, especially in terms of team working, the process supports organisational development through:

- Self-review, which generates local ownership for nursing services development and highlights a range of local strengths, weaknesses and issues to be tackled.
- Peer review, which provides a 'fresh' outside perspective on the organisation, enabling it to see itself differently and sharpening its focus on priorities for action and opportunities for development.
- Ideas generated by the review process locally and 'imported' by network participants following their visits to other organisations.

**Most organisations involved gained energy, focus, new ideas and confidence. It was crucial to give as well as take from the network**

The participants felt there were many benefits gained from the process (Box 2). These included:

- It is owned by the network – 'we don’t have to do it, we want to do it'
- It is meaningful to the local situation
- It generates enthusiasm for review, learning and development throughout the nursing service
- It captures the whole picture of nursing, not just a part
- It enables each trust to tackle its own priorities for development in partnership with others.

**Reflections**

The network has learnt a lot about how the process works and has identified how it can be further refined. Most organisations involved gained energy, focus, new ideas and confidence. It was crucial for organisations to sign up to an 'unscientific' approach, and to give as well as take from the network. In particular, network participants learnt how peer review can be used in support of self-review.

Self-review has been the most beneficial part of the process for some organisations, especially because learning and skills can be spread widely across the organisation. Undertaking internal review is an undervalued and difficult process, but one that is crucial to success.

**Conclusion**

Peer review can make a valuable contribution to organisational and personal development and professional practice. Perhaps the main benefit is in developing an organisational culture that welcomes peer review processes.

**Reference**


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