



Case Study: The Great Appraiser

Organisational Details

Musgrove Park Hospital is part of Taunton and Somerset NHS Foundation Trust and is the largest General Hospital in Somerset serving a population of over 340,000 and employing about 4000 staff.

Each year 34,000 patients are admitted as emergencies; 10,000 patients are admitted for elective surgery; 28,000 are seen for day case surgery; 300,000 outpatient appointments are held; 49,000 attend Accident and Emergency, 3,000 babies are born in the Maternity Department and 170,000 diagnostics tests are carried out.

In 2009/10 the hospital had a budget of £230m with over 700 beds, 15 operating theatres, an Intensive Care and High Dependency Unit, a Medical Admissions Unit, a fully equipped Diagnostic Imaging Department and a specialised Children's Department including a Paediatric High Dependency Bay. Musgrove Park also provides Neonatal Intensive Care for all of Somerset.

The Challenge

Musgrove Park aims to be a high quality, constantly improving hospital, providing excellent clinical services in an efficient, effective and integrated way. Staff feedback in the National NHS Staff Survey and internal assessment conducted while formulating the Trust's organisational development and leadership strategy had highlighted a need to further improve the quality of appraisal.

While the number of appraisals taking place was relatively high, there were questions about how aligned appraisal was in supporting the Trust to achieve its overarching aims. With clear appraisal policies already in place the focus was on ensuring appraisers were equipped with the appropriate knowledge and skills to conduct effective, objective-focused appraisals. With limited information available on appraisers' strengths and development needs, the first step was to understand more about the support needed.

"We were looking to understand more about the quality of our appraisals, and get help in setting actions to address any issues."

Identifying Appraiser Strengths and Development Needs

Aware of Think Associates' independent research within the NHS to identify the key competencies demonstrated by effective appraisers Martin Penny, Taunton's Lead Advisor for Organisational Leadership, commissioned a 'Great Appraiser' multi-source feedback project to test some of the organisation's internal assumptions about what support was needed most and guide future strategy.

The 'Great Appraiser' framework seeks to differentiate the personal behaviours and competencies that an effective appraiser needs to demonstrate and not measure technical knowledge about, for example, KSF or appraisal policies. The competencies are designed to ensure that the resulting data is a useful input to development discussions rather than an assessment of performance and are grouped under the following categories:

- Preparation
- Assessment
- Managing the Appraisal Meeting
- Interpersonal Skills
- Future Focus
- Personal Qualities
- Process Requirements

The project comprised of 15 appraisers (“targets”) from a range of medical, clinical and non-clinical roles. The appraisers were invited to select between 5 and 10 people (“raters”) who work with them, and know enough about their working style and skills to be able to give feedback about their appraisal competencies. The feedback was given anonymously via a secure online survey and participants were also asked to give feedback on the process itself.

“360-feedback is a difficult process to do well; it often depends on the culture of the staff undertaking it and those involved in the feedback so competent and experienced facilitation is essential.”

In line with best practice, the individual appraisers then discussed the resulting individual reports created by Think with a skilled feedback coach whose role was to assist with interpretation of the report and help provide focus around what actions could be taken to develop further.

“The survey identified areas where our appraisers were doing really well – most staff were happy with their appraisal. But we also identified some specific high-impact areas for organisational improvement.”

Collective anonymous results for the group were then analysed to produce a sample perspective of the wider organisational position which corroborated much of the existing knowledge and information. It also highlighted specific strengths such as appraisers’ ability to:

- create rapport and engage with their appraisees; and
- recognise and praise good performance

Alongside areas requiring improvement such as appraisers’ ability to:

- create the time and atmosphere for reflection and analysis ; and
- manage achievement of goals by following through on agreed actions, encouraging ownership by the appraisee and giving ongoing attention to their performance

What Did We Learn?

Initial efforts to launch the ‘Great Appraiser’ project stumbled through insufficient early communication and confusion about what was expected. This was quickly remedied through 1 to 1 briefing sessions with each of the “targets” and direct communication with the “raters” via team meetings, email and telephone. As a result, subsequent cohorts benefit from more structured and explicit preparation.

Feedback about the process itself also produced useful learning by revealing a number of staff were unclear about the purpose of appraisal within the organisation and the benefits of participating in it. If such concerns were taken as proportionally representative of the wider population, the detrimental impact on the delivery of high quality appraisals could be significant – managers and staff understanding the purpose and benefits of appraisal can be a major factor in overcoming issues such as appraisals being seen as too bureaucratic and time-consuming or being little more than ‘tick-box’ exercises.

Benefits Realised for Appraisers and the Organisation as a Whole

Overall, the principle benefits for the appraisers being rated were:

- Structured feedback to help them understand where they have strong appraisal skills
- A gap analysis highlighting priority areas for development

“We have incorporated the findings of this project into a report linking the NHS Staff Survey with our future OD strategy.”

For the organisation, key benefits included:

- Greater understanding of how effectively objectives were being cascaded through the appraisal process
- How the appraisal process was contributing to organisational development
- Insight into levels of staff engagement
- Assurance of robust management practices
- Focus for developmental strategies

Key Lessons for All

1. Confirm the vision for appraisal in terms of its organisational role.
2. Ensure there are clear definitions of the quality standards that are expected and that these are communicated fully across the organisation to all appraisers and appraisees in a way that it is seen as value-adding.
3. Continually ask for and collate appraisee feedback on their appraisals as part of a staff engagement process.
4. Encourage all appraisers to reflect on their appraisal practice and be proactive in developing their associated skills with appropriate coaching support.

If you would like to run a similar project, or just know more, please contact Rob Winson via email (rob@think-associates.co.uk) or phone 07766 41 55 33.

“Working with Think on this project was excellent; Rob was very helpful and we received a high level of support.”

Thank you to Martin Penny for his contribution to the creation of this case study.