

TRANSCRIPT

Leadership series – Professor Neil Watson



Paul Parsons - This is Not a Consultation. I'm Paul Parsons.

Caroline Latta - And I'm Caroline Latta. Welcome to Not Consultation

Paul Parsons - Our podcast on all things patient and public involvement and NHS service change.

Caroline Latta - Hello, everyone, and welcome to the third episode in our series exploring leadership with experienced service change leaders.

Paul Parsons - In this series, we're talking to different service change leaders about the projects they've been involved in, what they've learned about leadership and their tips for aspiring service change leaders.

Caroline Latta - Today we're talking to Professor Neil Watson, who is the Director of Pharmacy at Newcastle Upon Tyne Hospitals. Previously, he was the Chief Operating Officer for the North East and North Cumbria COVID-19 Vaccination Programme. We're looking forward to finding out more about his experiences leading one of the most impactful service changes in living memory.

Paul Parsons - Hello, Neil. Welcome to Not a Consultation. Thanks for joining us today.

Neil Watson - Hi, Paul, thanks for the invitation.

Paul Parsons - We've got a number of questions for you, so can you just tell us about your career background? What brought you to your chair today?

Neil Watson - So I'm a hospital pharmacist and been a hospital pharmacist for the last 35 years. That's quite hard to say when you realise you've been in the service for that long. Always within the NHS. Initially worked in Edinburgh for a couple of years and went then down to the big city in London and worked there for a number of years, and then in 2007 moved up to North East of England to work in Newcastle.

Caroline Latta - Pharmacy into service reconfiguration is an unusual path. So what brought you to service reconfiguration?

Neil Watson - So I think within pharmacy, I'd always been interested in innovation in its broadest sense and had always been looking for ways to modernise a pharmacy service. Very often that had been through using digital means and digital enablers had always been something with a great interest of mine. So we were one of the first very large organisations, for example, to go live with electronic prescribing back in 2009, and there have been many, many more since. And that allowed us to very significantly transform the way that pharmacy worked, but actually the way that medicines were supplied and used within our patients, within the hospital. So innovation has always been there for me, and therefore service transformation within pharmacy was a large part of what I was doing anyway. So to use those skills and service transformation more broadly was quite a natural transition.

Caroline Latta - Tell us about leading the vaccination programme, one of the biggest service reconfigurations in the history of the NHS. Tell us about leading that project.

Neil Watson - Yeah, leading the vaccination programme was an extraordinary part of my career. It was an absolute honour to be involved in leading a programme like that. It

certainly wasn't without its challenges, but it wasn't without its excitement as well, because it was certainly one of the most important things that I have done in my career. And I suppose there'll be a point where I might look back and think, actually, it was the most important thing that I led and was involved in. It was quite a journey, really all in all.

It began for me in September 2020, which might sound quite early for listeners, but we started to get the sense at that point, even though we were only kind of nine months into the pandemic, that vaccines might be coming through and we needed to start planning. So in the North East and North Cumbria, we were perhaps quite quick to it and we were on a front foot in that regard. And so we began planning about what a vaccination programme might look like. And so we were very quick to realise that you were going to have to collaborate, involve primary care and general practise in particular, but also community pharmacy, but also getting into partnership with colleagues in local authorities, which was a real joy and a new aspect for me through public health, but also education leads.

So the vaccination programme really transformed for me the way I was thinking about leadership and the way I would work as a leader within a complex system and working with people from whom you don't have direct responsibility and that you need to engage and influence in very different ways and to motivate others to work with you. So the vaccination programme for me was a joy, but also a massive challenge.

Paul Parsons - That's an awful lot of people you've just mentioned bringing together there. So can you describe some of those challenges and how your approach to leadership helped the programme overcome those?

Neil Watson - So we created a leadership team that had input from really experienced nurses, pharmacists, GPs, we had an infectious diseases lead, we had logistics colleagues, procurement, project management, human resources, finance, you name it, we had experts that we handpicked to come in. So actually, whatever the challenge was going to come along the way, we were going to be able to meet that challenge fairly much head on. And the challenges you might expect was around the complexity of delivering vaccine across a really wide ranging population.

One of our key challenges was being able to be adaptable. We would have to change how we operated on a virtually week by week basis, and that wasn't easy. And also very rarely do you get involved in a project and a programme that is literally headline news for weeks and months on end. And so maintaining public confidence in what it is that you're doing, which is of course important always in the NHS, was ever more important because it was just so visible.

Caroline Latta - What did leading the vaccination programme teach you about leading service change?

Neil Watson - I think one of the key things I learned really very quickly, which is something that all leaders need to be aware of but became front and centre, was about the importance of listening. Listening to those experts that you've pulled together. There's no point in asking people to come and join you if you then don't listen to them. I've mentioned adaptability already, and adaptability is incredibly important. I had to become very comfortable with change, as did the team around me, so we had to be very adaptable.

The other thing is with the politics, small P and large P, it was really important just to keep calm whilst maintaining that listening, making sure that you're continuing to move forward in a very positive way. It's very easy to become, if you like, frustrated with some of the things that perhaps are going on locally, regionally and nationally, but you have to maintain the confidence of your team. And most importantly, with the vaccination programme, it was about maintaining public confidence, and you can't maintain public confidence if you're thrashing around. So that calmness, I think, is really important. The fact that little legs are going ten to a dozen underneath the water, is neither here nor there. You kind of have to maintain that confidence. So I think keeping calm and listening are the two big things for me.

Paul Parsons - I'm really interested to see if leading the vaccination programme changed your view of yourself as a leader, how would you describe your leadership style and what are the principles that you hold yourself to in leading?

Neil Watson - I don't have on my wall here the principles that I'm going to follow, but the key things that I try and use throughout everything that I do as a leader, being very clear about what collectively we're trying to achieve, about a principle of spending more time listening than talking.

There's certainly something about surround yourself with experts, but if you do surround yourself with experts, you've got to be prepared to trust and listen to those experts. Because if you listen to what they're saying and you trust their advice and trust them to get on and deliver what, collectively you're trying to achieve, then what you will deliver will be 20 times better than if you were to go off and try and do it yourself, or you were going to try and tell them how to do their job. That's just not how leadership works.

I think a really good example would be we were wrestling with adapting to the vaccination of relatively young children and we'd been talking quite a lot about process and about how we were going to keep those young children safe and what the process would be. And it was actually our lead matron who stopped us all and just said, "can we just remember why we're here? We're here to look after patients and we're here to look after the public and keep them safe and keep them well". And sometimes being brought up short by a colleague who just reminds you what you're there to achieve is incredibly important, but you have to be open to it, you have to be listening.

Caroline Latta - You've talked there about allowing other people to lead. What are your top tips for other service change leaders?

Neil Watson - Top tips, I suppose, naturally come out of some of the style things I've mentioned, my approach to leadership. What I haven't mentioned thus far is the importance in using experts in engagement, involvement and communication. Now, all of us have to be able to know how to do that as leaders, but it's, I think, sometimes forgotten that you need to use experts in engagement and involvement, because if you don't, you might be missing a trick. And that was something that I will be forever proud of as the golden thread through the vaccination programme, is that work that we did in engaging with our colleagues across the system and perhaps more importantly, engaging

with the public in how they wished their vaccination programme to run. So that would be my other tip is involving in using experts in engagement and involvement and communication.

Paul Parsons - For anyone out there who aspires to be a service change leader, maybe earlier on in their career, but they've seen you on the telly, Neil, and they think, I want to be doing that in 20 years time. What would your advice to them be?

Neil Watson - So I think something, again, I haven't mentioned thus far, but I think is really important, is about not being afraid to make mistakes and also then being prepared to admit that you've made a mistake. And in so doing, that means the same, not just for me, but means the same for the rest of the team. The rest of the team knew to feel confident that they can make mistakes, they can learn from those mistakes in a learning open culture and then improve. So there's constant improvement, continuous improvement in the work that you're doing. And service change cannot work properly if you're not prepared to make mistakes and if you're not then going to continuously improve.

It's funny you mentioned the telly. Thank you for that, Paul, it's a difficult thing for me because there's nothing worse than being constantly reminded that you're on the telly. You will perhaps remember that very, very early on in the vaccination programme, despite my best efforts to persuade others to do differently, we went live with a vaccination centre for a very elderly population very early on, with numbers that perhaps were unwise. And we as a team felt uncomfortable about that, but we needed to get on because speed was of importance in a very vulnerable population. And the first day was really uncomfortable for us. We had an elderly population in the cold queuing for considerable periods of time, waiting to be vaccinated. Very uncomfortable day. We apologised for that and we very quickly learned from it. The second day we had people waiting for considerable period of time, but they were inside and they were warm and they were safe. And on the third day, any moderately to small size queue was inside. And then by day four and day five, we had an efficient process and we did that because we were prepared to accept that we had made some mistakes and we learned from those. We did some process analysis and we very quickly changed the way we were working,

operating for the population, so the experience that people had thereafter was much better.

So being prepared to make mistakes but then change quickly and improve is really important. So that's number one. And number two, I don't know how many times I can say the importance of being prepared to listen, that is an incredibly important thing to do for anybody who is aspiring to work in service change leadership.

Paul Parsons - Professor Neil Watson. Thank you very much. Listening to your people, allowing your team the opportunity to make mistakes and the importance of public engagement, very simple principles that lead to great results.

Caroline Latta - Absolutely, Paul. Allowing people to make mistakes has turned out to be such a key issue for other people we've invited onto the podcast, as well as they've mentioned it too.

Paul Parsons - I find it interesting that people from such different backgrounds have arrived at the same conclusions about what good leadership looks like.

Caroline Latta - Yes, it is. Which makes me even more excited about hearing what our next guests in the series have to say.

Paul Parsons - Me too. That's it for this episode. Huge thanks to Neil Watson for joining us to talk about his experiences of leadership.

Caroline Latta - We'd love to hear about your experiences of leadership too, especially if you've got some tips to share. Why not join the conversation by following us on Twitter @notconsultation or emailing us at listen@notaconsultation.com.

Paul Parsons - Don't forget there's loads more learning in all our other episodes available on our website, notaconsultation.com.

Caroline Latta - You can find us as Not A Consultation wherever you get your podcasts and hit subscribe to be the first to get all our new episodes.

Paul Parsons - Thanks for listening and remember, this is not a consultation,

Neil Watson - it's a podcast.

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