

## TRANSCRIPT

### Leadership series – Laura Skaife-Knight



**Paul Parsons** - I'm Paul Parsons.

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

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

**Caroline Latta** - Hello, everyone, and welcome to the fifth episode of 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, our guest is Laura Skaife-Knight, who is Chief Executive at NHS Orkney.

**Paul Parsons** - Hello, Laura, welcome to Not a Consultation. Thanks for taking the time to join us today.

**Laura Skaife-Knight** - Pleasure. Thanks for having me on this programme.

**Paul Parsons** - So, Laura, can you give us a brief summary of your career background and what brought you to your role as CEO at NHS Orkney?

**Laura Skaife-Knight** - Of course, thank you. So my background is quite an unusual one in terms of my pathway to becoming a Chief Executive. I started out as a print journalist and then was really interested in health stories. So got my first job as a communications

officer at University Hospitals of Leicester just over 20 years ago now. I moved onwards and upwards in communications and engagement pretty quickly. Some would say I peaked too soon, but before I was the age of 30, I was one of the youngest directors of comms in the country at Nottingham University hospitals. So for most of my career, I've worked in really big acute teaching hospitals, largely in the East Midlands, at board level director of comms roles. And then about four or five years ago, I had the opportunity to become deputy chief executive at the time at a hospital that was the most failing hospital in the country on quite literally every indicator. So I set out to be a director of comms. But what I always say to people is, I certainly did not set out to be a deputy chief exec and I most certainly didn't set out to be a chief exec.

But the reason I've really fallen into this is, one, I've been given fabulous opportunities along the way and people have really believed in me as a leader, and two, I've really taken that challenge and run with it and actually believed in myself. So, moving from a director of communications to a deputy chief exec first and foremost, it's really about the breadth of portfolio and I think really at the heart of everything we do is really great communications and engagement and taking people with you, and that's really what a great chief exec is all about, in my opinion. So I'm six months into my job now at NHS Orkney, my first chief exec role, and trust me, I am learning heaps every day.

**Paul Parsons** - And you're our first Chief Executive on Not a Consultation, so thanks again for joining us. You mentioned there the opportunity to go and be deputy chief executive at the worst Hospital on all the indicators. Is that what brought you to service change and service improvement, or did you have experience before then?

**Laura Skaife-Knight** - I had experience before then, but that experience put me in really good stead going into the worst performing organisation in the UK at the time in West Norfolk, and I guess I really become exposed to service improvement when I was at Nottingham University Hospitals. Our chief exec at the time was right at the heart of re-engineering in Leicester, and that's really where service change started out many years ago. So by learning from Peter Homer, our chief executive at the time, really what we did in Nottingham as a senior team was looked at whole hospital transformation. So, you know, one of the biggest acute teaching hospitals in the country. We looked at service

improvement on a very big scale and that's where I really learnt the trade of how it works, what ingredients need to be in place, but probably what works and what doesn't. And I've learnt from my own experience and added a twist to that along the way.

**Caroline Latta** - Thanks, Laura. As you know, we're a podcast about all things patient public involvement and service change, and it's really interesting to hear those reflections back in the day when you were at Nottingham. Can you tell us a bit more about what you learned about leading service change from those experiences?

**Laura Skaife-Knight** - Absolutely. So, firstly, I think it's really important to remember change is really scary for many people. So we talk about it, it's really easy to say it, but actually the smallest of changes is quite daunting to a lot of people, not only on a small scale, but when you magnify that up to a whole organisation, it's even more daunting. So I guess first thing I would say is listen continuously and act on feedback from patients and staff. That should drive service change and improvements. And you expect me to say this, but I'm going to say it anyway: constant communications in terms of how you are doing in progress is absolutely key. And I think the other two or three things for me is you have to have a methodology you agree on as an organisation and invest in upskilling your staff. So they've got the really basic skills to be able to do service improvement on a local level and then on an organisational basis, and what I did, as an example, when I was at West Norfolk, at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, we trained several hundred colleagues a year in CUSA methodology. So within a really short time, a couple of years, you started to have a mass in the organisation who were trained in service improvement and quality improvement, and that really helped.

And then I think the final couple of things for me are staff have ideas. Staff know their service better than anyone. So empower staff to lead change on a local level. And we always have had staff ideas programmes to empower staff to get on, implement change, ask for support if they need it, and then we celebrate those ideas that have come to fruition. But if they fail or don't work, that's equally OK as well. It's about creating that safe space and safe environment and back again to Nottingham. One of the phrases I always remember is, when you're doing service improvement, if your service didn't exist, how would you create it? And I guess not on one instance has a colleague said to me, I'd

have exactly what I've had today. So service improvement has to be continuous improvement. It never ends.

**Caroline Latta** - So does being a Chief Executive now bring different perspectives on leadership compared to the roles you've had in the past?

**Laura Skaife-Knight** - Yes and no. Fundamentally, my values have not changed. I am a big believer in leading with kindness and compassion, very big into visible and on the ground leadership. And people probably say they see too much of me here, but I am constantly out and about, so I stay close to the issues. I know what the tempo and mood music in the organisation is. I think, as a senior leader, you have to have humility, and that means not being perfect or good at everything and being really honest and showing your vulnerabilities to your own staff, because we're all human, including chief execs. So that's the way I lead in this organisation, but always fundamentally doing what's right for patients and staff, and that's the bottom line for every decision I make. If it's right for patients and staff, then, generally speaking, let's just crack on and get things done. In terms of change, my perspective, the way it's changed things and the way it's different from a chief exec perspective, it's a sense of scale of responsibility. It's really different when you have a portfolio, for instance, as an exec director, and then you're the accountable officer or chief executive, the scale of responsibility and level of responsibility on your shoulders, I think, until you're standing in the shoes of a chief exec, you can't quite fathom that, if I'm honest with you.

So I think a couple of other things. Consistency and reliability is key when you're in these positions, and by that, I mean, walking the walk, being consistent in your behaviour, so people know what they're going to get from you, and being absolutely consistent in that day in and day out. And then I think the final thing that's really come home to me is you are only as good as your team. So recruit and choose wisely, but always recruit people better than you.

**Paul Parsons** - You mentioned just now, Laura, the importance of listening to people and acting on the feedback that they gave you. I don't remember seeing before a report from a chief executive of their first hundred days, what they've heard and being so open about

that. We'll include a link to the report in the show notes. What brought you to producing that report? And if you would as well, what's the reaction been from the people in NHS Orkney and the residents of the islands?

**Laura Skaife-Knight** - Thank you. So I made a really conscious decision before I took up post as chief exec at NHS Orkney. Not really to come to any big conclusions before I started. It's really hard, isn't it, when you read things, you speak to colleagues, you join board meetings. But actually, I wanted to come in, give myself a fixed period of time. So three to four months in my case, and truly listen to our staff: what it's like to work here, listen to our patients: what is it like to receive care here, and listen to our partners: what are we like to work with? To come to my own conclusions. And I was brave enough, with the support of the board here, to publish a report which had the full support of the board. But being honest with you, Paul, there was some nervousness around it because it was quite a hard hitting report. There was some hard reading in the report, but actually I wanted to be really honest and authentic and play back to our staff and patients and partners what I'd really heard. But probably most importantly, what we're going to do about it.

**Caroline Latta** - Absolutely love your 100 day report, Laura. So how has it gone down with your staff and then with your patients and residents, then again with your partners?

**Laura Skaife-Knight** - The report has been applauded across the board, I think, really because of the brutal honesty, probably for the first time from a senior colleague here, though I stand by that. I've made no apologies for that, because I think I wanted to play back exactly what I've heard, not dilute it down, because I think the temptation is always to do that, but play back what I've heard. But be clear what we need to focus on to really move this organisation forward and what is needed to change. And I say that and emphasise that word fundamental things here need to change if we're going to fulfil our true potential, and I wanted to set that out in a really clear way. What we need to do to move forward.

**Caroline Latta** - We're going to put words in your mouth, but I imagine part of that as well is from your experiences of being a service change leader and listening to residents,

patients and the public when you're doing, for example, public consultation, is that very good practice of feeding back what you've heard prior to decision making, to check back in with folk to make sure it's been interpreted properly and you haven't missed anything and all the information is available to help make better, more informed decisions, because that's what listening and engagement and public consultation is all about.

**Laura Skaife-Knight** - That's precisely what I did. So as I drafted the report, I shared either the full report or segments of it with key stakeholders and our staff to say, have I heard this right? Does this resonate with you? And is this going to land right? I wanted to make sure I'd interpreted the stories that I'd heard, some of which were really hard to hear, but I wanted to make sure that I was doing justice to the real richness of feedback that I'd received. So that's precisely the approach that I took. And then also, I am a very big believer in openness and transparency, and that means in the good times and the not so good times. And actually, again, being really honest, this is what I've heard. And I know some people thought it was a really hard read, but actually, we will not move forward if we don't face up to the starting point in the organisation, and that's what I try to do.

**Caroline Latta** - It's one of our firm positions, isn't it, Paul? Transparency is always your friend.

**Paul Parsons** - And facing your shortcomings with courage has to be up there as well, doesn't it? Laura, what are the leadership principles that guide you and that you hold yourself to, to make sure that you're following that approach?

**Laura Skaife-Knight** - Quite a few things, and I really like to pride myself on being a values led leader and consistently so. First and foremost, fairness and equity. And at the heart of that, and I say this every day, just being in the staff briefing today, nobody in this organisation is more important than anyone else. So breaking down those barriers, everybody's voice matters and counts. Being honest, sometimes brutally honest, and that can be a difficult thing for certain colleagues to hear. But consistently being honest and at the heart of that is openness and transparency. I think being yourself, showing your personality and bringing your true self to work, I think, is hugely important. And I encourage everyone to do that here because then we get the best out of everybody.

Mention consistency and never asking anybody to do anything that you wouldn't do yourself.

**Paul Parsons** - Can you delve into authenticity a bit for us? I mean, that's really important to us at Stand as well. If you could dig into that for us a little, that'd be really helpful.

**Laura Skaife-Knight** - I think when some people take jobs, they think they've got to turn into somebody that the organisation wants them to be. And when I took this job, I very deliberately decided to be 100% myself from the moment I applied through the recruitment process to the moment I walked through these doors and onwards to doing the job now. And I think that just means being you, completely, not who you think the organisation wants you to be, because I think too many people fall into that trap and I think that means being honest when you haven't got all the answers. Being honest when you make a wrong judgement call and being honest, we will make mistakes. And trust me, I make mistakes every day of different sorts, but just being open and honest about that, nobody's perfect. And I think we all think we have to have this perfect world sometimes. And actually, I think people respect you a lot more if you live in the real world and are just truly yourself.

**Caroline Latta** - Laura, we have a beautiful, small but perfectly formed audience who are really interested in service change, leadership, culture, involving people, and making things better basically. Speaking to that audience, what are your top tips for service change leaders out there that might be listening?

**Laura Skaife-Knight** - So I think I've got three or four big things, really. Firstly, you have to create a compelling narrative as to why change is needed in the first place. Otherwise you will not convince people to go with you on that journey. Secondly, empowering your staff and teams to lead change. Staff have the ideas and it goes back to, if your service didn't exist, how would you create it? Staff know the answers to that. So let them run with that, with the support they need. Then finally equip your teams with the skills they need to lead service change in the first place.

**Paul Parsons** - For anybody out there at the beginning of their career who listens to this or sees other leaders and aspires to change things for the better, what would your advice for them be?

**Laura Skaife-Knight** - I think a few things. Firstly, if I can do it, anyone can. So I am not a big academic by background or anything like that. I have worked hard, I've been really focused, and I've had the privilege to work with some amazing leaders who have put their trust and confidence in me and perhaps had a bit of luck along the way, but I've really grafted over the last 20 to 25 years. So if I can do it, anyone can. Fundamentally, leadership is about having the skills and power to take people with you on a journey, and with that comes certain skills. I think compassionate leadership is key in that, but about taking people with you and enthusing and inspiring people to go on that journey with you. And I think, finally, let people fly with their ideas. Staff have the answers. Empower your staff to fly with their ideas and if those things do not come off, actually giving them a safe environment in which to fail, because failure is fine. That's how we learn and that's how we don't repeat our mistakes.

**Paul Parsons** - What a brilliant opportunity that was to get to talk to a chief executive as part of this series.

**Caroline Latta** - Yes, it is, Paul. Laura sets a great example. I was really interested to hear about the 100 day report and how well it went down with her staff, her stakeholders and of course the population she serves.

**Paul Parsons** - I found it impressive that throughout her career, Laura's managed to stay true to those leadership principles that she outlined. And you can start to see that there are some common leadership principle themes emerging from all of the guests that we've spoken to.

**Caroline Latta** - Well, that's it for this episode. A huge thanks to Laura Skaife-Knight for joining us to talk about her experiences of leadership.



**Paul Parsons** - We'd love to hear about your experience of leadership, especially if you've got some tips to share. Join the conversation by following us on X, formerly Twitter @notconsultation or emailing us on [listen@notaconsultation.com](mailto:listen@notaconsultation.com)

**Caroline Latta** - Don't forget there's loads more learning in our other episodes. All, of course, are available on our website, [notaconsultation.com](http://notaconsultation.com).

**Paul Parsons** - You can find us at Not a Consultation wherever you get your podcasts and hit subscribe to be the first to get all our new episodes.

**Caroline Latta** - Thanks for listening. And remember, this is not a consultation:

**Laura Skaife-Knight** - It's a podcast.

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