

Communicating the job in a hospital trust

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This paper draws on the experiences of a five-year workplace literacy project at a large acute hospital trust to reflect on the role of speaking and listening in the low-paid, low-skilled workplace. It references a number of reports produced by the project, including the report of an investigation carried out by the project into mechanisms to 'communicate the job'.

Project background

The project itself was known as the Stepping Stones programme. It was managed and delivered by a team of approximately ten workplace, basic skills practitioners employed by Oxfordshire County Council. It was funded by the South East England Development Agency as part of the agency's work to reduce low skills in the region. It ran for five years from March 2001 to March 2006 at Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals (ORH), which is a teaching trust. At the time of the project it employed some 10,000 staff across four main hospital sites.

The programme's initial brief was to interview 100 ancillary staff (working mostly as cleaners, caterers and porters) to elicit their learning aspirations, to analyse their skills needs and then to deliver ten hours of free literacy, English language, numeracy or information communications technology (ICT) learning to any staff who were interested, in paid work time. Some of these staff were employed directly by the trust; others worked for one of two contractors. Through the programme, ORH's head of facilities sought to add value to the facilities' employment offer and simultaneously to address 'communication issues'.

The desire to add value to its employment offer reflected concerns around the recruitment and (particularly) retention of ancillary staff, at a time when National Health Service (NHS) performance targets demanded cleaner hospitals and better hospital food. At initial project

meetings, the trust specified 'communication issues' in relation to customer service and to team work and identified the diversity of its workforce as a contributory factor.

In common with many low-paid, low-skilled workforces, the low-paid, low-skilled workforce at ORH was diverse in age, gender, ethnicity, first language, educational attainment, employment history and career aspiration. Initial interviewing and analysis suggested two characteristics in particular informed communication issues. First, migrant workers (from a wide range of countries) with limited English language skills made up at least 50% of many work teams. Second, native speakers (including a majority of the supervisors) tended to have low educational attainment (were not qualified to level 2) (Stepping Stones, 2001).

Those potentially best placed to support the language development of the migrant workers – their native-speaker work mates and supervisors – in many cases lacked the skills to do so, especially where supervisors were concerned. It was not uncommon to find native-speaker supervisors with low educational attainment in charge of non-native speakers with intermediate and higher-level qualifications from their countries of origin. In addition to limited English, these workers brought expectations and attitudes to the job that were often significantly different from those of their native speaker colleagues.

Work organisation appeared to be broadly neo-Taylorist.¹ Before the programme, there were few opportunities for training and development. There was no appraisal, no personal development planning and little evidence of constructive feedback being given. Supervisors, responsible for delivering ambitious performance targets with limited resources, appeared to rely on command and control. Asked by the programme team, 'How do you know when you're doing a good job?' workers would not infrequently answer, 'When no one is shouting at me.' A number of staff reported feeling patronised by managers and supervisors, as exemplified by the comment, 'They talk to us like children.'

The Stepping Stones programme began in spring 2001, coinciding with the launch of *Skills for Life* (DfEE, 2001) and, more broadly, with a series of radical initiatives in the NHS designed to 'modernise' the service (see for example DH, 2000, 2001, 2002 and 2004). These initiatives included an unprecedented investment in the learning and development

¹ 'Taylorism' describes a type of work organisation associated with the American engineer and management theorist, F. W. Taylor (1856–1915). Taylorism (also known as 'scientific management') was based on close analysis of a task's constituent parts in order to maximise efficiency and achieve greater productivity. Taylorism required workers to follow specified processes exactly, and closely monitored them to ensure conformity. Neo-Taylorism describes modern variants of this system that seek to achieve standard outputs by closely prescribing worker behaviour. Neo-Taylorist workplaces tend to be characterised by limited worker involvement in decision-making.

of staff who were previously excluded from workplace learning. The aim of this investment was both to make fuller use of the talents and potential of non-professional employees and to raise performance standards in areas related to customer care, such as cleanliness and catering (Stepping Stones, 2005).²

These NHS initiatives set the context for the Stepping Stones programme. However, despite this investment and managers' willingness to support the programme, pressure of work ensured that at no point during the five years could departments release significant numbers of staff for significant amounts of classroom learning. Consequently the programme was preoccupied with two questions throughout its five-year life:

- 1 What support is most useful to help staff do their jobs effectively?
- 2 How can learning opportunities for staff be maximised and optimised?

Of the various activities undertaken by Stepping Stones to answer those questions, three in particular related to speaking and listening in the workplace. The first was the design and delivery of a team appraisal process to eleven departments and over 330 management, supervisory and operative level staff (Stepping Stones Programme, 2005). The second was the delivery of health and safety training to eight departments and several hundred staff. The third was an investigation of the systems and processes through which staff roles and responsibilities, including the aims and objectives of departments and of the trust as a whole, are communicated (Stepping Stones Programme, 2006).

Language for appraisal, language for health and safety

In the third year of the project, the trust made appraisal mandatory for all staff. This presented a logistical challenge to managers of facilities departments, who might have anything up to 200 members of staff to appraise. The logistical challenge was complicated by a shortage of supervisors, which could result in supervisor–staff ratios of 1:60. Moreover, the departments had no experience of appraisal and were concerned that even

² Thus, for example, from the trust's staff magazine: 'How does the [trust] become a customer focused organisation, in the new world of patient choice? This was the challenge discussed by [the trust's chief executive], during his most recent round of open sessions for staff. He stressed the need for the [trust] to think about the whole patient experience, not just the quality of clinical care. When patients are given a choice, cleanliness, the food, the general environment and the courtesy of staff are all going to be important too. How we tackle these issues will influence how well we do in the future. Given the financial restrictions within which we have to work, some difficult and unfamiliar choices may have to be made as we move into a much more competitive marketplace.' *ORH News* (2005).

if they could organise supervisors to deliver appraisal, those supervisors lacked the expertise and experience deemed necessary to appraise staff.

As a result, the Stepping Stones programme agreed to design and deliver group appraisals to facilities staff. These group appraisals took the form of a series of facilitated and structured group discussions, generating departmental action plans and individual personal development plans. Although managers and supervisors were present, at their request the sessions were led by the Stepping Stones team.

The sessions were structured around a pack, produced by the Stepping Stones programme, containing explanatory material and specially designed appraisal paperwork. Each participant was issued with a copy. The facilitator used the pack to guide participants, grouped into twos and threes according to role, through the appraisal process. This involved the facilitator presenting each discrete appraisal element to the group as a whole; small groups discussing it to enable participants to process the information; participants in the small groups giving feedback to the group as a whole, in order to share views; the whole group discussing the feedback to arrive at a consensus of views; and finally participants recording conclusions. In addition to the facilitator, other members of the Stepping Stones programme were present to provide support to participants to enable them to get the most out of the procedure.

For most participants, these sessions were the first time they had experienced appraisal. Not only were staff unused to meeting in groups to assess performance, but they were also unfamiliar with the language of appraisal. Terms such as 'key result areas', 'objectives', 'targets', 'action planning' and 'goal setting' appeared to be as foreign to native speakers as to non-native speakers.

Despite the complete novelty of the process, and considerable initial scepticism from many staff, the appraisal programme, made up of an initial three hour-long session followed by a one-hour review session once every eight weeks, proved popular. Eleven departments and over 300 staff ultimately participated. Stepping Stones practitioners facilitating the appraisals helped staff enter an important area of workplace discourse.

One incident from the programme is useful to record in the context of this paper. At one appraisal meeting a curtain-hanging assistant reported that he could make a potential improvement to his department's customer service. He was willing to undertake a further

task related to his job but currently restricted to estates department staff. If he undertook this task it would save the trust money and offer a better service to ward staff and patients. Neither he nor his manager knew how to propose this change to their own organisation, and neither felt confident or able to set about finding out. (The suggestion was ultimately forwarded to the appropriate decision by the Stepping Stones' facilitator.)

From the appraisal programme came facilitated health and safety training, again mandated by the trust. A Stepping Stones basic skills practitioner who was qualified to deliver health and safety training led these training sessions, supported by another practitioner. As with the appraisals, the facilitator–participant ratio was generally about 1:4 or 1:5. The focus of the health and safety programme was on language as new to native-speaker staff as it was to the non-native speakers, particularly in relation to the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health's (CIEH's) foundation examination.³ Significant time on the course was devoted to helping workers recognise their own articulation of health and safety in the language used by CIEH.

Investigating how 'the job' is communicated

The third Stepping Stones activity that related to speaking and listening was an investigation of the systems and processes used by the trust to communicate to staff their roles and responsibilities, including the aims and objectives of departments and of the trust itself as a whole. This investigation, originated by Stepping Stones, was supported by the trust's learning and development department, which was interested in exploring ways to develop on-the-job learning opportunities.

The investigation's premise was simple. Work is a collective enterprise. Each day, a group of people assemble to pursue a shared goal. They spend the rest of the day agreeing what that goal is and how best to achieve it. The investigation designated that process 'communicating the job' and hypothesised that it was likely to involve the use of literacy, English language, numeracy and ICT skills.

In its conceptualisation of the 'job', the investigation included not only the tasks listed on a worker's job description, but also all the organisational activities a worker participates in

³ The examination assessed participants' ability to describe the nature, costs and benefits of health and safety at work, including common types and causes of work-related accidents and ill health. Its syllabus covered health and safety law, accidents and ill health, risk assessment, first aid at work,

(such as appraisal) that aim to co-ordinate individual efforts: activities that help articulate not only workers' individual roles and responsibilities but also the aims and objectives of the organisation as a whole.

The investigation recognised that these activities may be formal, such as the appraisal meeting; they may be informal, for example a tea break discussion between colleagues about a procedure; or they may combine the formal with the informal, as when a supervisor places a new member of staff for several days with a more experienced colleague to learn through observation.

Since organisational aims and objectives and individual roles and responsibilities are constantly evolving, members of the organisation are required constantly to review and refresh their understanding. Insofar as this is a learning process, these activities constitute learning opportunities, but opportunities capable of negative as well as positive outcomes: 'good' learning that facilitates productive collaboration between members of the organisation, and 'bad' learning that obstructs it.

From that very wide range of activities and interactions that together 'communicate the job', the Stepping Stones investigation focused on four formal mechanisms used by the trust to articulate organisational aims and objectives, the roles and responsibilities of individuals within the organisation and changes in procedures and processes within the organisation.

The mechanisms investigated were:

- organisational (corporate) induction
- methods used to teach the job to the novice (new appointee)
- supervision
- notice boards.

For each mechanism the investigation sought to:

- examine how effectively the formal process operated in practice
- identify any factors that interfered with or subverted that communication
- consider the implications for learning and development.

The investigation drew on three main sources of information. One was the facilitated group appraisal programme and the reports and records it had generated. Another was the health and safety training Stepping Stones delivered to the same staff groups. The third

was an audit conducted specifically for the investigation with 16 facilities staff (two-thirds of whom were native speakers of English) drawn from a representative range of departments across the trust's various sites.

Organisational induction

In our audit sample 75% of staff reported having attended the trust's corporate induction. When asked to assess their learning from induction, these workers identified basic orientation, such as about site layout, communicated orally. They reported that they did not use the written materials provided.

Methods used to teach the job to the novice (new appointee)

The task of teaching job routines to new members of staff is officially the responsibility of the supervisor. In practice the investigation found that supervisors generally delegated this task to one of their subordinates. Nearly all staff audited said they had learned their job by shadowing a colleague. The audit suggested that there were two principal criteria for selecting a member of staff to be shadowed. One was the length of service and experience of the person to be shadowed; the other was simply location. If the new member of staff was to work on a particular ward or work station then the task of teaching fell to the nearest member of staff, regardless of their length of service or experience.

Supervision

Audit respondents considered that supervision was 'good' when supervisors gave the supervisee regular, constructive feedback on performance, and an opportunity to raise concerns and offer suggestions about work practices. Respondents considered speaking and listening to be the appropriate medium for this sort of communication.

It was through supervisory interactions that respondents formed their understanding of individual, departmental and organisational performance targets. These targets are an important factor in aligning individual activity to organisational aims. Although only 30% of the sample was able to give an example of one of the trust's targets, 60% could identify a measurable performance target relating to their job. The remainder relied on general (oral) feedback (related for example to quality control assessment or customer feedback) and lack of complaints to assess performance.

Notice boards

In the departments audited only the manager and administrator (where there was an administrator) had regular access to email. Consequently, notice boards tended to serve as a sort of departmental global email, giving official notification about rotas, changes in work practices and new requirements relating to employment issues such as holiday leave. Despite the significance of these announcements, only 50% of our sample reported scanning notice boards for work-related information. The location of the notice board was an important factor in determining how much attention it got: workers were unlikely to scan a notice board unless their daily work routines took them past it at a point when they had time to look at it.

As has been frequently observed (Belfiore *et al.*, 2003; Mahwah and Jackson, 2001), the low-paid, low-skilled workplace is increasingly familiar with paperwork, most of it generated by safety regulations and quality standards. Some 90% of the audit sample reported that paperwork was part of their everyday work routines. Less than 40% considered that paperwork served any valuable purpose, suggesting at least some sort of breakdown in communication between these workers and whoever ultimately required them to use the paperwork. As noted above, a bare half of respondents reported using information from notice boards. By contrast, 80% of respondents considered they engaged in regular oral communication with their supervisor. An equal number reported feeling able to influence aspects of departmental decision-making through this mechanism.

The importance of oral communication

The investigation's report concluded that whatever the importance of written records, oral communication was central to departmental performance. In particular the report drew attention to there being 'a potential relationship between staff confidence in their ability to influence change in their own department and the quality of communication with their supervisor'. It noted the importance of there being (confident) oral communication between supervisee and supervisor if information was to flow up as well as down the chain of command (from management to supervisor, from supervisor to staff, from staff to supervisor and from supervisor back to management). It noted the importance of oral communication in the teaming up of a novice with a more experienced member of staff to transmit departmental work practices to new staff.

Reflections

When it comes to developing speaking and listening skills, the low-paid, low-skilled workplace presents challenges and opportunities. It challenges those aspects of the Skills for Life strategy oriented to teacher-led groups of individuals seeking qualification outcomes from substantial pieces of classroom learning. This sort of learning does occur at work but, because of pressure of work, it is not generally an option for low-paid, low-skilled workers (Fuller *et al.*, 2005).⁴ In other words, to improve the speaking and listening skills of the low-skilled workforce we may need to complement classroom learning with other models.

Further, it is important to recognise that with the best will in the world employers pay people to work not study (Unwin *et al.*, 2005).⁵ Organisations that regularly release groups of staff to study for qualifications that their jobs do not require are hardly operating cost-effectively. Efficient organisations make better use of the labour they are hiring. None of which is to say that employer organisations do not make time for learning. As described above, they mandate it: appraisal, statutory and mandatory training, induction, team meetings, supervision – all have learning as their aim, albeit another kind of learning. But what return do employer organisations generate from their investment in those activities? What might the answer to that question imply for publicly funded interventions that aim to develop the speaking and listening skills of low-paid workers?

What of the speaking and listening skills themselves? The mix of native speaker with non-native speaker as a feature of the low-skilled workplace was commented on above and this surely is likely to continue for some time to come. This would suggest that the speaking and listening skills demanded of native speakers extend beyond the mere accommodation of colleagues with limited English to some sort of inter-cultural communicative competence.

But the demand for inter-cultural communicative competence surely extends further. As a collective enterprise, work demands active collaboration. Organisations are rarely

⁴ It is well established that people with higher levels of initial education and qualifications and who occupy more senior positions in the workforce have disproportionately more opportunities to participate in formal training events, particularly those which lead to further qualifications. See for example Felstead, A. *et al.* (2000).

⁵ The primary function of any workplace is not learning but the production of goods and services and the achievement of organisational goals determined internally and/or shaped by others such as head offices, parent companies and government departments. Furthermore, organisations in the public and

democratic or equitable. Their stratifications draw from and reinforce the divisions and sub-cultures of the wider society, each with its own discourse community and its own literacy. The power relations that generate those class divisions and sub-cultures in society at large may be intensified at work. No wonder then that in addition to technical jargon, shibboleths abound (exemplified not only in 'management speak' but also in 'worker speak'). All this seriously obstructs collaboration.

To collaborate effectively, workers must surmount these obstructions. Managers must be able to speak and listen to their staff. Just as importantly, staff must be able to speak and listen to their managers. The experiences of the Stepping Stones programme suggest that developing speaking and listening skills is very much about developing the ability of workers to negotiate their own organisations, that is: to move into 'foreign' discourse communities within their own organisation.

A lesson for those seeking to facilitate the development of workers' skills is that when classroom learning time is not available, it is worth investigating the learning potential of the activities that the employer organisation is willing to invest in.

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