

Leadership Podcast – Leading the Way

Transcript of podcast – Episode 6

Arnab Seal and Jonathan Darling

(Music starts)

Arnab Seal

Hello and welcome to Leading the Way podcast of the RCPCH. I am Arnab Seal, I'm a Neuro-developmental Paediatrician in Leeds and part of the Education and Learning Board of the RCPCH. At the RCPCH, we do believe that leadership is for everyone and hearing stories about people in leadership positions can give us great ideas of how different leadership styles can work and how it might be beneficial for all of us, individually and collectively.

We are very fortunate today to have with us Dr Jonathan Darling. Jonathan is a Consultant Paediatrician and a Clinical Associate Professor in Paediatrics and Child Health in Leeds. He's also the Vice President of Education and professional development at the RCPCH. Welcome Jonathan and thank you for joining us for this Leading the Way podcast.

Jonathan Darling

Thanks Arnab, great to be here.

Arnab Seal

Jonathan, you are somebody who I have known personally for over 30 years, and I have always marvelled at the different leadership roles and the different ways that you have engaged through the whole of these last, you know, 30 years odd, but can you tell us a little bit about where your leadership journey started? How it started?

Jonathan Darling

I think it goes back to when I was in my training and I guess as I look back, I was doing things that maybe I see now were leadership, but I didn't really recognise it then. So, for instance, when I was in Saint James's Hospital as a senior registrar, I was involved in setting up a kind of Junior Doctors committee to solve some of our issues that things weren't working as well as they could, for instance rotas or various issues like this, and I felt some of these we could solve ourselves if we all got together. So, I led on that and we did what we could to solve the things that were in our control. But then we also tried to come up with realistic proposals to put to the Consultant team about some of the things that weren't in our control. That was leadership, but I didn't really realise it at the time, I was just doing what I felt needed to be done to make a difference.

Arnab Seal

I think that's a wonderful example of how actually doesn't matter which role you're in, you can actually get involved, that goes back to very early days. Can you tell us a little bit about the journey through from that time till now?

Jonathan Darling

Well, I finished my training in Leeds and then became a Consultant and Senior Lecturer in Leeds and I was very involved in education, particularly undergraduate education. So, for many years, I've been part of the Medical School in Leeds and have led in various roles. So, for instance, I've been leading a Paediatric course and then I was head of Year 4 and then I became director of student support. And more recently, I've been chairing our health and Conduct committee or often it's the practise committee. Alongside that, I've had other roles such as designated Doctor in the NHS, so there's been a range of roles that I've been doing.

Arnab Seal

So, tell me a little bit more about the designated doctor role, it seems slightly removed from the other roles that you mentioned. So how did that come about and how was your experience within that?

Jonathan Darling

Well for all through my career, I've been involved in safeguarding. And people sometimes get confused, what are all of these various positions, but named doctors for safeguarding are within organisations like a trust has one or more named doctors for safeguarding children, whereas designated doctors will be for an area. So, I was designated Doctor for Leeds and for a while I shared that role with somebody, and then I was doing it just myself.

It wasn't that it came from a huge amount of specialist safeguarding experience. But I've done it for many years and I felt I could deliver usefully on what was needed, which was partly leadership, again, partly thinking about strategy and training, but partly about solving complicated situations when there's disagreements about what should happen next within professions or across professional groups like Paediatricians are thinking one thing, the social workers are thinking another.

How do we solve those things? How do we escalate? And these things aren't ever easy to solve, but I felt it did play to my strengths, and when I first started out, I was a bit nervous. Could I do it? And there were difficult situations and it was stressful at times, but overall, I did enjoy it and I felt I was working amongst a big group of people actually in Leeds who bring all these different perspectives and types of expertise, all to deliver really good safeguarding. I've learned a lot through doing it, I have to step down from that role now, but it was really good to do it.

Arnab Seal

So, I guess interacting with and understanding these different roles and what they were doing and then navigating through that, that gave you both the skill sets, but also the

opportunity to make a difference. And I suspect having your other roles as a Consultant Paediatrician, but also your teaching and academic roles gave you that wider perspective of how things could change. So, within your Consultant Paediatrician role, can you give us some examples or what you thought was important in a leadership role because it is something which is intrinsic to any Senior Paediatrician role.

Jonathan Darling

I think as I've got to this point in my career, which I've been doing it about 30 years, I actually counted it up. But, I realised a quote from Bob Klaber that I keep referring to because it did strike me at the time where he said something like, "leadership is about creating an environment where everyone around you can thrive." And I think it's very profound and hit a chord with me, but yeah, maybe that's kind of what I've been trying to do. Maybe not very well, but he was pointing out that when we start as a consultant, we're often thinking it's about the decisions about particular things, you know what, antibiotic or when should we step in and do this or what test to do.

And of course, we need to have expertise and know these kind of things, but he was saying and I think he's right, that actually above that, there's a different level of creating an environment. And that's simple things like I always tried to make sure we went and had coffee together or I was well known for enjoying my tea cakes, which those of you not from Yorkshire, sultanas in a nice bun, with some hot buttered toast.

We'd try and stop and have time for that kind of thing, and I think these social elements of whether it's a ward, round or whatever we're doing, if we can just take time to get away from the immediate environment of the ward and be together and just enjoy each other's company. It counts for an awful lot and it helps create that environment and we can all think of ways that work for us wherever we're placed, but what's important is thinking how can we create that kind of environment.

Arnab Seal

Making that time and having that environment and making that personal connections. And you talked about Bob Klaber and one of Bob's other things and which ties in very nicely to this is the kindness. We need to be kind not just to everybody else, but also to ourselves in order to be able to actually thrive, and that really resonates with me as well.

I want to come back to your academic roles and you've held senior positions within the Leeds University as a Deputy director of student support. So, within those roles, were there any other facets which you discovered were important leadership qualities?

Jonathan Darling

I think that in most of these roles, it's the people and working with people that's so important. And that means taking time, building relationships, understanding where people are coming from, enjoying being with different people. And usually, when there are disagreements, it's often that people are coming from a different perspective and if

we can just understand each perspective. Often there is a way forward that brings an even better way than either option that we might have been considering.

So, in student support, I think I learned a lot about the importance of well-being; that there are things that are well evidenced that support well-being and that we need to think about those for ourselves and our students and our trainees. They're often simple things, but they're not things that are prioritised within the NHS. Within our Thrive Paediatrics work which I've been part of, it's about reemphasizing some of these things or helping people learn some of these key things.

Arnab Seal

I think that's a very powerful message which is around the fact that you need to understand where the other person's coming from, in any difference which you spoke about and actually making that time can give you a far better outcome and be able to have a better connection.

You mentioned Thrive Paediatrics, which kind of takes us on to your role within the college as the Vice President of Education and Professional Development and you are still in that post, you've been doing it for a while. Tell us what other aspects of that role, really which you have enjoyed and what other insights that you had which might be beneficial for our listeners.

Jonathan Darling

I have really enjoyed the role. I think the college is a great organisation to work with and there's about 3000 volunteers I think, that all come together in delivering the work of the college. And so, it's great working with them and getting to know people in different parts of the Vice President role I'm in and also working with the staff of the college who are an amazing group of people, about 200 people.

And so, I've enjoyed many aspects. But it's primarily working with people and learning from their expertise and their perspectives and knowledge, just enjoying seeing a different perspective because I think often in our day-to-day work, we have our eyes focused obviously on what we've gotta do, but it does help us to do some other role that lifts our perspective or helps us see things in a wider way or from a different perspective. Then the college certainly does that, and I'd encourage anyone who's thinking of any sort of college role to go for it, because it's a great way to see things in a new way.

Arnab Seal

I think that's a great message as well, which is around we do get bogged down within our own clinical work etcetera, so broadening our horizons and being able to participate in this wonderful community that we have and the opportunity that we have and we really want to welcome irrespective of whichever role people are in, to get involved in the work of the college. So, Jonathan, if you were to give some nuggets for our listeners regarding leadership roles and things, what kind of takeaways do you want them to have?

Jonathan Darling

I don't feel very expert on leadership, part of joining Leading the Way podcast is that I get to learn from all these people who I think have so much to teach me. I think that quote that I referred to earlier about creating that environment where everyone around us can thrive is fundamental to me. And if all of us can be trying to change the climate around us, so it feels good to be in that place for other people so that they can thrive, so they can deliver their best, so they feel they've got psychological safety where they can offer opinions and thoughts without fear of being shot down or criticised, that means that the whole service can flourish.

There's a lot of challenge in our service. I mean, we both know that. It's not sometimes an easy place to be, or sometimes people do feel criticised or not able to deliver their best. But that doesn't stop us all trying to influence and bring change in the spheres of influence that we have and as that kind of coalesces and more and more people do that, I think we can change how it feels to be in the NHS.

Arnab Seal

I think that's a great message. I think that particularly as you get into a senior position, that role of containment to be able to let people feel free and feel enabled to do stuff. I think you also demonstrated very ably, one of the other leadership qualities very amply which is around being humble.

You felt that you don't feel like a leader, but clearly from what you have shared with us today, you exemplify a wonderful leader which we in the college are very, very fortunate to have. Thank you for sharing your experience with us today and the podcasts regarding leadership, it has been wonderful and thank you so much.

Jonathan Darling

Thank you. It's been great to talk to you.

(Music fades in)

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