

Coaching Health Management Teams: a personalized approach to improving performance

Health managers have multiple demands on their time. On-the-job crises and organisational inertia often prevent them from achieving their goals. Despite efforts to increase health managers' capacity through training and guidelines, challenges remain in bridging the gap between knowledge and quality practice.

Traditional methods of training have not addressed this challenge, so the Maternal and Newborn Improvement (MANI) project came up with a new approach. Using an executive coaching package to build the leadership and management capacity of the Bungoma County Health Management Team (CHMT), the objective was to go beyond a one-off training where learning can, and often is, lost when returning to post. This sustained and innovative coaching method aims to ensure a more systemic adoption of strong leadership capacity that is engrained into individual and collective environments.

Innovative coaching vs classroom courses

MANI's method is set apart from traditional coaching due to its personalised approach. The coaching starts and ends with all the participants coming together to share and learn with and from each other. The benefit of this is to show that everybody is facing similar challenges, such as feeling helpless and powerless to tackle the real problems facing provision of healthcare in the county, which helps to create a bond between the group. Rather than just focusing on a solely individual process, this approach uses a combination of both group work and private sessions.

The other difference is that participants learn and use management and leadership tools, enabling them to analyse the system within their work places objectively, and come up with interventions to address problems. When applying the intervention, they receive one-on-one coaching to track their progress and use the process as a reflection exercise to develop their own leadership and management skills.

From apprehension to appreciation

Despite an initial preference from the CHMT for the class-room based approach, the personal development plans and coaching exercises were an eye-opener to their strengths and areas that they should further develop. This included self-confidence; tangible and

specific goal-setting; evidence-based decision making; and using tools to better manage teams.

“This has helped me to think about my success, the coach asked me to identify my personal strengths and I was hard tasked to identify them, he asked to go home and really think about it and name at least 10”

Throughout the coaching, participants gave universally positive feedback.

“When you implement the initiative, it gives you the will to move on as you feel you are making an impact”

Benefits obtained from coaching

One member of the CHMT, when asked to describe the process, felt that the one on one coaching helped to interrogate and track solutions over time, while allowing for room to seek clarity on issues like process indicators that were not understood during group discussion.

For some, using the tools gave them a chance to realise that the initiative identified were only root causes to a bigger problem.

To one of the participants, the process was useful in identifying what was within their control and what was not. To this end, they put effort to what they could do, by taking this approach of small incremental steps, one CHMT member who had sought to reduce queues at the lab noted that as of the last coaching session, he had left no one at the queue.

Reflections on a fresh way of approaching leadership and management development

- When participants decide their own initiatives, this creates greater accountability and drive. Understanding deeper root causes allows participants to see and tackle challenges differently.

“A problem has root causes and once identified, it is as good as resolved... Challenges do exist especially in the work place. There are logical ways of analysing them and thinking in a sequence has proved great at resolving them. I have learnt that I must totally change my approach to my work. I have been working under duress, I must relax and be proactive and not reactive.”

- Sometimes participants were part of the problem by not presenting the 'win' scenario; this encouraged thoughtful reconsideration of mapping a problem comprehensively and presenting enough evidence that everyone would benefit from when the problem was solved.

“This training has given me the ability to interrogate issues, identify what I can do about it and help me to see what I can do about this.”

- Tackling small challenges even in the face of little resourcing is possible.
- Stronger leadership takes time and commitment; setbacks are natural but it is important to keep momentum moving forward in the day-to-day.
- Commitment to the full set of activities results in greater progress. Getting the most out of this method requires that participants commit to the full suite of activities. The key with this is sustained and recurrent adherence, applying what you have learned to your everyday activities in a systemic manner.

Real change in strengthened capacity

The project used an indicator-based quantitative tool to measure participants' development over the course of the coaching. Over the four indicators measured, the results show an average increase of 65% from baseline. The areas monitored included; capacity of management and leadership tools, a drive for change initiatives, maximising use of networks, and impetus for results and impact across the CHMT.

Impact across the team

The coaching provided an opportunity for CHMT members to reveal vulnerabilities about themselves within their roles. Within this space, they were able to learn to lean on each other through offers and requests, and understand that they needed each other despite coming from different departments. Through active and aligned planning of selected initiatives, they were able to identify specific ways of strengthening coordination and reduce duplication, leading to more effective ways of working.

By identifying shared values and setting task teams and 'consultant' circles from which to draw support from,

there was a stronger group dynamic by the end of the final group workshop. The group work also provided an opportunity for discussions that helped clarify roles and responsibilities within teams. This will reinforce the activity of practically defining job descriptions and another begins.

Figure 2: CHMT members completing the tracking tool



Members also cited greater confidence in being able to serve as leadership champions. This was demonstrated largely through cascading the tools and skills gained from the coaching, to the level below them. Beyond this, and encapsulating the importance of monitoring progress, the team acknowledged the need for accurately measuring success by setting targets and developing accountability mechanisms through both leading (i.e. process-oriented) and lagging (i.e. result-oriented) indicators.

Continuity beyond MANI

Through this training, participants were able to overcome barriers of confidence and resourcing gaps, and articulate ideas on how to move forward in a productive manner around the initiatives they had selected. This process allowed CHMT members to move beyond positions of blockages, have a deeper understanding of root causes of challenges, and find tangible and actionable steps in the right direction – even amidst intractable obstacles. It is evident that CHMT individuals who fully committed to this process feel more emboldened, empowered and effective in performing their critical roles as government health leaders. These learnings have already been disseminated beyond the target group of CHMT to their wider teams, and it is intended that this will continue with the newly revitalised team spirit.

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