

LESSONS IN DEVELOPMENT

Psychiatrists show the way in the field of mentoring peers and employees for managers in the corporate sector.

Report: Marc Stigter and Jeffrey Looi

● Psychiatry, the branch of medicine that deals with mental illness and diseases of the brain, does not spring to mind when thinking of best practices in leadership. But medical specialists such as psychiatrists lead teams of professionals in the provision of health care in a time-poor and often resource-constrained system dependent on patients.

Within psychiatry in particular, the pressures of emotion, distress and diagnostic uncertainty are prominent. There are lessons in the way psychiatrists deal with these complexities. With “healthy leadership”, two relate to practices of reflection and mentoring.

Reflection as a leadership practice is gaining awareness in the corporate sector but is still not widely practised. But psychiatrists are applying critical self-reflection both on an individual basis and in conjunction with peers.

Individually, psychiatrists reflect and continuously monitor their own cognitive modelling, information collection, decision-making and measurement of clinical outcomes. They tend to reassess their own perspective and ask underlying questions. Did I miss anything? Is there another explanation? What else might be happening? Do I need more information? Is this beyond my expertise and should I get advice? Knowing one's strengths, limitations and possible blind spots is crucial. Advice might be sought informally from a colleague, or formally as a second opinion.

Psychiatrists also meet and reflect formally in peer review groups on a mandated basis to discuss, under professional privilege, difficulties they are experiencing or errors they may have made. The purpose is to offer constructive external review and advice from trusted and experienced colleagues.

Peer review aims to improve skills through discussion and reflection. In

this process, the psychiatrist may seek advice on a case posing problems, or on their leadership role in relation to personnel or administrative difficulties. Forms of peer review and professional development are mandated for all medical practitioners as a condition of registration.

This notion of peer review is practically non-existent within the corporate sector. Only at top executive level do some chief executive peer or industry forums exist. But throughout levels of management, regular peer reflection is rare. Even those within the same business function hardly turn to each other for critical reflection, perhaps because they view each other as potential competitors for the same jobs.

Psychiatrists are expected to lead a co-ordinated approach to patient care, serving as both technical specialists and leaders and line managers within their field. They tend to view the development and encouragement of staff as crucial, and provide support and opportunities for professional development.

But psychiatrists are also committed to supervision and mentoring, especially of trainees, in a formally structured way – a practice not necessarily new within the corporate sector either. But how regularly do corporate leaders mentor their subordinates, let alone business or management students or trainees?

The supervision of trainees is often left to the human resources department. But due to the daily pressures and workloads of corporate leaders, any mentoring intention is often sidetracked and not a priority. But dedicated mentoring and supervision programs where knowledge and best practices are shared by experienced mentors with young trainees regularly in an organised way should be a priority for corporate leaders.

Within health care, trainee mentoring and supervision is a priority and formal processes are in place. Specialists such as psychiatrists are even required to meet in peer review sessions for discussion of supervision and mentoring issues. In today's war for talent, the corporate sector may follow the health-care example and offer dedicated mentoring programs to their future leaders. **BRW.**

Marc Stigter is director of the advanced management program at Mt Eliza executive education (Melbourne Business School). Associate professor Dr Jeffrey Looi is deputy head of the academic unit of psychological medicine at ANU Medical School.



BRW.