

Leadership in optics



A new course in leadership aims to give optical professionals the skills they need to meet the challenges ahead. **Gill Brabner** explains

It has become a truism that the optical sector is going through great change. For example local and regional optical committee members are faced with a new NHS commissioning landscape when trying to promote community optometry; all opticians and optometrists are faced with a harsh economic climate when trying to promote their own or their employers' business.

What makes for an effective leader in the optical profession? If you ever want to break the ice with a group of optical professionals, ask the gathering one simple question, 'Who in the profession is a good leader?' Many of us would have similar views on what characteristics a leader in the optical profession should possess and what it means to be an effective leader. These qualities might include negotiation and influencing skills at the highest level. Or you might expect an effective leader to be good at helping their teams to manage constantly changing demands and priorities in a difficult economic climate for anyone in practice and or working in changing NHS landscape for anyone who is also a local or regional optical committee member.

Need for training

Surprisingly few optometrists or opticians have access to any kind of leadership training specifically targeted at our profession. In fact while in the US, for the past 20 years there has been leadership training for optometrists at eight or nine US colleges, there has been no equivalent industry-wide leadership training provided for the optical sector here. We have expected optometrists and opticians to learn these skills on the job. Yet there is a real need for specialist training, as Paul Carroll, director of professional services at Specsavers confirms,

'Successful leadership means developing the skills and knowledge of teams and supporting them to use their talents. Good leadership is essential to any organisation that wants to lead the way in building



Carroll: leadership skills can be honed through training



Hewlett: optics needs commissioning skills

trust among their customers. Leadership skills can be honed and enhanced through relevant training. We support any leadership training which improves skills across the sector as a whole.'

At LOCSU, we already provide a range of training for LOC and ROC members – ranging from induction days for newly qualified members to peer review sessions at this year's National Optometric Conference (NOC). We have also set up a network of established, experienced practitioners (LOCSU's optical leads) to provide leadership to their local region. But it is clear that to make sure our leaders have the right skills to develop community optometry we need something more.

David Hewlett of the Optical Confederation highlights this need: 'Those who have worked in hospitals, for major companies or PCTs/LHBs may have had access to this leadership type of training in the past but there is nothing in the core curricula. Yet these are precisely the skills we need in all parts of the sector as part of multi-professional commissioning including at LOC/ROC level, working with clinical commissioning groups, in clinical senates and health and wellbeing boards on eye health issues.'

So LOCSU has joined forces with the Wales Optometry Postgraduate Education Centre (WOPEC) at Cardiff University to launch a new course, Leadership Skills for Optical Professionals.

The course, which can be worth

20 credits towards a postgraduate qualification, covers:

- Successful negotiation with individuals and groups
- Mapping of regional eye care and developing and presenting a strategy for regional eye care
- Assessing own leadership strengths against the LOCSU leadership competency framework.

And the course will comprise of a mixture of distance learning lectures, with attendance at three compulsory weekend sessions at WOPEC in Cardiff. As one prospective delegate said when she signed up: 'As a practising optometrist, leading colleagues is very much part and parcel of my day to day working life. I have no doubt that this course will help me in bringing colleagues along with me, for the good of the practice.'

Funding for places

I am also pleased that as part of the training support provided to LOC/ROCs, LOCSU will fund 11 places. This funding will benefit the whole profession in terms of developing people with the right skills to lead our profession for the next 10 years and beyond. Funding will be awarded according to applications from members who can demonstrate their commitment to their local or regional optical committee and for taking their career to the next step. Applications for funding will be governed via a confidential and anonymous short listing process followed by interview (October 18 or 19 in London) which will involve leading practitioners and academics.

● More details about the Leadership Skills Course are available from LOCSU gillbrabner@locsu.co.uk or WOPEC (PGOptom@cardiff.ac.uk). To find out more about LOCSU's funding or for an application form contact Jacque Hudson, office manager at LOCSU (jacquehudson@locsu.co.uk or 020 7549 2050.)

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