



Podcast transcript:

Why is leadership such a hot topic for occupational therapists right now?

Voice 01:

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Voice 02:

I feel like I spend a lot of my time saying to occupational therapists be a bit brave. I think we're generally quite humble, unassuming people, who just get on with the job and I say to people, just have a go. What's the worst that's going to happen?

*Karin:*

Hi and welcome to the RCOT podcast. I'm Karin Orman, Lead Professional Adviser here at the Royal College

*Paul:*

And I'm Paul Cooper, also a Professional Adviser. So, today we're talking about leadership. In fact, it feels like we're talking about leadership a lot at the moment – why is it such a hot topic for occupational therapists right now?

*Karin:*

Well policy in health and social care reflects the need for leadership to drive innovation and the move towards integration of services, a more personalised approach to care, shared decision making, all of this is reliant on a cultural shift in the mind set of practice, but this can only happen if we have people leading at every level within services.

So for today's show, we spoke to three occupational therapists, from different areas of practice, different geographical areas, and different career levels, about their experiences of leadership. We wanted to hear a range of experiences, but also find out any common threads running through the stories.

*Paul:*



Recognising yourself as a leader can sometimes take you by surprise. I think that moment when you first recognise yourself as a leader can be really affecting and this next clip really captures the conflicting emotions that can sometimes come with it:

*John:*

My name's John Tetlow and I'm the lead occupational therapist at the pain management programme in the Walton Centre in Liverpool.

So when I originally started working in our team, they were all the same grade and the most experienced member of the team was the identified team leader at that time and for various reasons that suddenly became me. And at the time I was quite ambivalent about that because why should I be leading a team when I'm the same grade as everybody else.

And then when the opportunity then came up to actually apply for a promotion at a grade higher, I was still unsure at that point. I still didn't know is this something I want to do? Is this the direction I want to go in? And it wasn't until I actually sat back and thought about what I'd done in this role as a team lead, because at that point it was about 3 or 4 years that I realised you've I've done a lot with this. That I'd actually contributed a lot to the service and it gave me the confidence to think this is for you. This is something you need to do.

*Karin:*

It's interesting to hear John say that it wasn't until he sat back and reflected on the work he'd done that he fully recognised his role as a leader, because I think that's actually a very common situation within occupational therapy.

When we speak to members I think it's very clear that occupational therapists feel most comfortable leading from behind, enabling others to move forward with a project or a piece of work. And of course, that approach has many benefits, it's collegiate, empowering, but as a profession we'd really benefit from being more confident with our presentational leadership skills.

We know when working clinically with people that we need to record what we do, otherwise legally it didn't happen, likewise, we need to be telling others, recording where we've led and delivered on a piece of work. It's so important for colleagues, managers, commissioners to see what we can do. But also it makes us reflect on what we've achieved and it builds our confidence to do more.

*Paul:*



Yes, I think the roles here at the Royal College is about supporting members to recognise themselves as leaders and telling people about what they do.

Karin:

Yes, sometimes, it's these frustrations about lack of understanding of what occupational therapy is and can do that can drive people to develop their leadership qualities.

[phone rings]

Amy:

Hello. My name's Amy Jane White and I'm the principal occupational therapist for Dorset County Council.

A few years ago, I attended a senior leadership meeting and at that meeting, a long-serving member of staff stated she'd never met such a difficult and challenging group as the occupational therapist staff group and that she didn't see the value that we brought to the organisation. That comment for me ignited this spark and started me on this pathway to not only show that value but also making sure that the value of our profession was being communicated and understood by all. So I wanted to come into a role where I was able to do that.

Historically within my organisation, occupational therapists have never really felt that they were valued or understood. And then three years ago we had an interim director in Dorset who forms the principle role, the principal occupational therapy role and she told her occupational therapy staff that they had the ability to change lives and improve the way services are delivered. And actually it is my job now to continue to promote the work of our occupational therapy staff, both registered and unregistered, promoting it across Dorset and even on a national level, making sure their voice is heard, the benefits of our interventions are appreciated, and also that the potential of occupational therapists as a staff group is understood. And actually the OTs that I work with in Dorset are such a dynamic group, they're forward thinking, they're creative, and now I can see the change in them, as a staff group, that they are believed in, and they know that as individuals and as a professional group. And actually I don't need to prove the value of OT, the occupational therapists I work with do that on a daily basis anyway, but it is my role as the principal lead to make sure that their value is promoted, shared and it's understood by all how we can educate, enable, empower others and truly transform the lives of the people we work with.

Karin:

We asked Amy about the work that she and her team have been undertaking to promote the role of occupational therapy nationally.



Amy:

Some of my staff groups have been using the Improving Lives, Saving Money campaign templates in how we are evidencing the value of our interventions and our approaches and we have two of our APMs presenting at an OT conference this year on looking at developing staff and looking at competency frameworks around moving and handling. And I also work as an assistive technology lead within the county council and we're constantly presenting on how we're adapting and flexing our toolkit to accommodate new ways of working to make sure that we're keeping up with practice, that we are being flexible with our approach.

Paul:

Amy's story is a really good example of turning a negative into a positive. I know a lot of people are inspired to lead when they see something that they feel strongly needs to change, or when they see something lacking. For John, that something was an absence of networking opportunities.

John:

When I think about examples of where I made an impact as a leader, I think it's within the specialism that I work in, in the chronic pain service—What's come across a lot in that time that I've been doing that is that occupational therapists often feel that there aren't that many networking opportunities and we spend a long time discussing that, but not a lot of time thinking what do we do about that? 3 or 4 years ago, after having that discussion again, it suddenly dawned on me, well what can we do about this? We talk about it all the time but nothing's actually happening, so I put myself forward and said look I'll contact the Royal College and see are there any opportunities for us to develop networking opportunities and from there I was able to develop a clinical forum for occupational therapists working in chronic pain and straight away there was a real interest in that. You know we've had a lot of people taking a real interest and wanting to be involved, wanting to know more about it. Although it's still early days, I think that's going to create lots of opportunities for the future.

Paul:

The third story of a journey into leadership that we have to share with you today is about stepping out of your comfort zone and feeling the fear, but doing it anyway. It's a topic that we've found comes up again and again – this is Helen's story:

Helen:

I'm Helen Lycett. I am the trust lead for AHPs at West London NHS Trust. I am an occupational therapist and I've spent all of my clinical career working in mental health and I am now the lead for AHPs in a large combined mental health community health provider in West London.



I took the opportunity to do a secondment, this was going back a number of years ago now, working as a project manager so doing something completely different, and I was massively out of my comfort zone obviously never having done that before and never having worked in a team that was predominantly non-clinical, but I learnt so much. I did go on a really steep learning curve, but I learnt so much from it, in terms I guess, of the broader picture, the NHS, organisational behaviour, it was my first real exposure to, I guess, the board and the trust board, and that level of the organisation, so I got to go into services that I would never have set foot in ordinarily if I stayed in my previous management and clinical roles. That was something I'd definitely say changed my view of the world and I guess gave me skills and the confidence really that I felt, well if I can do this, I can do anything. And it definitely, I think, helped to shape my future career, in terms of being a bit brave.

Paul:

Helen has some really useful advice for anyone who is thinking that they would like to develop their leadership skills and want some practical tips for how they can begin to do this, even at an early stage of their career...

Helen:

The other thing I would say, that I think was pivotal was applying to be on one of the boards at RCOT, so I a number of years ago, applied to be a member of what was then the new professional practice board (it's since been changed and is now the English Board). I saw this opportunity advertised in OT news and I thought that looks interesting, I put myself forward and was appointed onto the professional practice board and again it was one of those really kind of career changing moments for me in that it gave me exposure to things that I never would have got in the day job and again the strategic thinking, an awareness of the national picture, it just helped shape my view of the world in a different way. And subsequent to that, I then actually went on to chair that board and have a seat on council that went with it which I guess projected me then into a different world again. But I often say to people, of all the things I have done in my career, I honestly believe had I not done that, I don't think I would be where I am now. Because it gave me that exposure to different experiences that you just don't get in the day job as an occupational therapist. And particularly at a still quite junior level as I was then. It gave me so much to work with in terms of when I was applying for jobs and going for interviews at more senior roles.

Paul:

I asked Helen what she would say to early career occupational therapists who are interested in that type of opportunity but perhaps feel intimidated or under-qualified:

Helen:



I would just say have a go. You probably do know more than you think you do-I feel like I spend a lot of my time saying to occupational therapists be a bit brave. I think we're generally quite humble, unassuming people, who just get on with the job and I say to people, just have a go. What's the worst that's going to happen? And I have always found the people at RCOT to be very welcoming, supportive- They always really valued my contributions so my advice would just be give it a go – what have you got to lose? It really was quite life-changing for me.

Karin: So, we were interested to find out what skills and behaviours people consciously adopt as leaders

John:

I think some of the important skills and behaviours to be a leader, especially within occupational therapy, is your confidence in your role as an occupational therapist and what occupational therapists can contribute to the team that you're working in. I think it's really important to be very clear on that, that you can confidently take your team forward, as a leader, and also communicate that to other members of the team, who may be unsure what your role is as an occupational therapist.

I think another important aspect is knowing the bigger picture. Is knowing what's going on with policies, Government policies, and how that contributes to your service and the direction you're going in.

Karin: Amy echoed that need for confidence in the value of the profession and clear targeted communication proving that value.

Amy:

As a leader I think listening and communication skills are essential. I'm the connect between the OT staff group and the senior management team and I need to be able to communicate the challenges to both of those groups, so I always make sure we're heading in the same direction. Knowing who you are talking to and adapting your communication style to suit your audience. So whilst I go into certain meetings with certain leaders, with inspiring case studies of how we change people's lives, I may go into another meeting with data and potential cost savings just to make sure how other people tick, knowing your audience. But I believe in my profession and I believe in the staff group that I lead, and I know, that we can transform service delivery and play a key role in improving lives, especially as budgets get tighter and tighter. We will adapt because services need to, and hopefully I'll be there promoting occupational therapy the whole way along the way.

Paul:



It's great to hear that RCOT's recent campaigns are playing their part in helping Amy feel empowered to lead. Helen had another interesting point to add to this conversation about mistakes...

Helen:

I always have and I am the type of person naturally that will just give things a go, I am less bothered about making a mistake. That's not to say that I would do something reckless, as I say, it's calculated risks that I believe when things don't go according to plan, it's a learning opportunity. As long as nothing catastrophic is happening, all things can be salvaged. But the flip of that is that you have to be big enough to put your hand up and admit when this isn't working, it's not going to plan and let's stop, think, what needs to change. Or equally, crikey something's gone wrong and this has really gone wrong, the wheels have come off and we really need to stop what we're doing and try and go in a different direction. So I think just my innate kind of personality as someone who's willing to take a bit of risk and so the flip of that is that you do really have to be big enough to say when things aren't working. I think genuine leadership it comes from when you are able to do that. If you're the kind of person that thinks I'm just going to plough forward with my view of the world and keep going on regardless of what happens and regardless of what other people are saying around me, then that's not real leadership, that's just dictatorship. But if you can try and measure that with hearing what people are saying, if things don't feel right, or trying to engage people in whatever change you are trying to make and they genuinely feel they are part of it and have ownership, then that's leadership to me.

Paul:

Thank you to our interviewees John Tetlow, Amy Jane White and Helen Lycett for taking part in today's show and sharing their leadership journeys with us today. I know we've really enjoyed hearing them and I hope you have too. If you want to get in touch about today's episode, or if you have any ideas for future episodes, we're on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. You can comment on our podcasts using the hashtag #RCOTpodcast. So to end this episode, Karin, what advice do you have for occupational therapists at any career level who want to develop their skills in this area?

Karin:

Well, the College has a range of resources and opportunities for members to develop their leadership skills and experience. The Career Development Framework has a leadership pillar, and defines leadership skills and mindset at every stage of the occupational therapy career. So members can take a look at this, identify what level they are currently at, and the next level to aim for, to get some ideas on how to develop their skills. The occupational therapy Improving Lives, Saving Money campaign allows people to share their service innovations, so



visit the ILSM web pages under promoting occupational therapy on our website and we also have opportunities to get involved with leadership roles at the College. Again, go to our website, look under practice resources, leadership and management.

Let's give the final word today to Helen:

Helen:

One thing I always say to people and try to hammer home, since I've been in this job especially, in that trust-wide leadership role is that you are all leaders, you know you can be a leader at any level and it's something I really want to try and instil in people and seeing themselves as leaders because lots and lots of people don't, and we know this. People don't see themselves as leaders.

People do fall into a trap of thinking well I'm not in a management position so therefore I'm not a leader, we're really working hard to try and dispel that myth and trying to give people opportunities and exposure to things again that they wouldn't ordinarily get as part of their day jobs to try and open people's eyes to what leadership is and that it's not necessarily about being called a manager. So I think for me that is definitely one of the major differences, that you can be a leader no matter who you are.

[END]