The introduction of the Frontline Management Initiative in South Western Sydney Area Health Service

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the development and implementation of a management development strategy for the South Western Sydney Area Health Service (SWSAHS). The program, the Frontline Management Initiative (FMI), was introduced as a developmental tool which enabled managers to identify those competencies that they already possess and those which they need to develop. The FMI will be progressively implemented throughout the five sector health services of SWSAHS comprising approximately 1500 managers. This article outlines the introduction and experience of FMI in one sector health service, the development and assessment of a manager's portfolio, the pathway developed from FMI to university based health management courses, the lessons learnt and the future directions for management development.

Background

The Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills identified the need to develop Australia's Frontline managers through programs directed at Frontline managers, and through the development of a Management Competencies Framework (Karpin Report 1995). In response to the Taskforce recommendations, the Federal Government established a National Frontline Management Reference Group within the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA).

Frontline managers are important members of an organisation who are involved in key management roles such as team leaders, ward supervisors, co-ordinators and project managers. Although not usually responsible for managing other managers, they undertake a vital role in co-ordinating and influencing a section of the workforce under their domain.

After an extensive consultative process between enterprises, employer and employee organisations, training committees and governments, ANTA identified 11 generic Frontline Management Competencies. Once the Standards and Curriculum Council endorsed a draft of the competency standards, the FMI was developed.

The FMI Development Kit was produced as a new strategy for management development in the workplace. The kit of resource material was produced and trialed in a range of pilot sites across Australia. It was designed to assist organisations and individuals through the process of developing frontline management skills. The resource material provides for guided self-learning, and gives participants the opportunity to develop key competencies in the context of their job and workplace. Subsequently, the feedback received from the trial sites, both from the organisations' management and the program participants, was incorporated into the final Development Kit which was launched in September 1998.

In November 1997, NSW Health released its Management Development Strategy (NSW Health 1997), built around industry consultation and the findings of the Karpin Report. The Strategy states that "... it is NSW Health's policy to adopt a 'best practice' approach to the development of managers. Each Health Service and the Health Department shall develop a Management Development Strategy which should be comprehensive and explicitly integrated with the organisation's business strategy and corporate objectives. Management development activities should be planned and organised, demonstrating the use of a full range of formal and informal, structured and unstructured learning experiences."

The Management Development Strategy is built on the Karpin Report's definition of management development. It is "... the total, continuous learning process through which managers develop their competence. This encompasses learning through a variety of formal and informal, structured and unstructured experiences, including learning from the work role and from work relationships; from self-development; and from formal training and higher education programs." (NSW Health 1997).

The decision to adopt the Frontline Management Competencies as the framework for management development in SWSAHS was made following the release of NSW Health Circular 97/119. The emphasis on management development was repeated in 1998 in the Strategic Directions for Health document released by NSW Health with the inclusion of "develop and implement a management development program that focuses on leadership and people skills" in the strategies for shaping the future (NSW Health 1998).

The FMI was introduced as a pilot in the Fairfield Health Service, part of the SWSAHS. The University of Western Sydney Macarthur and SWSAHS have worked in partnership to promote and extend the recognition granted to those staff of SWSAHS who complete a Certificate or Diploma of Frontline Management. This paper describes the steps taken to introduce and incorporate the Frontline Management Competencies into one Area Health Service.

The underlying ideas

SWSAHS is one of the state's Health Services with provider status for the FMI. It comprises five Sector health services and employs over 9,700 employees of which approximately 1,500 are managers. The decision to introduce the FMI in 1998 was made in response to an extensive review of the effectiveness of the Performance Management process that had been operating in one of the sectors of SWSAHS for some years.

The review indicated that in the areas where the performance management process was not working as well as expected, a lack of management skills on the part of the managers was a contributing factor. When asked to suggest the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the ideal manager, most managers produced a list very similar to the Frontline Management Competencies. The FMI offered a clear developmental framework for managers, many of whom are clinicians promoted into management positions without any real preparation for the role.

Performance Management

SWSAHS promotes a developmental model of performance management and it is within this context that the FMI is conducted. The FMI is used as a developmental tool to enable managers to identify those competencies that they already possess and those which they need to develop. There are many paths to develop that competence and these are negotiated between each Frontline manager and their supervisor within the performance management context. There are onsite coaches (managers who are qualified as Workplace Assessors) who provide ideas, encouragement and wide knowledge of competencies to those managers who are undertaking assessment against the Competencies. The Executive of the sector Health Service have also been trained as workplace assessors.

Competency-based assessment

Competency is a broad idea that includes all aspects of work: skills to perform particular tasks, managing a number of different tasks or activities within a job, responding to problems and non-routine events, and dealing with all aspects of the workplace including working with others. Competency standards should relate to realistic workplaces, be expressed as outcomes, be understandable to all users, describe the work, set out the standard of work that is expected, and provide the basis for skill formation now and in the future.

The emphasis is on the practical competence needed by workers and how they can apply what they know to the challenges that arise in their day-to-day work. Where endorsed competency standards exist, people can be assessed and awarded nationally recognised qualifications. As shown in Table 1, there are 11 units of Frontline Management Competency. These are used in SWSAHS as single units which are grouped into four themes according to the requirements for a particular qualification.

The assessment of competence is based on gathering evidence from the workplace, and making a judgement on whether competence has been achieved. Assessment against competencies can be for a number of purposes, the most common being identification of competencies already held by the participant, provision of a framework for developmental activities (either formal education or work-based learning and development), award of a formal qualification, and placement in a skill category for industrial awards.

Assessment for the purposes of the award of a formal qualification is conducted in the context of the National Assessment Principles which were endorsed by the Ministerial Council of the Australian National Training Authority on 22 May 1998. The principles underpin the Australian Recognition Framework and apply to all assessments conducted under the National Training Framework (ANTA, 1999).

As shown in Table 2, Frontline Management qualifications are available at 3 of the 12 levels endorsed under the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), which provides a comprehensive, nationally consistent and flexible framework for all qualifications in post-compulsory education and training (Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board to MCEETYA, 1998). At the qualification levels that the Frontline Management Competencies are assessed, the differences between them are expressed in terms of breadth, depth and complexity of knowledge and competencies; degree of autonomy; responsibility for others; complexity of workplace environment; and degree of judgement exercised in the application of the competencies.

Detailed health-specific Evidence Guides have been developed for use in SWSAHS to supplement the assessment judgements. The assessors look for a series of points when determining the appropriate qualification level, as follows.

Certificate lll. Demonstrated relevant theoretical knowledge, application of a range of well developed skills, application of known solutions to a variety of predictable problems, processes that require a range of well developed skills where some discretion and judgement is required, interpretation of available information using discretion and judgement, taking responsibility for own outputs in work and learning, and taking limited responsibility for the output of others.

Certificate IV. Demonstrated understanding of a broad knowledge base incorporating some theoretical concepts, application of solutions to a defined range of unpredictable problems, identification and application of skill and knowledge to a wide variety of contexts with depth in some areas, identification, analysis and evaluation of information from a variety of sources, taking responsibility for own outputs in relation to specified quality standards, and taking limited responsibility for the quality and quantity of the output of others.

Diploma. Demonstrated understanding of specialised knowledge with depth in some areas; analysis, diagnosis, design and execution of judgements across a broad range of technical or management functions; command of wide ranging, highly specialised technical, creative or conceptual skills; generation of ideas through the analysis of information and concepts at an abstract level; accountability for personal outputs within broad parameters; and accountability for group outcomes within broad parameters (Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board to MCEETYA, 1998).

Assessors need to develop a sophisticated understanding of the competencies that they are assessing, as well as of the process of assessment. A major concern of the Vocational Education Training (VET) sector is the quality of the assessments being undertaken. The assessment standards are at the core of any VET qualification and

the conduct of assessment is a critical factor in the acceptance of competency based training. However, the guidelines provided in the Australian Qualifications Framework are generic, giving broad conceptual outlines rather than detailed and specific lists. Although checklist based assessment activities can streamline and simplify the process of assessment, it is the role of judgement and tacit knowledge in learning and assessment that is intergral to the overall process (Jones 1999).

The SWSAHS assessment of candidates for qualifications against management competencies has required extensive training to develop a pool of qualified assessors who can bring a skilled and sophisticated approach to the conduct of assessments.

The Frontline Management assessment process in SWSAHS

The three phases in the Frontline Management process are related to the stages of Workplace Assessment. There is a progression from initial assessment and identification of competencies already held, ongoing assessment of the development of those competencies not present, and final assessment (the formal recognition of competence).

In SWSAHS each phase is clearly defined, with a range of activities to be undertaken. Initial assessment involves a briefing session with candidates and their managers. Workplace-based activities are identified to confirm the appropriate level of Frontline Management qualification. Managers undertake a review of the candidate against the competencies and the candidate undertakes a self review against the competencies. The Frontline Management coach, candidate and assessor agree on the units of Frontline Management competence that will be presented for assessment.

In the ongoing assessment phase, the candidate, assisted by the workplace coach, undertakes activities to develop evidence of application of the required competencies. This may be a relatively simple process of documenting existing practises. It may equally be one of undertaking learning and development activities that will provide the participant the opportunity to develop the knowledge or skills required to be assessed as competent. The candidate may enrol in either formal study or through the SWSAHS Management Development program.

The activities undertaken during this phase are guided by a Learning and Development plan which the candidate completes with their manager and assessor. This ensures that the activities undertaken are consistent with the performance management processes of the workplace.

In the final assessment phase, the candidate presents a portfolio of evidence of competence for assessment by qualified workplace assessors. The results of this assessment will be either Competent, in which case the candidate will receive a Frontline Management Certificate or Diploma, or Not yet Competent. There is no pass or fail in competency-based assessment. When an assessment of Not yet Competent is made, a Development Plan which will guide the candidate in further activities needed to develop Competence, is negotiated with the candidate. At the conclusion of this Development Plan, the candidate presents the evidence for a further assessment.

The pilot at Fairfield Health Service

The Fairfield Health Service (FHS) was selected as the pilot site for the FMI in SWSAHS as there was very strong support from the General Manager and Executive for the initiative. This is a crucial factor in the success of an initiative that challenges the assumptions of staff about how one learns to be a manager. The concept of self-directed learning that occurs in the workplace, rather than the more traditional "classroom" context of higher education, and which is fundamental to the FMI is unfamiliar to many managers. SWSAHS managers are generally already tertiary qualified and the value and merit of workplace learning is not always recognised.

Preparation and assessment of portfolios

Initially TAFE was used to brief the trial group of 7 managers, all drawn from Community and Allied Health within the FHS. At the same time a number of staff of the Area Human Resource (HR) Development Service and the Fairfield Sector were trained by TAFE as Workplace Assessors. The participants in the pilot were assisted

by onsite coaches trained as assessors, who understood the process of competency assessment. These coaches provided the necessary local knowledge of FHS to the development of Assessment Portfolios by the participants. Staff of the Area HR Development Service conducted the assessments of the pilot group in conjunction with assessors from TAFE. The dual assessment was adopted to ensure validity of the assessment decisions.

SWSAHS has assessment protocols that preclude line managers from assessing their own staff or any other staff from within their own sector. Assessors who are independent of the management of a sector conduct the formal assessments.

Portfolio development

After being briefed on the Frontline Management Competencies and the process, the pilot group was asked to develop within 6 months a portfolio of evidence of their competency. Apart from a portfolio guide which described types of evidence and how to arrange a portfolio, they were initially given no other documentation to guide them.

The candidates, their managers, coaches and some successful participants in the program attended the two-hour briefing session. The session covered the context of the development of the FMI, the Karpin report and the process of assessment.

The candidate, their manager and the workplace coach undertake the next step over a period that ranges from 2 to 6 weeks. The candidate's job description is mapped against the competencies proposed for assessment. It is essential to determine the range of responsibility, accountability and autonomy of the candidate in order to ensure that assessment for a formal qualification will be valid. At this point areas of responsibility that have been assumed but are not formally part of the job description often become apparent, as well as those aspects of the competencies to which the candidate has no exposure.

Self-assessment by the candidate and review by the candidate's manager are the key activities of the mapping process. The candidate and the coach meet to discuss the results of the self assessment and the manager's assessment of the candidate. At this point there are a number of options for the candidate, including the following.

⊕ Begin to gather the evidence for assessment against the nominated units of competence. The coach will advise the candidate on the type of evidence to gather, the use of the Portfolio to arrange this evidence, and the use of the Learning Log and the other tools in the Portfolio Development Guide.

⊕ Enrol in SWSAHS Management Development program to address gaps in the candidate's knowledge and skills that were identified through the self-assessment and manager's review. This training may then lead to the process of gathering evidence for assessment against certain units of competence. It is important to identify these units at the earliest stage so that collection of evidence can be concurrent rather than retrospective.

⊕ The candidate may negotiate with their manager (through the performance management process) some opportunities and activities which help them to develop the competency. These could include special projects, higher grade duties, secondments, and mentoring opportunities.

While the candidates began to prepare evidence of their application of the competencies in the workplace, the Area HR Development Service created documents that would assist them. A comprehensive portfolio framework was developed for the pilot group including a self-assessment tool, manager's review tool, a map of the typical qualifications that this group had achieved including in-house VETAB accredited program against the FM Competencies, a tool to help the participants map their job descriptions against the competencies, and suggestions about the type of evidence that they may generate during their normal workplace activities.

The Portfolio Development Guide has progressively had a number of editions as a balance develops between a broad range of documents to assist the candidates and an overwhelming number of tools, that makes the assessment process more cumbersome. Version 7 is a streamlined document that is easier for both the candidates and the assessors to use, with new tools continuing to be developed in response to requests from coaches or candidates. The intention is that a range of tools will be available to meet the different learning styles and literacy levels of candidates.

Gathering evidence of competence may take some time (lasting as long as a particular project) or the evidence may relate to a single occasion. In either case, if the Frontline Management candidate has identified units of competency for which they are seeking assessment, it should be possible to gather evidence concurrently with daily activities. One element of evidence may serve for a number of the elements of competency. This was a concept that some of the pilot group had difficulties with because in essence the more holistic the approach to the process is, the less time it takes to construct an assessment portfolio.

Assessment against the Frontline Management Competency Standards is a developmental process in health care, with benefits for both the individual and the organisation. It is not linked to industrial awards or pay rates. In other states and organisations the Frontline Competencies are applied in different ways, with industrial as well as developmental links. For SWSAHS the purpose of the assessment is to provide the individual manager with an insight into their own strengths and weaknesses, and to offer possible paths to develop their management skills. The intention is to provide, via nationally recognised qualifications, acknowledgement of the skills and knowledge that an individual manager has developed and demonstrated in the workplace, with the opportunity to use that qualification to progress to relevant tertiary education if so desired.

Assessment of competence can take place at any time and include as many of the competencies as the candidate wishes. It is preferable that assessment is against a number of competencies or parts of competencies at the one time. Assessment is meant to be useful to the candidate and to the organisation rather than a difficult, costly or stressful process. It is from the assessment that areas of further learning and development are identified.

While the pilot group were preparing their evidence of competence, the Area HR Development Service briefed a second group of 16 managers who started preparing their portfolios for assessment.

When the pilot group was assessed it was found that the level of anxiety amongst the group was very high. They had invested so much thought and physical effort gathering the evidence that they were very stressed. They were rather cynical about the idea of being assessed as competent or not yet competent because to them it was still pass or fail. The SWSAHS Frontline Management protocols required each candidate to provide three pieces of evidence of their understanding and application in the workplace of each performance criteria of the units for which they were seeking assessment.

Attempts were made to address the candidates' anxiety about the assessment process by conducting preliminary assessments of the portfolios and suggesting any changes that needed to be made before the portfolio was formally presented for assessment. The portfolios were then examined by two assessors and sent back to the candidates with requests for further information or explanation before a one hour assessment interview was held with each candidate.

All candidates who presented a portfolio were assessed as competent at the time of interview. Each person received a Certificate 3 or 4 in Frontline Management presented by the CEO of SWSAHS.

FMI pathway to postgraduate management studies

At the same time that the pilot group was conducting their self-assessments and preparing their portfolios, the Area HR Development Service was negotiating with the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur for recognition of the qualifications gained by those assessed against the Frontline Management Competencies. The University undertook a major project to develop articulation pathways for those who have gained a Certificate 4 or Diploma of Frontline Management. The University has developed ways of integrating the knowledge gaps identified by the Frontline Management candidates with their formal teaching programs.

The FMI is new and the understanding of nationally recognised competencies is still developing so it was most important that SWSAHS was able to offer the Frontline Management candidates some tangible "traditional" recognition of their achievements. UWS Macarthur has shown vision and leadership in accepting and adopting the value of the Frontline Management qualifications, especially in their postgraduate Health Service Management programs.

Management Manual

The SWSAHS Competency-Based Management Development Program is aligned with the nationally endorsed Frontline Management Competencies. For new managers people management is often the greatest challenge. For 10 years, one component of the SWSAHS Management Development Program has been a Management Manual for new managers. This was largely a pooling of policies, procedures and survival knowledge that new managers needed in a short time after their appointment. This has been rewritten to reflect the FM Competencies using an action learning approach which ensures that managers are developing their competence and evidence of it as they work. At the end of the process, the new manager is ready to be rigorously assessed against the competencies, drawing on the work that have been undertaking in the previous 7 months. This means, for example, that as a manager prepares or reviews their Business Plan, the process is conducted within the framework of the Frontline Management Competencies so that the manager develops the evidence of their competence arising from their naturally occurring workplace activities.

SWSAHS has also negotiated with Pearson Education (Prentice Hall), the publishers of the Frontline Management Development Kit and the Frontline Management Learning Guides, to develop a Learning Guide that is customised to Health based on the Management Manual.

Single unit projects

The Area HR Development Service has recently conducted a training and development program for a group of 74 managers based around Unit 4 of Frontline Management - Participate in, lead and facilitate work teams. After participating in 11/2 days of training this group of managers was asked to put in place a project based around a team they lead, using the principles of Unit 4. They also had to undertake at both the beginning and the end of the program a self assessment of their competence as a member and leader of teams. The managers were given 3 months in which to conduct the projects.

At the end of this time, they will undergo a paper based assessment to achieve a Statement of Attainment in Unit 4 of Frontline Management. Extension of this process to other Units which are recognised as strategically important for the organisation at a particular time, is another method of building the competence of the organisation.

The next phase of FMI

The Frontline Management Assessment process is currently being extended into the other Sector health services of SWSAHS. For each candidate, possibilities include extending the range of programs and opportunities available to managers to fill the gaps in personal competency identified through the assessment process; achieving assessment at a higher level, or for more of the competencies; university to extend formal education and knowledge; special projects enabling the participant to exercise or to extend the range of their competency; leading Management Manual study groups for new managers; mentoring; coaching Frontline Management candidates; better performance management of staff, with the many benefits that this brings to the organisation; and national recognition of management skills developed and demonstrated on the job, when moving to another position.

For the Area HR Development Service and SWSAHS, possibilities include extension of the Frontline Management assessments into the other Sector health services; training more Workplace Assessors; developing a range of programs and projects that are linked to the competencies; refining the Portfolio Development Guide; and developing new Frontline Management based assessment tools

Many lessons have been learned from the pilot group. Inter alia, we have learned that the process is more time consuming than we thought possible for the candidates; the more integrated the activities and the evidence, the less evidence is generated and there is less duplication of effort; the Frontline Management Competencies provide a clear framework that enables managers to recognise their competence and their skills gaps and where to go next; workplace coaches are the key to success for the candidates (without regular meetings, reality checks, and guidance the candidates lose their way and their impetus); the successful candidates have identified quite significant changes in their workplace practices; the candidates who have been assessed so far are keen to go on

to more units at higher levels; candidates can make the process as individual as they wish, at their own pace, in their own time; and visible top down support is a significant factor in the success of the program.

The next 12 months will see extension of the Frontline Management assessment process across all levels of SWSAHS. There are many questions still to explore, especially methods of long term evaluation of the success of the program and how to extend the Competencies to Senior Executives.

Conclusion

The FMI is still too new in SWSAHS for any longitudinal evaluation. However, anecdotally the use of the FM competencies has been beneficial for both the candidates and the organisation. Candidates report improved capacity to manage their time and work priorities, as well as significant improvements in their interaction with the teams they lead as their people management skills have improved. Both management and candidates report an organisation wide improvement in consultative processes, linkages to the organisation's goals and improved opportunities for further development and training. These results address some of the issues identified by Harris, Maddern and Pegg (1998) in their study on the changing roles and careers of health service managers.

The adoption of the FMI has provided a framework within which to conduct the SWSAHS Management Development Program. In accordance with current NSW Health policy, the FMI has been integrated into SWSAHS' business strategy and corporate objectives. It has provided the organisational mechanism for recognition and improvement of the skills of the health service's frontline managers. The process acknowledged that the most effective learning takes place in the workplace.

The revised FMI program is being conducted during 1999/2000 and reviewed late in 2000. A full evaluation process is still to be developed. One of the issues from the pilot program was the difficulty of evaluating a program that is still in train, the benefits of the program being long term, both for the organisation and for the participants, who may choose to use their qualification as credit for further university study, or who may take up a coaching and mentoring role within their organisation with new managers.

SWSAHS has led the way in being the first major health service in Australia to implement the FMI within their management development program. Other health services within New South Wales are now also adopting the FMI model. A number of different   models are being followed ranging from the extensive use of external assessors to a process very similar to that in SWSAHS. The key factor in the model adopted has been the degree of top down support for the Initiative. Unless senior level staff are prepared to be trained as and act as assessors and coaches, then use needs to be made of external assessors and facilitators. The SWSAHS process and Portfolio Development Guide have been referred to extensively in the development of the program in the other Area Health Services.

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Table 1: Frontline management competencies

Unit of Competence	Frontline Management roles
1 Manage personal work priorities and professional relationships	Is responsible for managing their own performance and taking responsibility for their professional development within the context of the organisation.
2 Provide leadership in the workplace	Has an important leadership role in the development of the organisation. This will be most evident in the manner in which they conduct themselves, the initiative which they take in influencing others, and the way they manage their responsibilities.
3 Establish and manage effective workplace relationships	Plays an important role in developing and maintaining positive relationships in internal and external environments so that customers, suppliers and the organisation achieve planned outputs/outcomes.
4 Participate in, lead and facilitate work teams	Has a key role in leading, participating in, facilitating and empowering work teams/groups within the context of the organisation. They play a prominent part in motivating, mentoring, coaching and developing team members, and in achieving team cohesion.
5 Manage operations to achieve planned outcomes	Is actively engaged in planning, implementing, monitoring and recording performance to achieve the business plans of the team/organisation. This pivotal role is carried out to create staff, efficient and effective products and services to customer satisfaction within the organisation's productivity and profitability plans.
6 Manage workplace information	Is an important creator and manager of information. Their competency in identifying, acquiring, analysing and using appropriate information plays a significant part in the efficiency and effectiveness of the individual's/team/organisation's performance.
7 Manage quality customer service	Is involved in ensuring that products and services are delivered and maintained to standards agreed by the organisation's policies and practices as well as legislation, conventions and codes of practice.
8 Develop and maintain a safe workplace and environment	Has a key role in ensuring that the workplace meets safety requirements set down in legislation, standards and the organisation's policies and practices. While it is recognised that safety is everyone's responsibility, Frontline management has an important leadership role in promoting and monitoring a safe workplace and environment.
9 Implement and monitor continuous improvement systems and processes	Has an active role in managing the continuous improvement process in achieving the organisation's quality objectives. Their position, closely associated with the creation and delivery of products and services, means that they play an important part in influencing the on-going development of the organisation.
10 Facilitate and capitalise on change and innovation	Has an active role in fostering change and acting as a catalyst in the implementation of change and innovation. They have a creative role in ensuring that individuals, the team and the organisation gain from change; and that the customer benefits through improved products and services.
11 Contribute to the development of a workplace learning environment	Plays a prominent role in encouraging and supporting the development of a learning organisation. Promoting a learning environment in which work and learning are integrated is an important goal to be achieved.

Table 2: Australian Qualifications Framework

Qualification level	Schools Sector	Vocational Education and Training sector	Higher Education sector
11			Doctoral Degree
10			Masters Degree
9			Graduate Diploma
8			Graduate Certificate
7			Bachelor Degree
6		Advanced Diploma	Advanced Diploma
5		Diploma	Diploma
4		Certificate IV	
3		Certificate III	
2		Certificate II	
1		Certificate I	
	Senior Secondary Certificate of Education		