



Leaders of Tomorrow

Conversations on shaping the future of care



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Introduction

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It's time to talk about leadership

The UK care sector has arrived at a crucial crossroads. Now is the moment for the leaders of tomorrow to step forward and into the spotlight.

Care is full of incredible people who go above and beyond every day. Many of them are already leading by example, perhaps without knowing it yet themselves. If we're to overcome the challenges ahead – such as the growing staffing crisis, or the pressures of the cost-of-living crisis – then we must help, support, and prepare these leaders of tomorrow to take the leap in their care careers and inspire others to go above and beyond with them.

After all, leadership in care is about putting people first. We saw it in action during the pandemic, when current leaders and owners of care organisations covered unwell workers' shifts, donning their PPE gear to ensure vulnerable people were still getting the best possible level of care and support.

Sustaining this kind of leadership will be the difference between a promising future for the care sector and one filled with uncertainty. This is why it is time to identify the leaders of tomorrow. Where are they now? Do they see themselves as future leaders? And what systems need to be in place to ensure they are able to flourish into the people we need?

The care sector is vital to the UK economy and society. According to Skills for Care statistics (2021 Adult Social Care Workforce Data) the sector employs 1.54 million people and contributes £50.3 billion to the economy. But more importantly, it keeps thousands of people out of hospital and allows them to lead normal and fulfilling lives.

Care workers are essential, and recruiting and retaining the right care workers will depend on the availability of leaders to support, nurture, and inspire them. The time has come to build sustainable leadership in the care sector, ensuring individuals not only have the necessary care skills but also the right professional and personal qualities to shape a positive future for the sector.

To learn more, we spoke to a range of people who work in care – both current leaders and those identified as high potential leaders of tomorrow. We've heard their views on the current state of leadership in the sector, what is working well right now, and what more needs to be done. If there's one thing above all our discussions have discovered, it's that this is only the very start of the conversation.

Key themes

What makes a care leader?

It takes a certain type of person to be a leader in care. But what are the unifying characteristics seen across the board? Understanding this will help us to identify what to look for within care organisations.

The confidence to lead

Stepping into a leadership role takes confidence and ambition. So, do the leaders of tomorrow start out in the care sector with the ambition to lead? And how confident are they already?

Bringing career journeys into the spotlight

Discovering the leaders of tomorrow means offering them a clear career path. But is there enough awareness around career paths in the sector? And what support already exists?

The responsibility on current leadership

Guidance and support are at the heart of nurturing future leadership. And that responsibility falls to those who understand and live these roles, our leaders of today.

What makes a leader in care?

Tomorrow's leaders are already among us. If we truly want to find and nurture these people, we need to be able to identify them. Becoming a leader in the care sector is no ordinary role – it requires a specific type of individual. But what qualities do these individuals need?

According to Amanda Jackson, Director at Heritage Healthcare, compassion and respect are two indispensable qualities of any inspiring care leader. "You need someone who can deal with some of the fear, the uncertainty and doubt, which the sector currently has. Someone who is trying to give that reassurance to staff all the time."

These might be issues that many other industries never have to face – the need to reassure and lead staff members through macro challenges such as the staffing crisis, or even something as human and personal as the loss of someone in their care. Truly, no two days are the same, which is what makes this sector such a rewarding area to be a part of.

Compassion and respect are two indispensable qualities of any inspiring care leader.

Tenacity is the name of the game

Compassion, empathy, and a people-first approach are at the heart of every good care leader – but for Jane Perry, Director and owner of Bluebird Care Ayrshire, Edinburgh, and Glasgow South, these must go hand-in-hand with tenacity. "You have to go at it," she says, "there's a new challenge every day. You have to learn to accept the hard knocks. And, at the same time, you have to also accept when you're doing a really good job."

Amanda Jackson was quick to support the need for a 'never give up' attitude, saying she finds "tenacity, and perhaps ambition", to be what truly sets care leaders apart.

It's a sentiment echoed by Nicole Gibson, Care Manager at Care South. "You have to be a certain type of person to stay within the care sector. You have to understand the people you're leading. Sometimes you get it wrong. But you just adapt."

"Ultimately, we could recruit almost anybody for these roles, but we don't. That's not what we want. And I don't think that's what our customers would want either."

Jane Perry

Good leaders know their limits. The best leaders know which members of their team can help them and how.

Leading with self-awareness

Good leaders know their limits. The best leaders know which members of their team can help them and how. And according to Amanda Jackson, that is precisely what sets a great leader apart. "Someone who can manage their own strengths and weaknesses and is able to handle those difficult situations."

Amanda Jackson wasn't the only advocate for knowing when to stand aside and bring in the team's expertise. "Being a good leader is recognising your own strengths and abilities," says Jane Perry, "and where there are gaps in your strength and abilities, working with other leaders and managers who have those strengths. That way, we can work together as a collective to achieve what we want for our customers. I don't profess to be the best at everything, and I recognise in my own managers that they have knowledge I don't."

Putting the 'care' in career

The leaders of tomorrow will need plenty of passion. Across all of our interviews, it was the common denominator that shone through strongest.

"Why are we different as care leaders?" says Nicole Gibson. "Because we care. We genuinely want to be in this sector. It's not an easy sector to be in, and I think that's why you get such good managers."

"I think there are some amazing and passionate individuals across the social care sector" says Amanda Jackson. "They genuinely care about what they do."

According to Jane Perry, the ability to marry that passion with a keen sense of business acumen is something that future leaders will need. "We're going to need strong people. They'll be negotiating with ministers and people who have little or no knowledge of the care sector and are used to making decisions based on budgets."



Jane Perry, Director and owner of Bluebird Care Ayrshire, Edinburgh, and Glasgow South

Jane started her home care journey with Bluebird Care in 2008, delivering high-quality home care in Edinburgh before venturing into Glasgow South and Ayrshire. Working with multidisciplinary teams and integrating with other leaders in the Social Care sector, Jane is driven to deliver the best home care service possible.

The confidence to lead

Leaders inspire confidence in others. But first, they need to have confidence in themselves.

Confidence is a topic that came up time and again in our conversations with current care leaders. Making the step up to a leadership position for some can mean taking an active decision to move out of their comfort zone.

"I don't think there are enough people in the care sector at the moment who have the confidence to take that next step" says Amanda Jackson. "A lot of them come in, they just need a job. But I think at the end of the day, a lot of it is they don't believe in themselves. And I think it's giving them that belief that they can do it really."

Growing and evolving confidence is just as important as gaining qualifications.

Growing confidence, not just qualifications

For Jane Perry, watching her team grow and develop is incredibly rewarding. But she also pointed out that growing and evolving confidence is just as important as gaining qualifications.

"It's great to see people develop and grow and to watch them pass their qualifications and get recognition from our customers. But then to actually say, 'This person obviously has something here. How do we best support them?' Because they're not always the best at singing about their own achievements."

Indeed, Amanda Jackson echoed Jane Perry's thoughts, stating that development isn't just about qualifications. "Developing them is one thing. But so is making them realise they are capable of more than what they might believe they're capable of."

"At the end of the day, you're making decisions about someone's life."

Nicole Gibson

"I don't think there are enough people in the care sector at the moment who have the confidence to take that next step"

Amanda Jackson

Not everyone wants to be a leader

It's important not to confuse a lack of confidence with a lack of desire. While the care sector is full of compassionate and inspiring individuals, this doesn't always necessarily translate into wanting a leadership role.

"Some people are quite happy" says Amanda Jackson. "It's not a confidence thing, it's that they don't want the management level positions. And that's also fine."

But why might this be? As we've already touched upon, this lack of confidence to step into a leadership role could be down to the sheer responsibility of decision-making at this level. As Nicole Gibson describes it, "At the end of the day, you're making decisions about someone's life."

Yet confidence is often also heavily influenced by perception. One thing which has historically held back the care sector is the idea that care is a low-skilled role – something which Nicole Gibson says, "couldn't be further from the truth."

Care is a professional career and if people can come into care with that belief, then they are far more likely to aspire to a leadership role in the future. If we are to truly instil confidence in our leaders of tomorrow, then perhaps it is time we take a look at how we positively evolve the perception of the industry itself.



Amanda Jackson, Director, Heritage Healthcare

Amanda began her professional life as a carer, where she fell in love with her work and has since risen through the ranks to Director. She has been at Heritage Healthcare since 2008, delivering life-changing home care to communities in the North East.

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Bringing career journeys into the spotlight

The future leaders of care will be looking ahead to the career journeys that lie before them. But what does that path currently look like? And are there enough people coming into care with the ambition to lead?

For most of our interviewees, becoming a leader in care wasn't initially an aspiration, but quickly became one.

"It wasn't my chosen profession" says Jane Perry. "I came into the sector because I was looking to care for my grandmother." Indeed, Amanda Jackson and Nicole Gibson both say something similar. "I never went into the job with any ambitions to achieve more than just having a job that I enjoyed, really" says Amanda Jackson.

Yet all three of these individuals fell in love with their work and have gone on to spend years, even decades, in the care sector and move into leadership positions.

What support is already in place for tomorrow's leaders?

Nicole Gibson says that she received an abundance of support and a clear managerial journey when she came into care.

"We have lots of career progress. There are pathways set up for us, but I don't think it's the same in every company. We go through a rigorous process to be leaders. You have to go through interview processes. We're governed by CQC."

Amanda Jackson, too, was quick to praise the organisations she has worked at for their support. "In terms of career roles, there was always support there, there was always training there. There was always encouragement there. We've got a lot of staff within the company who've progressed through the ranks."

And while Jane Perry came into the care sector at a slightly later stage in her career, she too supports the notion that the journeys are there for those who know where to look, saying there's "a clearly defined pathway right up to being a care manager."

"I think the support is there, but you have to look for it. We need to get that information out there and reach out to managers rather than them having to look for it."

Nicole Gibson

“There has to be recognition that care workers are professionals. The recognition needs to come through about care being a professional job, and it being seen to be on a par with the NHS.”

Jane Perry

So, if the paths already exist, why are we not seeing more leaders coming through in the sector? For Nicole Gibson, it's all about awareness.

“There are resources out there, but I don't think it's widely publicised” she says. “There's the workplace development fund (WDF), based around leadership and getting aspiring managers into management roles. There are loads of different courses that aspiring managers can go on. But I don't think that it's advertised. I think there is definitely a piece of work to be done around that.”

What more needs to be done?

Creating awareness around career paths starts with creating greater recognition of care as a professional career. All of our respondents pointed to this issue, and all were passionate around what comes next.

“There needs to be some work done around leaders of the future” says Jane Perry. “There has to be recognition that care workers are professionals.

The recognition needs to come through about care being a professional job, and it being seen to be on a par with the NHS.”

For Amanda Jackson, “proper conditions” were necessary in order to bring out the best of future leaders, with a “dedicated pathway for the staff to progress with a professionalised social care sector.”

The good news is that work is already underway. Heritage Healthcare, where Amanda Jackson is currently Director, make exploring career aspirations part of their ongoing support planning, encouraging staff to achieve their goals.

“We support all of our staff at every step of the way” Amanda Jackson tells us. “We have lots of training available to them, we offer them no end of training, if they want to do it.”

It's action like this, driven by existing care leadership, which is laying the foundations for tomorrow's leaders to come through and thrive in these roles in years to come.

Creating awareness around career paths starts with creating greater recognition of care as a professional career.

The responsibility on current leadership

Tomorrow's leaders need support and a clear direction.

If confidence among future leaders is an issue in the care sector, then the responsibility lies on the shoulders of today's leaders to go to these individuals and nurture them into leadership roles.

"It's about recognising your self-worth" says Jane Perry. "People aren't always good at it. I think that's our responsibility, as leaders of today, to go and say to these people, 'You've really got something, let's do it together.'"

Whether it's encouraging those with potential to apply for a post or promotion, or to take that extra course, today's leaders have as much impact on the future leadership of this sector as anyone. For many of our interviewees, the right leadership is what inspired them to move into leadership roles themselves.

Shaping tomorrow's leaders with today's support

Working in care can sometimes be lonely due to the shift patterns. But with the right support or role model, that needn't be the case.

"The reason I came to Care South for my first registered manager role was purely because of the support here" says Nicole Gibson. It seems Nicole isn't alone in this, either.

Amanda Jackson's own story is proof of the impact that a good leader today can have on your tomorrow. At her first care home, the owner of the home truly believed in each and every one of his staff.

"He was always there to support us. And he allowed me to develop my career to the current position that I'm in now. He believed in me, and he believed in me being able to achieve more than what I believed in myself at the time."

Jane Perry says that she would like to see today's care leaders moving into more of a "guidance teacher" role, providing one-to-one career advice to shape tomorrow's leadership. "I'd like to see something like that. Or just having a chat with someone to say, 'Well, if that's not what you want to do, that's equally fine'. But I think it's important to recognise the individual and recognise the individual skills of the leaders of the future."

"Where are our leaders of the future going to come from? We need to recognise them within our own organisations."

Jane Perry

Giving today's leaders the time and resource to support

It's easy for us to say that today's leaders should offer their time and resource to future leaders. But as anyone working in the care sector will tell you, care professionals are exceptionally busy. If we want to offer the leaders of tomorrow mentorship and support, then the leaders of today need time to take a step away and direct their attention towards these efforts.

"Managers are busy" says Nicole Gibson. "I think we need to allow them the time to get that support. Having that time to access that supportive view. Some managers then don't reach out for support until it's too late. And they end up leaving the sector rather than getting that support and staying here."

Jane Perry was also in agreement, indicating that time needs to be invested into identifying the paths of tomorrow's leaders.

"Where are our leaders of the future going to come from?" says Jane Perry. "I don't think anyone's going to put their hand up and say, 'me, me, can I be put forward'. We need to find them. We need to recognise them within our own organisations."

Time needs to be invested into identifying the paths of tomorrow's leaders.



Nicole Gibson, Care Manager, Care South

Nicole started her journey in the care sector aged 18. Today, she is a Care Manager at Care South, where she works passionately to support her team and ensure every care experience delivered is as positive as it can possibly be.

From conversation to action: the future of leadership

This conversation on leadership is not about passing the torch. Instead, it is about lighting a fire in future leaders so that the care sector can collectively shine brighter for longer.

To achieve this, we must work to nurture both the skills and confidence necessary to lead in a challenging sector. From interpersonal skills to financial skills, team-leading to expertise on organisational structure, the development of skillsets that enable us not only to lead people but to lead businesses is critical. This is where the potential lies to create an environment where we can attract the very best talent into the care sector. It starts with the current leadership. Encouraging those to make the transition from being a great carer to being a great future leader is more important now than ever before.

We'd like to thank our interviewees for sharing their insight, opinions, and passion with us throughout the interview process.

This project to date has provided us with valuable insight into the current development of leaders across the sector. It has also enabled us to establish key themes so that we might now explore these in more detail in the future, helping to identify sector-wide best practices and other ways that future leaders can be identified.

For now, we want to turn conversation into action, and so the next step on this journey is to explore the ways where we can make the most impact and help nurture those with the potential to lead.

One thing is for sure, this is only the beginning. And we're excited to see what the future holds for the development of leadership within care.



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