

Ruth Law:

So, what are the characteristics of a high performing team in a small office?

I've been working for the NHS, or rather for the National Health Service, in practice management for about five years now, partly in Edinburgh, and previously in London; two very different practices and two very different teams.

A practice manager is responsible for the day to day running of the practice and you need a wide range of skills, but a lot of it is about people management and, in particular, managing the admin and reception staff.

In my previous practice in central London, I had a multicultural and multilingual team with staff from Egypt, Myanmar, Kenya, and Iraq, as well as black and white Brits, so that was quite a diverse workforce; nearly all of them had a degree. I also had two male team members, which is quite unusual, as medical receptionists, because they do tend to be women, and there was quite a wide age range, although most of them were in their late 20s and early 30s.

On the whole, and it wasn't perfect, but, on the whole, it worked very well, and they worked well individually and as a team, showing tolerance, co-operation, flexibility. A lot of them were first or second generation immigrants and they were able to cope with a lot of change and were open to new ideas, and that is definitely an advantage in general practice where the government's constantly moving the goalposts, and we keep having to do things differently.

They also had the cultural and linguistic knowledge and skills to enable them to deal with a patient population with quite a large ethnic minority or minorities. And their relatively high level of education meant that they could cope better with the huge amount of information that the NHS tends to produce.

I think that their ability to support each other and adapt and learn was something that they had had to do, or their parents had had to do, when they arrived in the UK, and, basically, they had had to change in order to survive and this stood them in very good stead in the workplace.

Now this is in contrast to my current practice where most of the staff are white, middle-aged women, like myself. They do care greatly about the patients and, in many cases, have built up a rapport with them and they know the families well, but they find it difficult to cope with the pace of change.

So I tend to think that if you've got people who are generally from the same background that your... that you have the risk of a, kind of, group think developing and people saying, well, no, we've always

done it this way so we're not going to try anything different, so they're not open to change, whereas if you have a diverse workforce it will tend to be more dynamic and more open to new ways of doing things.