In the NHS there’s a lot of rhetoric about ‘We need to do things better for patients’, but in the past it’s often been a political or top-down movement. The people best placed to make the improvements are the front line staff, who understand how it works and how to make it better,” says Steve Harrison, head of quality improvement at Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

Steve has worked in the NHS for the last seven years having previously worked in the retail sector. The bulk of his current job involves running the Sheffield Microsystem Coaching Academy – a joint venture between the trust and the US-based Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy and Clinical Practice.

The Academy is the first of its kind in the UK. Launched in 2012 with funding from the Health Foundation, it aims to coach clinical teams across Sheffield to bring about change from the bottom up.

Steve explains that the Academy works to improve quality of care for patients in Sheffield by developing improvement coaches, who work with frontline teams to put quality improvement at the heart of everyday clinical care.

Steve or one of his trained coaches has gone into over 80 different ‘microsystems’, including hospital wards and GP surgeries. Some of the results include reducing patient waiting times in the renal outpatients department at the Northern General Hospital and shortening the average length of inpatient stays for respiratory medicine patients. And the trust’s sexual health clinic has gone from having to turn away 45 patients a week to making sure everybody gets seen.

Steve won the Coach of the Year title at the 2014 NHS Leadership Recognition Awards, sponsored by MiP. He says: “Heading the coaching academy, I’m responsible for building quality improvement capacity within the trust so that staff and teams can become more efficient and effective at delivering patient care.”

Steve says his previous retail experience, including managing store openings for clothing outlet Gap, has been useful in his work for the NHS. “The way you improve things is by working with people who do the job to understand what the changes need to be. As coaches, we went where the energy was within the trust, where teams in falls and in cystic fibrosis were keen to change the way they worked for the benefit of patients.

“There is a contrast between ownership and buy-in and it’s crucial that frontline staff take ownership of the system change they are investing in,” he adds.

Every six months the Academy enrolls a group of staff from the trust on a six-month training programme to become coaches in system management. The coaches learn how to work with and help individual frontline clinical teams to identify and make changes to their ways of working in order to improve patient care. Since its inception the Academy has also developed a course to help NHS managers understand the role of coaches and how they can help and support the work of their organisations.

Steve’s advice to others thinking of setting up a similar programme is to start small. “Go where the energy is, where people want to make changes and you will gain momentum from generating good news stories for patients.”

Helen Mooney