

## **“I wonder how much you can take the exec hat off?”**

### **Do senior leaders benefit personally from attending Schwartz Rounds?**

#### **Findings from a qualitative study.**

Joanna Goodrich<sup>1</sup>, Dr Aroon Lal<sup>2</sup>, Rebecca Myers<sup>3</sup>

## **Introduction**

Schwartz Rounds are a group reflective practice which gives an opportunity for staff from all disciplines to reflect on the emotional aspects of their work. An independent national evaluation has shown that healthcare staff who regularly attend Schwartz Rounds to share the emotional, social, or ethical challenges they face in the workplace, experience less psychological distress, improved teamwork and increased empathy and compassion for patients and colleagues (Maben et al., 2018)

These interviews were carried out to start to explore the perspective of senior leaders (“Execs”) and their sense of the meaning of Rounds, and how they might feel about whether they benefit personally from attending Schwartz Rounds. The interviews were conducted by two experienced Schwartz facilitators, with several years’ experience at executive level in the NHS.

## **Method**

Potential participants were sent a written invitation to participate in the research from the Chief Executive of the Point of Care Foundation. They were selected following a review of organisations participating in the Rounds across a range of types, and that were for practical reasons of easy access to interviewers around London and East of England. Rounds facilitators were contacted to help with names of executive sponsor of their Rounds, or Chief Executive. Of all 14 organisations contacted, 11 replied and agreed to participate. 25 people were interviewed who were a mix of Medical, Nursing, HR, Operational and Finance directors, and Chief Executives. They had been in executive roles for a range of time, from a few months to 27 years. All people interviewed had attended Rounds apart from one (and this was due to an anxiety about what they might hear and a perception that they would be expected to do something). All participants who attended Rounds had been more than

---

<sup>1</sup> Associate, The Point of Care Foundation

<sup>2</sup> Mid and South Essex Foundation Trust

<sup>3</sup> Mid and South Essex Foundation Trust

once, apart from one who did not have a clinical background, had been part of a panel and had found the experience extremely difficult and exposing.

Interviews were semi – structured and a test interview schedule was piloted and revised based on feedback from the participant. Interviews were then typed up by interviewers, anonymised and sent to a qualitative researcher to complete a thematic analysis.

## Results

### 1. Knowledge of Rounds and attitudes towards them

Some were familiar with Rounds from other organisations (sometimes more than one) they had worked in and had seen the benefit, so had brought them with them to the new organisation. Others were persuaded by other colleagues. One or two had heard about them and investigated further before introducing them.

*“I had some stories that needed to be told...[I had] got involved with Human Factors and saw how people’s behaviour changed when under stress (and for me too, as it had an impact on my own health) “*

A positive view of Rounds as part of the culture of the organisation was revealed by the comment, *“I think for us Schwartz Rounds felt like a normal thing to do and not having them would be like not ‘hearing’ the organisation”.*

### 2. Why do participants attend Rounds?

The participants made a point of attending Rounds, sometimes participating or being panellists in order to show visible support for Rounds, “setting an example”. Several spoke about sending a message, or a signal that the Rounds were important, and valued by the senior team, and that they were listening.

*“It sends a strong message that senior management consider this a high priority”.*

It was thought that the Rounds helped to break down hierarchy and several said that they felt their attendance helped staff to ‘see **we are human too**’.

*“The Rounds help show the vulnerability of everyone including leaders and makes execs appear more human to staff. I have had people approach me and feedback that they felt we do understand what it is like for them.”*

A clinician said that it was good for the wider organisation to see senior people sharing their own mistakes.

Participants did feel that being at Rounds was of benefit to them professionally: hearing what was said in Rounds helped them to **keep in touch** with the organisation, to stay grounded, and to understand the work of different staff, which they felt contributed to doing their jobs better. Execs spoke about the Rounds being useful for them to connect to what is happening in the organisation and spoke of it being a 'temperature check' or a 'cross-sectional view':

*"It is good to hear what staff are having to deal with and making sure that 'we don't forget what the work is'".*

*"Yes - I see what it's like to be part of this community - and what people bring to the party-it humanises us all. This helps me get out of my ivory tower and hear people's lives, it enables me to be human too."*

However, it was not clear whether the execs did take action after a Round. There were indications that they might take action in their area of work, but less clear whether as an executive team or Board the issues were discussed, and action taken. One exec said they can take back what has been said and concerns raised and can then ask (fellow execs?) if there are appropriate support services.

One Executive was deliberately choosing topics for Rounds that she wanted to be tackled:

*"We had a 'run' of suicides about a year ago and I deliberately chose topics that surfaced mental health issues. I also deliberately choose topics that surface specific topics (as a way of bringing things out before the 'freedom to speak up' guardian)"*

Another implied the execs would take action because of the impact the Rounds have for them:

*"[Rounds have] a very powerful effect on execs that attend....it's stuff you could never get from a survey."*

It was also suggested that the Rounds are helpful in informing discussions, by developing an understanding of their responsibility and the implications of decisions taken at the board. When asked what their **personal reasons** for attending might be, some found this difficult to answer and spoke again about the importance of role modelling or that it was 'good PR'. Some mentioned reasons that were to do with their role, including the need to hear what is

happening: *“failure to hear is what led to things like Mid-Staffs”*, or to hear things which help to drive change. Others spoke more personally and described how they felt, in ways which were similar to how we hear others (who are not exec members) talk about Rounds, whether for reflection or an hour’s ‘escape’ or to hear the stories:

*“I enjoy reflecting and am psychologically minded so think this type of intervention is important for myself as well as others.”*

*“Sometimes it’s about getting into a safe space and listening for an hour.”*

*“I just really like them. I’m curious and interested and like hearing people’s stories. I like having a glimpse into real life situations.”*

### 3. How do participants feel in Rounds?

Participants reported that attending Rounds, even as an audience member, was charged, and could provoke difficult feelings. To speak on the panel made the experience even more intense.

When asked about how they felt during the Round some responded personally, saying things like that they felt proud of their organisation, that they felt empathy, joy, distress, ‘*totally engaged*’, humbled and ‘*personally affected*’ and that it could bring back difficult memories – for example of being a junior doctor.

One said *“I genuinely put myself into their shoes and try to imagine how they feel, and another said, my assumption was that I wouldn’t find it interesting but went to show support – and yet it was joyous – and I was surprised how absorbed I was in the panel’s stories.”* Although most did not feel they benefited personally from the Rounds, there were one or two exceptions, where they did feel personal benefit. For example, one respondent described how Rounds did reduce their own stress and were “*relaxing*”. By listening to other people, they realised:

*“I am similar to others and people doing front line jobs...helps me stay kind to people”.*

Others spoke of being **reconnected** to their clinical work, or of being able to ‘reset’ or ‘reframe’ their emotions through listening to others. There were a couple who gained emotionally from sharing their own experiences in a Round (and appeared not to worry, unlike others, about their position in the organisation):

*"I went because I felt affected by some of my experiences and wanted to share that. I am an employee like everyone else and also need support."*

*"Allowed me to talk about some difficult feelings/experiences of my own that I thought were locked away. It's an hour away from everything else to sit quietly and think."*

Others spoke of feeling positive when they heard good stories and proud and respectful of their colleagues on the front line, which buoyed them up. It also helped them to get to know people in the organisation they would not otherwise meet:

*"I see them in the corridor now and say hello".*

One of the Chief Executives even spoke about 'talent spotting':

*"Sometimes you come across people that you've not seen before and feel 'wow, you are a real star".*

However, it was striking that difficult feelings seemed to outweigh the positive ones. A large number felt strong **feelings of responsibility** for what they were hearing during the Round, which could provoke difficult feelings – they used words such as uncomfortable, vulnerable, inadequate, anxious, guilty and defensive. They described feelings of frustration and powerlessness. A Chief Executive even used the word 'ashamed'.

Many spent the time thinking 'what can we do about that?' and felt frustrated when they hear how difficult it is to get things done. They described problem-solving in their heads during the Round:

*"I am often thinking what can I do about that? How did we get there? How can we improve it?"*

*"I wonder who I might need to talk to afterwards to try and fix things."*

Although sometimes their thoughts were more personal:

*"I can find myself thinking about my own anxiety and how it affects me. I ruminate on what I am hearing."*

### **Self-consciousness**

It was clear that Execs could never forget their position in the organisation and were very conscious of their senior role.

Some felt that their presence might **inhibit** people “you can’t not be the exec in the room”, and took care to sit unobtrusively either at the back of the room, or the middle, but no-one said they sat at the front.

*“I avoid the front (I don’t want to be seen to lead) and the back (I don’t want to be seen to hide) rows.”*

They worried that having executives there would stop people talking because “they will think that we are spying on them” or that it might change the nature of the meeting. Others felt it was right to attend once in a while but not all the time:

*“What if they want to talk about us or find us stressful?”*

Related to this, when asked to give examples of memorable Rounds, these tended to be where they were aware of their own response, and their position:

*“One about a death of a colleague I was too upset and wanted to contain the emotion I was feeling as I didn’t want to expose myself.”*

*“One where an exec colleague was on panel and became very distressed and was clearly uncomfortable sharing the story and being so upset in front of people. I felt unable to control or protect them.”*

*“One where a lot of change was happening in the organisation and people were sharing distress – I felt very uncomfortable and wasn’t sure how to respond because of the ‘rules’.”*  
Reflecting this, many spoke about how they did not contribute to the discussion in the Rounds because it was difficult for them to hold back from offering solutions:

*“I didn’t know how to join the discussion without problem solving.”*

*“What is difficult is sitting on your hands and not trying to sort it out in the Round ...but ultimately there are many things you can’t control so you have to learn to live with the uncertainty and the discomfort and give people chance to share how they are feeling.”*

In terms of contributing to the discussion generally, they were always **conscious of being an exec**. One person said they “only say something as a member of staff and not as an exec”. An exception was a Chief Executive who said they always felt happy to say something, but always waited for the discussion to have got going, rather than speaking first. Otherwise, it seems that execs did not join the discussion because of feelings of protectiveness towards

staff – for example a concern that if staff saw their ‘angst’ it would make them anxious. “I don’t want it to distress staff or colleagues and have a negative impact”.

This demonstration of the perceived need to protect staff, by suppressing their feelings, suggests the emotional labour (Hochschild 2003) that executives undertake in their roles, which based on the interviews appears to be explored on an individual basis through coaching or in a small group setting such as through established learning sets or peer support groups outside of the team in which they belong. This raises the question of what is the impact of not exploring this on the individual, team and organisation.

Others were conscious of their position in the organisation which inhibited joining in:

*“It’s a bit like mixing work and pleasure – if you make an idiot of yourself then how are you going to have the performance conversation later?”*

*“I worry what will people think and as an executive will it mean I will be less credible?”*

A new Executive said:

*“I think I am probably scared of opening myself...also as an executive ...possibly seen as guardian of values, I feel I need to be squeaky clean...and conduct myself in certain ways.”*

This was even more noticeable in some feelings about **being a panel member**. There was a mixed picture when it came to how participants felt about sharing their experiences and feelings. Some felt it was important to join the panel for staff to see that execs are human too, and one gave an example of how after being on the panel staff have approached them to say how they appreciated this, and that it showed the exec understood what it was like for them. Most had been on a panel or would do (only one said they would be unwilling), but there were concerns. Predominantly, there was a sense that they did not want to appear vulnerable either for their own sake or because they felt it would not be good for staff to see that. One person summed up feelings felt by others:

*“I was conscious of trying to balance what I wanted to project as an exec with being honest about my experiences and not showing I was overwhelmed by it.”*

Clearly, being on a panel is felt by some to be more **exposing** than taking part in a discussion, and many spoke of wanting to be seen as in control, (or not wanting to be seen as ‘soft’) and therefore doubtful about agreeing to be on the panel:

*“Feels exposing and not sure if willing to share that level of vulnerability as have to be seen as in control as I am a Director”*

*“I was concerned that I would be overcome with emotion in the room and don't think I should do that as an executive”.*

Another said that it *“would not be a good look”* to show too much emotion and felt conscious of being judged to a different standard. Another said:

*“I need to present an image of control and confidence at the moment as people are anxious.”*

This perceived **need to protect others** came up again in relation to being a panellist:

*“I am not sure how I would feel showing my emotions as it might cause others anxiety and my role is to protect them.”*

One interpretation of this reported need to protect is that it suggests a potential pattern of taking on a parental role in some execs leading them to suppress their own ability to process, own and develop strategies to manage their distress themselves (Menzies-Lyth, 1988; Armstrong and Rustin, 2019).

### **Difficult topics**

Execs' self-consciousness was particularly triggered by some topics in Rounds that they felt would be very difficult. Participants were asked if there are any topics which would be difficult for a Round; four said they couldn't tackle issues to do with race or racism. Reasons for this were to do with how to approach the topic:

*“Racism, discrimination would be uncomfortable as I am unsure how to discuss it and feel embarrassed at the lack of senior representation of people from BAME backgrounds”.*

This was echoed by another comment:

*“ Rounds that touch on equality and diversity problems make me think about my white privilege. People don't like talking about race, everyone feels uncomfortable....I don't know how to have the conversation and deal with the conflict”.*

There was anxiety about potential for conflict, if for example 'radical views' on positive discrimination were discussed.



Several said that bullying would be a difficult topic, citing a concern that 'only one side of the story' would be heard, and might be misrepresentative of situations if others could not speak up. There was a worry that discussions might not be 'balanced and fair'.

However, others, referring to racism, and bullying as topics felt that even though it might be uncomfortable for Execs it was important to give people the chance to share how they were feeling and that 'these things need to be heard'. One participant went further to say:

*"There is no point saying it's too difficult because then how can we address things?"*

### **Increasing stress and anxiety**

For some, the Rounds had the effect of (self-reported) increases in stress and anxiety, which is a striking contrast to the findings of the national evaluation of Schwartz Rounds which found that attendance had a positive impact on the mental health and wellbeing of staff, with a reduction in psychological distress in those who attended regularly (Maben 2017). We have seen the reasons for this, chiefly a sense of responsibility, mentioned by many, and guilt, for what they heard staff talking about in Rounds:

*"It raises my anxiety and feelings of inadequacy about what we are doing".*

*"It's difficult as I end up feeling responsible for not protecting staff from these difficult experiences...I feel the burden of having failed them".*

There was a suggestion that 'sitting on their hands' during the Rounds and not being able to offer solutions might not help their anxiety. Even though one person said: *"I would like to let go of the feeling of responsibility and just be part of the team"*, it was clear that for most of the Execs who attended, they were conscious of their role, and the responsibilities that went with it. Unlike others who attended they could not let this go and be the 'person in the professional'.

### **4. "The Rounds are not for us" – do they benefit personally?**

One of the strongest themes was that the Rounds are 'not for us'. In other words, the Execs feel that the Rounds are not designed for their benefit, or even that they do not expect to benefit for them in the same way as the 'staff':

*"I was concerned that I would be overcome with emotion in the room and don't think I should do that as an executive. It is not about us, it's about staff."*

*"I'm very conscious that the Round is to support staff and it's not for me. I contribute to be supportive and empathise. I'm very conscious that it is not for me to set the tone."*

*"I don't feel it's for me to share my own distress"*

Participants were asked if all their colleagues attended and all responded that they didn't think all did. When asked to speculate why that was, they said they thought some felt it was not relevant to their role or would feel uncomfortable in a forum where emotions were being openly expressed. This distancing due to discomfort or seeing it as not relevant could be seen as a display of social defences in order to contain anxiety (Menziés-Lyth).

## **5. Sources of support for senior staff**

There was a sense that the participants did not expect to gain from the Rounds in the way that other staff did, not just because *"I wonder how much you can take the exec hat off?"* but because of the nature of their role:

*"The stuff that is really tough in this job as an executive I don't feel can be shared in the Rounds".*

When asked where they turned to for support if needed, it appears that most of those interviewed do have their own support networks; several talked about formal support such as coaching or mentoring, or action learning sets, and others had formal professional networks (for example nursing and medical). A reflective group with clinical colleagues was mentioned. Some had informal networks of colleagues they have worked with over the years or trained with. Many referred to current colleagues (although one said *"but it can feel quite lonely when higher up"*) including support from their fellow exec team members:

*"I have a fantastic set of exec colleagues who I trust to talk about".*

One organisation had a quarterly away day with the executive team to reflect. Many mentioned the support of family members and partners, and friends, and other strategies to look after themselves including Reiki, massage, the gym, mindfulness and 'humour!' The Executives we interviewed have developed other sources of support, but they may not be typical of all senior staff.

It is interesting to reflect on the point that whilst Executives supported the Rounds, felt the process was an effective and important one for staff to process their emotions and receive support, and engaged in some form of reflection in other ways, several reflected that they did not process what they heard or how they felt when they attended. This was often

influenced by having to go straight back into meetings or executive level activities (and indeed most staff who attend Rounds have to go straight back to their work afterwards).

### **Further questions to explore**

The purpose of this study was to establish what it was like being an Executive in Schwartz Rounds, and to understand through their responses in the interviews how much you can take the 'exec hat' off? For many participants in Rounds in health and social care they provide a great source of support. The suspicion implicit in the title of the study is that Execs might experience the Rounds in a different way and that their own and others' sense of their role as 'leaders' might limit the personal support and benefit available to those who attend Rounds.

The responses received from some of the participants confirmed this, and there were several themes that suggest that targeted work with senior leaders would be fruitful, as well as more research. These included the feeling amongst a number of Execs that they had a role in protecting colleagues and this prevented them from expressing their own emotions in Rounds. In contrast to this is the question of whether Execs are able to role model authentic behaviours in the Rounds as part of their leadership tool-kit. Reactions from participants ask important questions about the nature and role of leadership and to what extent those in such roles are allowed by themselves or colleagues in their organisations to be just themselves. In her work on psychological safety, Edmondson (2018) suggests that a key part of a leader's 'toolkit' is setting the scene for others to do the work. A large part of the 'work' in healthcare is responding to the emotional aspects of ill health and thus leader's role in enabling emotions to be expressed and modelling it, we would suggest, is important but needs to be supported to prevent overwhelming senior leaders leading to burnout. Further research could explore this.

It would be interesting to carry out action research to explore what the impact would be of having time after the Round for the Executive team to share what emotions it evoked in them with their colleagues and whether this helped to reduce their own stress in attending, thus making it easier to do so? It would be good to explore the value of offering Rounds to Executives with their peers from other organisations. This has successfully been tried on a couple of occasions and was well received. A recent round with senior leaders exploring facing difficult circumstances enabled people from across different sectors to share their individual and collective challenges. People fed back how it made them feel they were not alone and that it was all right to share their own worries, which were normal reactions to the situation and not a sign of inadequacy or inability to cope.

Additional suggestions based on the interviews for further study:

- One of the assumptions Execs appeared to hold was that showing their own emotions may negatively affect staff. Explore this further.
- Whether running Schwartz Rounds for Board members would provide the psychological benefit experienced by other staff.
- Understand further the level and type of emotional labour undertaken by Board members and the implications for this in their leadership practice
- Explore with Rounds participants how they feel when Executives are present or on panels to see if the assumptions Executives have are correct.

Finally, there is a clear need for further training for facilitators and steering groups about how to approach 'difficult' topics of racism, discrimination and bullying. This could be provided with the help of external trainers who specialise in these topics.

## **Conclusions**

The evidence from the responses of participants in this study have led us to conclude that:

- Execs who support Rounds see them as a good thing for staff in their organisations but not necessarily as a support for themselves;
- When Execs attend they do for a variety of reasons and benefit in different ways;
- There seems to be an underlying feeling on the part of Execs that they are 'different' from other staff members and that for many this changes how they experience Rounds compared to their colleagues who are not Execs. This makes attending as a member of the audience or participating on the panel complicated and potentially adds to the level of emotional labour associated with their role.
- For some Execs, because of their sense of being different Rounds can provoke difficult and stressful feelings;
- The Execs that participated were aware of needing support and most appeared to have developed other sources of support, but there is potential to explore whether Schwartz Rounds for Board members would be found to be of value.

## References

Armstrong, D. and Rustin, M. (eds.) (2019). *Social Defences against Anxiety*. Oxford: Routledge.

Edmondson, A. (2018) *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. Chichester: Wiley.

Hochschild, A.R. (2003). *The Managed Heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press

Maben J., et al. (2018) A realist informed mixed methods evaluation of Schwartz Center Rounds in England *Health Services and Delivery Research*. 6 (37). <https://www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk/hsdr/hsdr06370/#/abstract>

Menzies-Lyth, I. (1988) *Containing Anxiety in Institutions*. London: Free Association Books Ltd.

## Appendix 1

<b>Role</b>	<b>Type of Organisation</b>
CEO	Acute Trust
CEO	Acute Trust
CEO	Acute Trust
CEO	Hospice
Chief Nurse	Acute Trust
Chief Nurse	Acute Trust
Chief Nurse	Acute Trust
Chief Nurse	Acute Trust
Chief Nurse	Acute Trust
Medical Director	Acute Trust
Medical Director	Acute Trust
Medical Director	Acute Trust
Medical Director	Acute Trust
Director of Operations	Hospice
Director of Operations	Acute Trust
Director of Operations	Acute Trust
Director of Operations	Acute Trust
Finance Director	Acute Trust
Finance Director	Hospice
Director of Workforce	Acute Trust
Director of Workforce	Acute Trust
Director of Corporate Affairs	Acute Trust
Director of Comms	Acute Trust