Occupational Health
Leadership Competency Framework

October 2025

Preface

Occupational health (OH) professionals play a vital role in enabling healthier, safer, and more productive working lives. Leadership within the profession has traditionally centred on clinical and technical expertise, and while these foundations remain essential, the evolving landscape of work and health requires a broader, more dynamic set of capabilities. We need confident, forward-thinking leaders who can influence, innovate, and shape the future of OH.

The SOM Occupational Health Leadership Competency Framework was created to support this ambition. It provides a clear, practical, and aspirational guide to leadership development across the profession. By strengthening leadership capability at all levels, we can improve the quality and impact of OH services and prepare the OH workforce for future challenges.

The framework responds to a national and global imperative: to strengthen the contribution of OH in addressing workforce health, economic productivity, and health inequalities. As the UK and other nations face rising levels of work-related ill health and economic inactivity, effective OH leadership is essential to delivering high-impact, evidence-based services.

Aligned with the objectives of the SOM Leadership Academy, the framework aims to:

1. Develop leadership and management skills among OH practitioners.

2. Foster a pipeline of future leaders through development opportunities.

3. Promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in OH leadership.

As part of a wider ambition led by the SOM Leadership Academy, this framework recognises that leadership in occupational health is not limited to formal roles or titles—it is a shared professional responsibility that emerges across disciplines, sectors, and career stages. It embraces the diversity of leadership contexts in OH—ranging from clinical excellence and commercial acumen to education, policy, system influence, and team leadership. It supports the development of OH professionals not only as clinical leaders, but also as educators, advocates, entrepreneurs, and change agents across sectors. In a world of increasing complexity and change, OH leaders must be equipped to collaborate beyond their immediate teams, engage across sectors, and drive improvements that connect workplace health with broader social and economic outcomes.

The framework supports this vision by offering a flexible, evidence-informed, and inclusive model for leadership development—one that encourages reflection, nurtures potential, and promotes the values of authenticity, equity, and servant leadership. Through this, it aims to build a confident and future-ready OH workforce, empowered to lead with integrity, impact, and purpose.

Above all, this framework is a call to action: to recognise and invest in leadership as a core professional capability and to empower the next generation of OH leaders to shape a healthier future for all.

Who is it for?

The SOM Occupational Health Leadership Competency Framework is both aspirational and practical: a tool to support OH professionals at every stage of their leadership journey.

The framework complements existing professional standards, and is relevant to all OH practitioners, irrespective of their professional background, role, or the setting in which they work.

OH practitioners will find it provides a structured guide for:

- Personal reflection
- Mentoring
- Professional development
- Career planning

In addition to individual use, the framework is designed to inform and support leadership development at organisational and system levels.

Service providers may apply the framework to:

- Guide team development
- Support service transformation in response to changing workplace health needs
- Inform recruitment and workforce development strategies aimed at attracting and retaining high-quality professionals
- Embed leadership expectations into service specifications and performance frameworks
- Support succession planning and long-term workforce sustainability

Education providers may use the framework to:

- Design and deliver training programmes that align with the evolving leadership needs of the OH workforce

The framework is not a prescriptive checklist but a flexible tool to identify strengths, recognise growth areas, and plan meaningful leadership development.

How this framework was developed

To develop the framework, we undertook a rigorous and collaborative process, drawing on evidence from the literature and insights from OH leaders across sectors and settings.

- We reviewed the literature on effective leadership in OH and related disciplines.
- We conducted in-depth interviews with OH leaders across sectors including the NHS, higher education, military, manufacturing, energy, and pharmaceuticals. These leaders represented both in-house and external roles, with responsibilities spanning local, national, and global contexts.
- We consulted with the Society of Occupational Medicine's Leadership Academy Executive Committee and a wider network of OH leaders.

This process ensured the final framework is grounded in research and enriched by real-world insight, making it practical and applicable across diverse OH contexts.

About the framework

The framework is structured around four domains of leadership:

1. **Leading self**

2. **Leading practice and people**

3. **Leading the organisation**

4. **Leading the profession**

Each domain includes sub-domains, within which are a set of competencies that describe the behaviours, skills, and mindsets required for effective leadership in OH. These competencies are designed to be:

- Evidence-informed: grounded in research and best practice

- Inclusive: relevant across roles, sectors, and career stages

- Practical: applicable to day-to-day leadership as well as strategic influence

- Aspirational: encouraging growth and innovation

Detailed descriptions within each domain support reflection, development, and practical application. The framework complements existing professional standards and is intended as a developmental resource, not an exhaustive checklist or assessment tool.

The framework recognises that leadership is not confined to those in formal management roles. Leadership in OH often occurs without formal authority, requiring influence, adaptability, and the ability to navigate complex organisational systems. It is a professional responsibility shared by all clinicians, regardless of discipline or seniority. Every OH professional has the potential to lead, whether through influencing practice, improving services, supporting colleagues, or shaping the future of the profession.

These realities are reflected in the breadth and depth of the competencies included.

Occupational Health Leadership Competency Framework

Domain	Sub-domain	Competency
Leading self	Self-awareness and development	Demonstrating self-awareness
		Acting with trust and integrity
		Managing personal resources and building resilience
		Being self-directed
Leading practice and people	Clinical leadership	Demonstrating technical excellence
		Applying evidence in practice
		Engaging with and translating research
		Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and reflective practice
	Relationships and communication	Listening actively
		Communicating openly
		Influencing and negotiating
		Managing conflict
	People leadership	Collaborating effectively in teams
		Mentoring and providing support
		Leading teams
		Leading change
Leading the organisation	Business acumen	Communicating effectively in business contexts
		Demonstrating commercial awareness
		Being business and service orientated
	Vision and strategy	Inspiring others
		Communicating with clarity
		Adapting and thinking ahead
	Organisational (and eco-system) leadership	Navigating and collaborating within the organisation and beyond
		Influencing across the organisation
		Leading system-level change
Leading the profession	External leadership and professional stewardship	Building strategic partnerships
		Demonstrating contextual awareness
		Championing occupational health
		Developing future leaders in occupational health

Appendix 1 – Detail of competency areas

Sub-domain	Competency	Description
Self-awareness and development	**Demonstrating self-awareness**	Developing an awareness of your behaviour and preferences, which enables leaders to flex their approach to meet the needs of others and specific situations and contexts, including: • Understanding your preferences and behaviours • Managing your emotions • Adapting your leadership behaviour for maximum positive impact in specific situations
	Acting with trust and integrity	Demonstrating consistency between what you say and what you do, including displaying a commitment to making people's lives better through better work, and building connection with others, including: • Speaking up and taking action when standards, quality or safety are compromised • Taking accountability for decisions within your area of responsibility • Behaving in a way that is consistent with professional and organisational values
	Managing personal resources and building resilience	Persevering to overcome obstacles, even in circumstances where there is a lack of resources or wider support, including: • Remaining objective in situations of conflict and pressure • Sustaining your energy and motivation in the face of setbacks • Maintaining your morale and motivation
	Being self-directed	Taking ownership of your development and using opportunities to realise your career pathway, including: • Taking initiative in finding development opportunities • Seizing opportunities for on-the-job development • Developing relationships proactively to support your career
Clinical leadership	**Demonstrating technical excellence**	Developing your clinical excellence in line with professional standards, including: • Championing a clinical perspective within a context of competing imperatives • Adhering to professional and ethical frameworks • Applying technical skills in context • Fulfilling clinical governance requirements • Maintaining legal and safety compliance

Clinical leadership cont.	Applying evidence in practice	Staying up to date with the latest evidence, research and innovations in occupational health and allied disciplines to inform your practice, including: • Proactively engaging with evidence, research, guidance and innovation in practice • Critically reviewing and refreshing practice in light of evidence • Updating protocols and practices based on emerging understanding
	Engaging with and translating research	Contributing to research through supporting, participating or leading research studies to strengthen and advance the evidence base for occupational health, including: • Taking part in research studies in occupational health • Encouraging and facilitating involvement of organisations in research and service evaluation • Gathering, analysing and sharing data on practice
	Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and reflective practice	Investing time in CPD and personal reflection to develop, maintain and improve your practice, including: • Identifying relevant development opportunities • Maintaining records of professional development • Actively reflecting on your practice and identifying opportunities for development • Securing mentoring to develop your leadership capability • Sharing relevant learnings and innovations with colleagues and stakeholders to advance practice and support others in their development
Relationships and communication	Listening actively	Listening actively to build relationships and develop understanding, including: • Consulting with others (e.g. peers, wider stakeholders) • Checking understanding • Creating opportunities for open discussions
	Communicating openly	Creating communication channels and strategies to ensure genuine two-way communication across audiences, including: • Adapting your communications to respond to needs and preferences • Providing opportunities to give feedback • Maintaining regular contact with diverse stakeholders • Actively seeking other perspectives, including those from underrepresented groups
	Influencing and negotiating	Influencing and negotiating to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes for individuals and organisations, including: • Using data, examples, stories and policy to adapt communication to diverse stakeholders • Presenting your arguments clearly and persuasively • Identifying opportunities to adapt your plans to accommodate the needs and priorities of others

Relationships and communication cont.	Managing conflict	Managing conflict between individuals, groups and agendas, including: • De-escalating tense situations within or between teams • Mediating conflict between individuals, teams or departments to find mutually acceptable outcomes • Identifying options to achieve multiple aims rather than having a "win-lose" scenario
People leadership	Collaborating effectively in teams	Collaborating with people with different backgrounds, perspectives and strengths, including: • Understanding and treating team members as individuals • Recognising the value of different contributions, particularly in multi-disciplinary teams • Using the expertise of others, particularly outside of your own area of knowledge
	Mentoring and providing support	Providing support to others and nurturing their potential, including: • Showing care and support for colleagues and team members • Encouraging others to develop to their own potential • Providing mentoring and coaching at all levels
	Leading teams	Leading teams in a participatory way, bringing together expertise and skills to make the best decisions and achieve results, including: • Consulting the team during decision-making • Creating opportunities for the team to reflect on what has happened and identify improvements • Creating a safe environment to raise concerns and identify corrective action • Working in an inclusive way, encouraging sharing of diverse experiences and perspectives
	Leading change	Supporting your team and the wider organisation through change, improving the chances of success through a participatory approach, including: • Keeping people up to date with what is changing • Providing opportunities for people to engage with and shape change • Offering clear reasons for change and measures of success
Business acumen	Communicating effectively in business contexts	Understanding and communicating in commercial terms, articulating the impact of occupational health in a relevant way for your context, including: • Building an effective business case for spend on occupational health activities • Tailoring your communication of priorities to the needs and outlooks of sectors and departments • Learning the language of your organisation and adapting your communication based on what is used and understood by your colleagues

Business acumen cont.	Demonstrating commercial awareness	Developing a broad and deep awareness of core commercial functions, processes and business skills, including: • Measuring the value of occupational health services within your organisation • Managing budgets effectively • Managing the performance of internal and external resources
	Being business and service orientated	Understanding your role in a commercial context and being able to balance clinical and business considerations, including: • Designing services that align to broader organisational goals • Offering solutions that meet business needs • Creating commercially viable approaches to improving employee and organisational health
Vision and strategy	Inspiring others	Articulating an inspiring vision that motivates your wider organisation to improve employee health, including: • Creating a clear view of how occupational health makes a difference in your organisation • Explaining what clinical services may be needed in the future • Justifying investment in employee health in a persuasive way
	Communicating with clarity	Putting forward your perspective clearly and professionally, and being prepared to offer a different perspective, including: • Sharing and justifying your own viewpoint, supported by evidence, professional judgement or experience • Saying what you think in a respectful way using clear, jargon-free language • Linking your thoughts to group objectives to build a collective understanding and approach
	Adapting and thinking ahead	Preparing for changes in circumstances and influences, and being prepared to adapt your approach, including: • Anticipating health needs and developing or changing plans accordingly • Preparing for eventualities, defining clear scenarios and consequences • Adapting your approach to changing business needs, and creating agile teams who are prepared to develop • Responding effectively to crisis situations
Organisational (and eco-system) leadership	Navigating and collaborating within the organisation and beyond	Engaging widely across your organisation to build an understanding of areas and levels of the business, including: • Seeking insights from a range of perspectives • Connecting people and services within and beyond organisational boundaries • Collaborating with different parts of the organisation to ensure front-line working practices are aligned with and inform strategic goals

Organisational (and eco-system) leadership cont.	**Influencing across the organisation**	Building relationships across the organisation to create wider buy-in to occupational health services and support for your goals, including: • Building a network of relationships within the organisation and maintaining regular contact with stakeholders • Influencing policy and ensuring employee health is taken into consideration in relevant areas • Building awareness of politics within the organisation and opportunities to align with broader agendas
	Leading system-level change	Driving systems change within the organisation to achieve clinical goals, including: • Ensuring staff resources are used effectively to deliver employee health services • Adapting to change services • Supporting wider change efforts to optimise the positive impact of work on health
External leadership and professional stewardship	**Building strategic partnerships**	Building strategic partnerships to deliver effective services with both internal and external partners, including: • Establishing relationships with clinical partners to provide effective services • Defining a clear purpose for all partnerships to underpin collaboration • Creating and maintaining momentum for action
	External leadership and professional stewardship	Understanding the context both of your organisation and of the world of employment in general to take an integrated approach, including: • Building an understanding of organisational culture and politics to adapt your approach • Monitoring external trends to anticipate opportunities and challenges • Taking a broader view of your context to influence others and adapt your approach
	Championing occupational health	Communicating the meaning and benefit of occupational health within your setting, including: • Articulating a clear business case for your services and role • Advocating for the profession within your organisation and by representing occupational health in professional bodies • Using all communications to underline the importance of health at work
	Developing future leaders in occupational health	Developing future leaders in occupational health by delegating appropriately and nurturing talent to build a pipeline of professionals, including: • Building connections with pre-registration education to highlight the opportunities for occupational health careers • Identifying talent and providing appropriate opportunities to invest in the development of others • Advocating for and championing others, particularly to broaden participation and build a more diverse workforce

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