Large healthcare organizations are widely regarded as amongst the most complex work environments, when compared with any other professional or organizational construct. Typical industrial era hierarchical forms of governance and leadership have been applied to healthcare environments for many decades with varying degrees of success. In Ireland this approach is not regarded as having been successful.

The operating and cultural environment in the Irish health sector had become particularly unstable. A large scale policy driven structural change had been only partially completed just as the economic crisis of 2009 led to the collapse of Ireland’s public finances. The health sector lost over 10% of its workforce. Incentivized exit schemes particularly targeting the higher paid and more senior staff, led to a loss of institutional memory and stability. Substantial pay cuts and higher workloads were the reward for those who remained.

As Ireland emerged from its economic crisis, efforts to improve the quality of health care and improve the organization’s culture led to the trialing of new approaches to collective and representative leadership.

These approaches employ anthropological findings in facilitating new forms of community and cultural leadership in a values based renewal process. This engagement embraces the identification and selection of ‘backstage’ leaders. The overall aim is to test the potential to create a grassroots social movement within the organisation.