reflections
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GROW YOUR SERVICE BY GROWING YOUR LEADERSHIP

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In this article, I share some of the findings from my recent doctoral research. What intrigued me most, was appreciating that there are multiple factors that interact to influence day-to-day centre life (Colmer, 2017). In my study, I explored leadership from a whole-of-organisation perspective which has revealed just how complicated leadership really is, and convinced me that there are no tricks or easy solutions. I propose that there are a set of principles and practices that leaders can adopt, which over time will build a strong and cohesive culture within a service. Leadership can be understood as *processes of influencing* others toward a set of common goals that are articulated in the service philosophy, vision and values. We can think of leadership as primarily being about creating and maintaining professional relationships to influence educators. For simplicity, in this article I will focus on the site leader but a future article will talk about my findings relating to all positional leaders and the importance of distributed leadership.

As leaders, how can we be confident that our educators understand the organisation's philosophy and values, and that they possess the skills, knowledge and attitudes to be supportive of every child's wellbeing, learning and participation? Early childhood services revolve around human connection and interactions. Every educator has a profound effect on each and every child through the multiple interactions that occur throughout the day. These interactions occur at an interpersonal level and as leaders we hope and trust that educators are warm, consistent, caring and inclusive in their relationships with children, families and each other.

There is a widespread assumption that leadership is simply about the strength or effectiveness of the capacities and actions of an individual person. While it is true that service leaders can have a significant impact on an organisation, many other factors interact to influence staff within a service. It is important to understand that leadership does not occur as independent actions but rather as 'some among many' organisational experiences. This involves understanding that a service is itself a complex social system that exists within a larger external social world. These internal and external social factors intersect in often unpredictable ways. I suggest a helpful analogy is to think of leadership as throwing a stone in a

pond –if the water is still, there is a clear ripple effect; but if the water is choppy, the ripples become lost in a bigger movement, mixed up with other influences.

There are many external influences that affect the service and the staff. These include the impact of governments (e.g. NQF, NQS and EYLF), societal values (e.g. beliefs about the value of early education, perceptions of child rearing), and economic factors (unemployment, disadvantage). Educators are also influenced by internal factors such as organisational history, traditions and 'unspoken rules' (Nuttal, 2013). All of these influences shape educators' understandings of their roles, and can contribute to shaping centre culture and the meaningfulness of the work to educators. In taking an organisational perspective it is possible to begin to understand why a leader's actions may fail to influence staff.

However, by adopting a systems approach, leaders can begin to appreciate that leadership occurs within a complex set of influences that are interrelated (Colmer, 2015). This can be best explained by understanding that any action taken can create an impact in other parts of the organisation; some of these might be desirable but there could also be unanticipated and undesired outcomes. Many leaders may be surprised to learn that their unplanned or unconscious actions can influence educators in positive or negative ways. Indeed, the unconscious actions of a leader may have a big impact while deliberate actions may have little effect. Here, I can share an example of how leaders influenced their staff by their interpretations of events. In my study, I found that where a leader held positive views in relation to the external event of the national reforms, staff within the service were overwhelmingly positive and excited about the work of implementing the new framework and embraced the challenges of change. The reverse also held true; where a leader viewed the reforms negatively, so too the staff considered the reforms to be a burden and were fearful of, and resistant to the requirements. Likewise, how leaders interpret internal events has an impact on educators; potentially difficult situations such as a parent complaint or a staff conflict can be presented as opportunities for learning and improvement rather than viewed as a threat.

A further finding is that leaders can influence their organisations through how they design the systems and processes that make up the internal organisational structures. The resulting system has a critical impact on staff engagement, motivation and participation. In particular, structures such as staffing arrangements (opting for higher ratios of permanent to casualised staff, more staff with qualifications), rosters that are fair and provide stability for children, opportunities for formal and informal communication among staff, and staff planning and programming time are important considerations. A leader has a direct impact on the emotional environment within the service through how they support critical reflection and professional conversations, how staff meetings are conducted, what opportunities are provided for collective and collaborative professional learning and how the leadership team works. All of these system factors influence educators' relationships, which in turn affect how educators respect and value each other.

In order to be influential, a leader needs to be available to staff and importantly to be a learner with staff. In my study, a leader's presence within the day-to-day work of the service enabled them to appreciate the interests of individual staff and to directly influence them to extend professional practice and participate in learning. Indeed, the value of deliberately creating opportunities for staff to work collectively and collaboratively were critical in supporting educators' understanding of service goals, building educator sense of identity and fostering professionalism within a service (Colmer, 2017). While we have assumed that people's intrinsic motivation affects their commitment and performance, as leaders it is helpful to understand that we can have an influence on how educators interpret their experience and how they understand organisational purpose.

This article merely touches on a few of my findings. It is my hope that leaders will find these ideas exciting, offering new insights about leading which will contribute to creating meaningful work environments for educators, thereby assisting them to provide high quality learning experiences for our youngest children.

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