



# A leading

Justine Cope, who has both a theoretical and practical insight into the workings of a day nursery, considers the management and leadership roles in a smaller nursery business

**D**eveloping my own nursery 15 years ago was a tremendous learning curve. Although I had middle-management experience and had worked as a team leader in a large organisation, the challenges of assuming full responsibility for a setting, combined with becoming an employer were uncharted territory.

I had a clear vision of what I wanted to achieve in terms of the quality of provision. However, steering a newly developed team towards this vision was more complex than initially anticipated. I knew from the outset that a participative approach would be invaluable in ensuring that my team were able to contribute to the development of the setting, and that this would help to secure the shared vision I was searching for.

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The biggest hurdle I initially faced was that staff who had come from other organisations often held the ethos of that organisation in high regard even if it did not demonstrate best practice. So, there was a tendency to say, "We did it this way," and a reluctance to deviate or change. Even though this was frustrating, I had to be proactive in listening to, and unpicking, it without disregarding their views.

### The respectful challenge

This directly led to my approach of challenging in a respectful and open-minded manner, and asking them to explain why they felt that their methods demonstrated best practice. It was a valuable two-way process,

and, on occasion, we adopted new processes to reflect the good practice observed by a staff member in another setting.

I recall a new member of staff displaying a rather fixed mindset regarding nappy changing, challenging me about our home-from-home ethos and raising concerns that we did not have fixed times for nappy changing. She felt that nappies might be missed as key staff were changing nappies as and when required, rather than at set times.

I explained that I was reluctant to implement a nappy-changing rota, as I felt that it was essential to build a relationship between the child and key person. I also explained that



Justine Cope with a member of her Early Stages team

# question

some children need more frequent changes than the four times a day she was suggesting, and some may require less. We also discussed the value of the key person system and I underlined that each practitioner in the baby room would only have three children's nappies to change each day. I asked her to try the system and come back to me if she still felt it wasn't working.

Surprisingly, she came to me mid-week and said how much more relaxed the setting was, and previously she had been exhausted when it was her turn to change nappies at her previous setting. She said she was also able to get to know her key group and gain a deeper understanding of their needs.

So, effective leadership and management are clearly essential when developing and sustaining high-quality early years provision. However, with increasing demand to keep up to date with sector changes, statutory guidance and assessment, leading and developing settings can all too often be sidelined.

Leaders and managers are frequently left spinning plates to achieve continuous improvement, while coping with day-to-day operational challenges. For example, many nursery chains are effectively managing their administrative tasks through centralised purchasing, budgeting and operating systems. But, for smaller independent settings, it has to be the multi-role.

## Managing vs leading

All settings have a named manager, who is responsible for the daily operation of the setting, and effective managers may also be competent to lead their team. Managers really should develop leadership skills, but not all leaders are managers - they may simply be individuals who are able to inspire, develop practice and bring about change. However, in terms of both these roles, many

smaller settings will be reliant on an exceptional individual or team who is able to multi-role and multi-task.

The pressures on small operators to meet the challenges of both leading and managing effectively are significant: the day-to-day operation is increasingly timebound by administrative tasks such as

Management	Leadership
Ensuring statutory requirements are met	Continuous improvement
Employment / deployment of staff	Identifying and implementing change
Curriculum management	Peer assessment
Managing resources	Team development
Budget control	Shared vision and ethos
Health and safety	Staff morale
Premises maintenance	Embedding best practice
Parent partnerships	Enabling and challenging learning environments
Risk assessment	Staff development
Safeguarding / SEND/ Early Help Assessment	
Assessment	

accounting for NEG funding, managing bookings, SEND, Early Help Assessment (EHA) and other statutory requirements.

In an ideal world, delegation is the key to ensuring that responsibilities are shared, and, indeed, a participative and shared approach to leading early years teams demonstrates that team members are valued, trusted and listened to, but, in reality, how easy is it to release staff from hands-on work in order to take on additional duties?

For many small providers, the manager is not included in staffing ratios, and so is available to support the day-to-day operation of the setting, but she may also be occupied assisting with staff breaks, attending to incidents and accidents, showing prospective parents around and covering staff sickness.

Yet, the cost of supernumerary time for other staff can be high, and with

*'...tick off those mandatory jobs, as this will give you a sense of satisfaction as each task is completed – you may even give yourself a little reward afterwards'*

rises in the national living wage and the controversial funding rate for the 30-hour entitlement, this pushes the cost of early education up for parents. Staff cover may also frequently be required to support children with SEND, undertake assessments, attend Early Help meetings and facilitate staff training.

The pressures of securing and maintaining good or outstanding Ofsted grades also adds to the challenges faced by early years settings. Leading the team towards continuous improvement relies on having comprehensive sector knowledge, remaining professionally relevant and up to date, investing in staff training and development, and actioning reflective practice.

Staff need to be confident and competent to identify and implement change, seek out premier learning opportunities, create enabling environments and push ➤

► boundaries in order to develop provision and foster the best outcomes.

All this requires dynamic leaders and managers who are able to motivate and enthuse staff towards a shared vision. Whilst there is no magic solution for achieving this, an honest and frank conversation with staff members may go a long way towards boosting morale and sustaining a shared vision. Sharing the challenges and time constraints of your role as well as acknowledging their frustrations can often lead to a better understanding.

## You and your workload

The appointment of an office administrator for a few hours a week will reduce some of the pressures, allowing time for the main focus of your role. Unfortunately, for many small businesses this is a luxury they cannot afford. However, it is worth some consideration, as an individual with one specific role can often achieve a lot in a short time.

So, do timetable supernumerary time for each team where possible: a few hours each week will enable you to delegate certain tasks and allow staff time to keep their own paperwork in order. Remember, managing your workload does not mean that you have to do everything yourself!

Sharing the workload will not only free up some of your time, it will also display confidence in your team, making them feel valued and trusted. While, on occasion, this may be cancelled due to illness or unforeseen events, having a timetable ensures that staff are aware of your commitment to supporting them, and may also give you valuable time to observe and develop practice throughout the setting.

## Action stations!

Don't stockpile work, as it can become overwhelming and drag you down. Pencilling in time slots for managerial duties such as invoices, staffing rotas and funding allocation, can also be effective at ensuring your workload is manageable and achievable, and you will be surprised at how much you can achieve by having an action plan.

However, don't prioritise the tasks



Justine Cope sharing a moment with a child at Early Stages

you like the best or you will be left with a list of things you don't want to do. For added satisfaction, tick off those mandatory jobs, as this will give you a sense of satisfaction as each task is completed – you may even give yourself a little reward afterwards. And don't be afraid to say no if you can't do it there and then. Apologise and explain that you will attend to it as soon as you can.

Finally, consider investing in a basic nursery management package - some are available from as little as £30 per month and can make a significant difference to the day-to-day operation of the setting and prevent you continuously shuffling pieces of paper, while saving the planet. More complex systems can also help with assessment, funding, staff deployment, tracking and training.

## The bigger picture

Get your voice heard within the sector: small businesses matter! So whether you are a sessional playgroup, private nursery or part of a larger chain, take the time to fill in

consultation documents, as this is the only way that the movers and shakers in the sector can be made aware of the actual challenges faced by those on the front line. Invest in your team, as staff retention is often a key factor in maintaining a quality provision: well-informed staff accept the financial constraints of smaller-setting budgets and will understand that you cannot always reward them financially.

However, there are other ways to acknowledge their hard work and achievements: a simple thank you, mention in the setting newsletter or Friday cake day goes a long way to showing your gratitude and will make the team feel valued. ■

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