

What makes a good

NMT asked Julie Rees, Nursery Manager of the Year in the NMT Nursery Awards 2017, what makes a good manager. Julie passes on what she has learnt



I have been nursery manager at The Old Station Nursery in Innsworth, Gloucester since the end of August 2015. I never aspired to be a nursery manager, but, after completing my early years teacher training (EYITT), I realised that if I wanted to follow my passion and belief that children learned through play, through child-led learning, I needed to be at the top to make the necessary changes.

Occupancy has tripled since I joined the nursery and we gained our first outstanding Ofsted grading in October 2016. My focus from the start was on building and engaging with my team, recruiting staff I could trust, staff capable of doing what they do best with minimum oversight. As a manager I am in control of the nursery, and all that goes with it, no matter what, but I recognise my limitations and have built a team that complements me.

Continual change

We continue to operate within continual change, with high expectations placed on the leader. Quality of practice for children can be linked directly to quality of leadership. I have a good insight into my role, continually developing myself and, with support from head office, I have learned what is expected of me. Financial management - budgets, staffing,

forecasting - was new to me. I have now learnt how to use nursery management software and also use social media to advertise our service and engage with families. I have certainly acquired new competencies.

Leadership style

As a leader, I try to understand the needs of the people around me: staff, families and children. My communication and interpersonal skills are fundamental to my leadership style and its effectiveness. During initial individual meetings with staff, and from spending as much time with them as possible, I got to know their individual differences and their working styles and was soon able to place staff in accordance with their skills and experiences.

There was resistance to change when I became manager: staff whose response was 'because we've always done it that way'. Some of these quickly left, and as I started to build my team, I adopted rigorous recruitment processes, always with an eye to the applicant's potential.

Delegation

I do not try to do everything myself. My staff have different skills and experiences, and this determines not just who leads specific projects, but

also outcomes. This makes them feel valued and respected. For example, those staff who are proactive with the garden have taken command of our outside area. Others, keen animal lovers, oversee the care and welfare of all our nursery pets. I thank and praise my team and, in return, they feel valued.

Qualifications

The best settings have highly qualified practitioners. Four of my team are just completing their EYITT and another staff member will start the course in September. I am fortunate to have a highly qualified, skilled and professional team: I am an early years teacher and three more staff hold early years degrees. One staff member is just completing her foundation degree and will then top up to a full degree; three staff hold L4 qualifications; 13 hold L3 qualifications and one staff member has a L2.

Supervisions

I like to think that I inspire not just my team but other settings too, as I visit professionals and the community because of our role within it. I share knowledge, aspirations and expectations through professional dialogue with my team. I link supervisions and appraisals to training and development: they are an important leadership tool, helping staff use their knowledge and skills effectively in their work.

Staff have supervisions

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nursery manager?

approximately every six weeks or more if considered necessary. Whilst written supervisions may not always take place, I make a conscious effort to speak with each member of my team daily. It is important, to me, that I speak to my staff individually; a one-size-fits-all approach to working relationships would probably fail, as they are all very different people.

Self-evaluation

We employ a robust self-evaluation system that takes into account the view of our parents and children. Seventy six parents responded positively to our recent parent survey: they all said that they would recommend our service. Our families are actively encouraged to express their concerns and any issues are immediately actioned. I need to ensure my team continuously refresh their skills to ensure outstanding practice. So, I make a point of recording all staff training in my parent newsletters. Knowing that we employ professionals with a range of skills and qualifications means that our families are assured that their children will benefit from quality early years education.

Continual improvement

Outstanding does not mean perfect - we all aspire to continual improvement. The pursuit of excellence is at the heart of all we do. My vision, shared by all the team,



The opening of Innsworth Nursery's second site: Julie Rees (left) with staff, children and soldiers from the Imjin Barracks opposite the nursery

focuses strongly on the achievement of all our children. I, along with my senior team, ensure that learning opportunities meet the children's individual needs and interests as well as statutory requirements. We use online learning journals, and systems are in place to narrow any gaps in outcomes between different groups of children.

Team meetings

Senior leadership meetings take place regularly and discussions daily. We decided that whole-team meetings were counter-productive, as after working for ten hours, and more, staff did not want to attend a meeting. My seniors cascade information to their teams at individual team meetings which often take place before the nursery opens. These present an opportunity to share good practice, ideas and planning.

Observation, assessment and planning

I set high expectations and introduce structures that help children's learning. I take every opportunity to simplify processes and reduce paperwork. Any time spent completing forms, paperwork, online observations and assessments, is time spent away from the children. Towards the end of last year, we adopted the in-the-moment planning approach and have recently held meetings to discuss and reflect how staff have found this, which resulted in some changes. I have attended two conferences, recently, where the emphasis was on the importance of the quality of conversations held between adults and children. In order that I can monitor these



A nervous Julie Rees before the NMT Nursery Awards 2017

conversations, I carry out observations of staff on a periodic basis for practice.

I think it is safe to say that I have my own style and way of doing things, but I have different styles for different situations and can adapt accordingly. Looking ahead, we can be certain that change will continue and that we will experience low points and high ones.

One thing that will not change is my passion and belief in the value of early childhood and its importance in building the foundations for a fulfilled future life. I care deeply for my team and will continue to motivate them and provide them with support and challenge. Whatever the future holds for us, I will always know that behind every competent manager is an extremely competent team. ■

A second site!

Our success has led to the opening of our second setting in the area, both of which I manage with the support of a full-time office manager. From September, my deputy manager will be supernumerary and will assist me in overseeing both settings.

- Julie Rees is a nursery manager within The Old Station Nursery, a group of nine nurseries throughout Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Gloucestershire.

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