

Leadership and Change: the heart of the matter

***“Leadership is the capacity to meet new challenges in a more conscious, intentional, and strategic way. The development of such a capacity would allow us to create a future of greater possibilities.”
(Sharmer 2007 p 1)***

As leaders today we face an unprecedented set of challenges. The fast rate of change has stretched our leadership and management models beyond their capacity. As a result we are called upon to explore leadership from a deeper dimension and investigate our own practice as early childhood professionals.

This article introduces key concepts around leadership and change with the idea that collaboration, power-sharing and building trusting relationships are the capacities necessary to create greater possibilities. These concepts can help us to think about early childhood leadership in a changing world.

Creating positive change has leadership at the heart of the matter. Leaders are those people that step forward with vision, inspiration and confidence to empower others and have the courage to test new thinking and try new ways of doing.

Effective leaders attend to the quality of relationships. Acknowledgement and acceptance of difference, balance of power in dialogue and openness to new ideas would be considered the core principles for building trusting relationships. Leaders see the importance of creating opportunities for people to come together to share experiences, learn from differing perspectives, explore challenges and in doing so build openness and trust. As noted by Sharmer (2007) an open mind, open heart and open will is what helps us to see, sense and act together as a group.

Creating a common goal and a desire among its members to engage in collaborative discussion, reflection and inquiry is necessary for positive change. Through cultivating self-awareness, skilful communication and taking action a group can find new responses to complex situations that will create ways of working together.

Wheatley (2007) proposed that “the solution is each other, if we can rely on one another we can cope with almost anything (pg 118).” With this notion in mind we are better able to counter the negative dynamics that are often stimulated by stress and fear of the unknown that are associated with change.

Another idea to consider is that really important knowledge can be derived from our own community and experiences not from outside experts. From hearing each others stories as they unfold overtime we illuminate how we see ourselves in the work we do and what is possible, we learn what others care about and our shared values and visions.

Paula's Story

Paula, a participant in a leadership and team development program designed for early childhood managers and coordinators across early childhood services, including inclusion support agencies, reflected on the organisational changes that were common amongst other participants.

The feeling of isolation – “where am I going and what has the sector got to offer in order to keep me working in child care?” Paula's story spoke of reaching a point where she saw how things could be – “a positive, supportive network with others that have the same beliefs and passion for child care.” Paula went on to say:

“I was looking for more support as a leader. At times I felt alone as there seemed to always be training for my staff and guidance, yet I was left to my own devices.”

“I now know that I am not alone as a leader, rather one of many who feel and felt the way that I did or do. The majority of ‘leaders’ face the same issues everyday and I have learnt various techniques and ideas of how to deal with this. I now know that ‘leaders’ do not always have to know the answers but rather work as a ‘team’ to develop your own answers.”

“I believe that I have changed my thought process in regards to issues at hand. I also believe that my thoughts over time as a ‘leader’ will always be changing, this is healthy and relevant to the times we are in.”

What does this mean in terms of early childhood leadership?

What do we already know from our experience?

What do we need to be asking ourselves?

How are we feeling about where we are now?

Who else do we need to include in our conversations?

What does this call us to do now?

How will we know if we are creating change that matters?

In summary, current perspectives on organisational development describe leadership as a dynamic relationship located within a group of people working together to create change. “The leadership relationship is one of influence in two directions: leaders influencing collaborators and collaborators influencing leaders.” (Aubrey 2007p. 4). This is made possible by creating a culture of learning and sharing knowledge in collaborative ways. In doing so we build the capacity to see, sense and create change that serves the whole - ourselves, our organisations and the communities of which we are a part (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers 2005).

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