

Positive leadership and management in residential child care: what do these involve and how do we bring them about?

Abstract

This short article reports on an interview with Graham McPheat, Senior Teaching Fellow, University of Strathclyde. Drawing on his experience as a children's homes manager and educator, Graham offers a starting point for debates about the nature of leadership and management in children's homes, and ways of bringing about best practice. Graham considers aspects of the 'leadership toolkit' by thinking mainly about the distinctions between leadership and management, ways of establishing leadership approaches in children's homes and the concepts of 'learning organisation' and 'managing risk'.

Interview

Would you say that there are differences between leadership and management, and if so, what are they in respect of the way they function in children's homes?

There are distinctions. Management is generally something about appointment, position and responsibilities and the things that have got to be done by virtue of the position, and there can be a range of tasks and accountabilities associated with that. Leadership is sometimes connected to that, but it can also sit very separately and one doesn't have to be in a management position to be a leader, but in my view the most effective managers will also exhibit behaviour which is consistent with providing leadership to their staff team.

One thing that both leadership and management have in common is the issue of power. Being in a management position gives people power, they have power over systems, over other people, whether it be staff or clients. There is also something about power and leadership as well, because leadership is essentially about power to influence, although often influence in a different way to the way a manager would do, perhaps - by instruction -- whereas leadership can be more a *process of influence*, of winning hearts and minds and taking people with you.

Good managers should be doing that anyway so I don't think the distinction is always that clear cut. Just because somebody gets promoted to a management position, unfortunately, I don't think always means that they do have those leadership qualities. Depending on what organisations are looking for, their priorities, selection and recruitment techniques, sometimes they may be better at selecting people who are a bit more process-driven and thus might be more suited to some of the management and quality assurance tasks. In today's culture, we're sometimes reluctant to look outside the box, and sometimes people that are seen as mavericks or different in some way, who may

have lots of positive leadership qualities to offer, can become managed out the system or side lined because they don't fit what the organisation's looking for.

Is drawing the distinction between leadership and management useful to residential staff?

Yes, in the sense that sometimes staff need to be managed and reassured and contained, and they will need managers who are very practical, who make sure things get managed, all the nuts and bolts things that we know have to happen day-to-day in units to help them function, so that they don't just dissolve into chaos or nothingness. So sometimes I think as staff we need that, but other times we need a bit of inspiration, we need a little bit of kind of stardust, we need to be encouraged to look beyond what's going on in the here and now, and almost like a brighter preferred future.

There is something about leadership in offering some sort of vision or notion of where we might get to, and for staff in being encouraged to recognise that. Sometimes we'll need a bit of 'management', sometimes we'll need a bit of 'leadership', and it won't always necessarily be the same person that provides these. Good managers are adept at surrounding themselves by people that can do some of those other things, and they build up a team which has a complement of skills.

Making these distinctions can be useful for staff, for example it can stop them getting frustrated at somebody always banging on about the rules and procedures that have to be followed - there is a time and a place for that, but it does not offer the more creative and visionary aspect, which is what leadership might bring.

What do you think managers coming newly into post face in establishing their particular leadership approach with their team?

Firstly, one of the obvious challenges is the basis on which they have been appointed. There is a number of establishments that will have people who are good at a specific role and may reward them by promoting them into another role, when actually some of the skill set required to do that other role is not necessarily the same as what they were good at in the first place.

There is often a presumption that the skills are transferable and because a manager is a good, competent performer at whatever level it is, be it first line supervisor, assistant manager, or deputy, that they are going to be able to take the next step up the ladder. We need to recognise that people's ability to move into that leadership role is not always assessed appropriately. And then we need to ensure that they are supported appropriately to develop from whatever was their starting point.

I guess that also brings to mind another consideration relating to whether or not people have been promoted internally or have come in externally, and the implications this has for developing a leadership style. I'm a great football fan, so the analogy of the player becoming player-manager, where your peers become the people that you are managing and you have responsibility for them, as opposed to somebody coming in completely

afresh. If the former, you are not just 'one of the boys' any more, you are managing people.

This is causing me to reflect on when I moved from being an assistant unit manager to a unit manager within the same establishment. The relationships where I experienced most issues were where others had been my assistant unit managers. There were fewer issues with the residential child care officers, because I had always been managing them, to a certain extent, and there was still that same relationship in many ways. The bigger challenge was with those who had been my colleagues and my peers. You are sharing emotions, feelings, experiences with colleagues, and doing that on an equal footing and then all of a sudden you are one step up. I'm not sure for whom it was more strange, I'm tempted to say myself! I could imagine in that situation that staff would become more guarded in some ways about what they shared with me, because we were not peers any more.

With managers who have been promoted to their roles, some staff may be concerned about opening up too much and expressing vulnerabilities or fallibilities in the usual, supportive way. I would hope that a good manager and a good leader, both through what they were saying and what they were doing, would get across to people quite quickly that all those supportive, relationship-based ways of working would still apply. But it would be ludicrous to try and ignore the fact that one person is now the other one's boss and that the power differential has changed as a consequence.

A further consideration is the degree of control and autonomy that managers have over such basic yet fundamental things as entrances and exits from the unit. This has implications for how they try to take their team forward, in terms of exhibiting leadership, building a team and developing a philosophy of care for the unit. It can be quite easy for that to be undermined when things are happening externally that just cut across that. Within the sector as it exists within Scotland, the nature of the organisation plays an important part, and here I'm drawing a real distinction between statutory provision and non-statutory provision. The gate-keeping processes are often very different. We know that statutory provision has to focus on the placement when the social work team is saying that somebody needs to be accommodated and there are no other options in the community. It is the statutory provision that basically has to turn this sofa into a bed or the education room into an extra bedroom, whereas some of the other establishments in Scotland, because they are working in a different way and buying-in placements, sometimes they have a bit more control over their gate-keeping processes.

What skills do managers need to enable people to get on board with changes in role when promoted to their post?

Managers in children's homes are far more visible than managers in a lot of other settings and need to be equipped with the skills to recognise what is appropriate to provide for staff at any given point in time. A manager has to become comfortable with the fluctuations in role relationship, where it feels fine to be sitting at a 'lower' level, and then there are other situations when a manager has very much got to step up to the plate.

These changes can depend on a whole range of circumstances, it could be a particularly challenging shift or situation, staff may be feeling a little vulnerable or under pressure, whatever it is, the point to acknowledge is that the manager recognises at that time that 'I've got to be more visible, I've got to show why I earned my stripes'. Importantly, managers need to be able to see that they do not need to be in that role all the time. They need to be comfortable with coming and going with those swings.

As much as possible, good leadership means being alongside staff, empowering, enabling and encouraging, but when something more is required then managers must switch through the gears and take on a more directive and overtly leadership-like role. They must demonstrate that they can not only talk the talk but can walk the walk, in terms of visibility and showing that they have the skills, the patience, the relationship-building qualities, the judgement, everything else that allows them to interact effectively with children and young people in challenging situations.

Perhaps there is something intuitive about doing this, but importantly, it is also something that you learn; what gear do you need to be in at any given time and when it's OK to be almost in the back seat and one of the group and enabling other staff to take the lead.

How does the concept of a learning organisation fit with the work taking place in children's homes?

Establishing a learning organisation is all about not taking control of every situation and you are not dictating everything, because staff have to learn and develop some of those skills for themselves, and have to be appropriately supported. Equally, when the opportunity is right, it is about staff being given the space and the licence to take charge of situations for themselves. Some of that entails mirroring what we should be doing with children and young people, by that I mean that we are not setting them up to fail, but not smothering them so much that we do not give them the chance to learn. I often say that in this sense, the manager, or the supervisor/worker relationship should, in some way, mirror the key worker/child relationship.

Managers have a really significant role in terms of whether or not organisations develop a culture of learning. The tone and the example that they set and the way situations are responded to and followed through has a great influence in terms of whether staff regard situations as learning experiences. We know that things will go wrong, or that there will be unplanned outcomes emerging from any number of situations. But how managers respond to that, individually with staff and with the team as a whole, either can have the effect of encouraging reflection or getting into a blaming culture. That is the opposite end of the scale and it really depresses me when I hear students who are practitioners talking about their experiences of supervision as less about development and themselves as practitioners, and more about going through the checklist: 'are you doing this right'. I don't think that lends itself to any sort of learning culture. It is more likely to lead to staff keeping their heads down and being seen to do the right thing, rather than thinking that every situation or circumstance has potential learning in it.

I really think the tone set by the manager individually with staff, be that in supervision or just the more informal encounters that happen all the time, how the manager encourages their other supervisors to manage their staff, all of that has a huge influence on whether we evolve into being learning organisations. By that I mean organisations that can truly reflect on and learn positively from the good, the bad and the ugly!

It is important to have those little light bulb moments where opportunities are identified for development sessions, perhaps circulating a piece of reading, stimulating a discussion, with a view to thinking about how do we incrementally expand the knowledge base of the staff team. Hopefully we make better decisions if we are more informed.

Every children's home has those periods where they feel like things are ticking over and staff are partly enjoying that, but also partly nervous about when the next bumpy period is going to come! Do we appreciate as much of those periods as we could? Possibly not. And when staff are in one of those really bumpy periods and it feels more like a fire-fighting mode, managers have to encourage staff to hold on to their norms, so that the fire-fighting period should never become the norm. When you're in choppy seas and the waves are so high you're struggling to see where you're trying to get back to, it's important to keep sight of that point. If all we're ever doing is responding to crisis then we're not creating a potentially therapeutic environment that we would want the children and young people to be living in. On the other hand, we need to recognise that there will be some periods where it feels very difficult and it seems as though all we are doing is responding to crises.

Is it important for managers and staff to look at the causes of crises?

Of course. Another main task for managers to achieve is that of encouraging staff teams to look beyond the direct behaviour of individual children towards the bigger picture. Sometimes staff may get stuck in thinking 'if we could just move on that young person', or 'they're inappropriately placed', or 'if it wasn't for them everything would be fine'. The difficulty is never just down to that one young person, but sometimes, when staff teams are really under pressure, staff may think that. I remember when I was doing some development work with a management team and a manager saying 'where I want to get my staff team to is the point where I never hear the phrase again "they shouldna be here".'. .

That links back to the gear change again: it is important to recognise when staff teams are really under pressure and struggling, and that is when managers possibly need to be consistently in quite a high gear at that point, and hands-on. I do not mean that necessarily in relation to children, but more in terms of encouraging and supporting the staff and not losing sight of the bigger picture, recognising that staff will need a lot of support, encouragement and advice.

Getting beyond that difficult patch requires leadership in helping staff to refocus on their knowledge base. It is important to keep sight of that child's experience and their needs and what their behaviour is telling us that they need. They will need support and intervention more than ever, rather than needing not to be here. So it is important to flip

that on its head. It is difficult to do that because you need the physical space, the emotional space and actually the headspace to step back from being caught up in the day-to-day and the really challenging aspects of the job.

What is needed is to take that physical and metaphorical step back and attempt to understand developmentally what is going on for each individual child, what is going on for the resident group as a whole, and then also what is going on for the staff team. It is important to understand how those interactions are playing out and bringing everyone into the present situation. In locating the difficulty with a particular young person, we are putting all the power and all the responsibility on them, and it is actually important for us to look at those who are getting paid to be here, the people that are the experts in caring for the children. We have to own this process rather than pathologising the child. There is an important skill there: challenging. When staff most need the time and space to reflect on some of that, well that is usually the time there is the least opportunity. It's all the more important in a quieter or a more settled period that staff recharge their batteries and enjoy some of the calmer moments. There has to be a bit of give and take in there, to capitalise on developmental opportunities. It's important to get out the unit for a morning or an afternoon or a day, it's often quite symbolically helpful in terms of taking that physical and metaphorical step back, so you're somewhere else and there's a chance to bounce about some of these ideas. When it's a challenging period, those sorts of events can be really difficult and hairy to manage.

One of the ways managers can help staff to see the bigger picture is by being on the shop floor a little more, to guide an increase in their knowledge and critical reflections skills. But sometimes the way the manager's role is constructed makes this difficult, for example, they might be getting asked to do other things by their organisation that either keeps them in the office or actually takes them out the children's unit altogether. As a manager in a local authority I was very clear that I had responsibilities and duties towards the bigger part of the service, but also that I had ultimate responsibility for the unit, and if the decision was 'I need to be here in the unit', then that is where I would be. But equally, managers have to be aware that staff have to be afforded space and the responsibility to manage some of this.

The important thing is for managers to be alert to when they need to be present in the unit and when they do not. A large component of the role is about 'sleeves up, visibility on', and another aspect is about encouraging staff to reflect on a child's prior experiences and how their behaviour makes one hundred percent sense if we were in their shoes. We know that our children and young people have not always learned the coping and communication skills that would give them other options. What we have to think about is the best way to respond to this and to try to create a healing environment.

Is it helpful for managers to have access to their own support systems?

Very. In the Scottish context, the role of external managers and the managers' peer group has varied tremendously depending on where people are employed. In some situations there is a ready-made and accessible peer group, but there will be other places where managers will be far more isolated, both geographically and professionally - these

things are very variably experienced. The needs of managers, regardless of where they are located, are the same but the resources they have are very different. There has been research about the role of external managers that raises interesting questions [see the article by Louise Hill and Neil Gentleman in this edition]. There are some abiding issues in terms of support. For example, what happens if a manager has an external manager who has never worked in residential child care before, do they really understand some of the things being wrestled with as a manager? How available and accessible are external managers, how interested and involved are they? Sometimes, when managers are seen to be keeping a lid on things there may not be very much scrutiny of how that is being achieved, but that may be risky, as we know from some of the highest profile enquiry reports and abuse scandals.

There are some challenges to overcome. Does frequently involving your external managers indicate weakness in some ways, does it demonstrate a lack of ability to cope and manage? Well, no. An ideal situation would be when an organisation establishes sufficient regular contact and mechanisms for contact that the manager is feeling supported without being over-managed or smothered. At the same time, managers need to feel confident that when they do ask for help or support it is not going to be viewed as a sign of weakness, or as a sign of failure. It needs to be more a matter of checking things out appropriately and just ensuring that practice is heading in the right direction, because the buck stops with the manager.

What sort of leadership skills are needed when helping practitioners to manage risk?

Staff need to feel that their managers will back them one hundred percent, in whatever way is needed and they will need to build confidence in making good decisions about risk, and being at ease about managing that. Many of our encounters will involve staff being in risky situations, from high level physical interventions, children absconding, to the much more mundane, and all the time they are balancing risk. The task of the manager is to encourage staff not to be paralysed by that and not to become overly defensive by just covering their backs, but instead responding in a way where they are sensibly managing risky situations and, by doing that, in turn encouraging children and young people to sensibly manage risky situations. Staff need to recognise that at any moment it could all go wrong and they will need to explain and account for themselves. When staff become absorbed in a culture of fearing situations, then risk becomes something that they try to eliminate, but that is never going to be achievable, so it is completely counterproductive. Neither is it going to be developmental or helpful for children and young people, who have themselves to learn how to manage risk. So many of them have been making poor decisions and we have to help them to rewrite their approach in relation to this.

There is a whole generation of workers who are dealing with a set of demands and risks that I did not experience in practice: social media. How all that is managed is fundamental to practice. There are various boundaries: the professional self, the personal, and the private. The focus in children's homes is relationship based and we are involved. Some people outside residential child care would have us believe that professionalism is about professional distance and sometimes that may be correct, but actually a lot of times in residential child care being in the relationship is a vehicle for everything else that you

are going to achieve with that young person. If you are not prepared to get close, that will limit what can be done. But inevitably that carries risks and staff have to be supported to be comfortable with that and to recognise how to make good decisions in relation to these. It is important to be open to naming that and talking about it because when it becomes unacknowledged then we get into really risky territory; it becomes a double risk. There needs to be discussions going on between staff and managers, involving children and young people and their families about that as well.

It is so important for managers and staff to be able to demonstrate that they are not acting due to something seeming like a good idea, plucked out the sky, they need to show that they are coming to reasoned decisions about the best way to proceed there and that they are communicating about it as well. We need to be 'planning for predictable crises'! Often we can anticipate what is likely to go wrong and if that happens, we pick up the pieces, dust ourselves off and we think about where we go from there.

Finally, how would you summarise what needs to be included in the 'good leadership' toolkit?

To occupy a leadership position well involves establishing credibility, staff have to believe in the person and in what they are getting from them in their professional interactions. There has to be congruency, an all-round trustworthiness, where staff believe in their manager for the right reasons. Unfortunately, we know that leadership can be exhibited in a negative fashion, as well as positively.

Good leaders need to have a strong sense of 'how involved do I need to be, how hands-on do I need to be' at any time, which involves assessing and weighing up a whole range of things. Leadership involves equipping staff to the point that they are well positioned to deal with difficulties and understanding whether they need some support or guidance, or need somebody to come in and take charge. This will change, at different times there will be different needs. Positive leadership entails not just the ability to change through the gears and hit the right one, but perhaps more crucially, the ability to recognise what gear is needed at any given time. This requires a real ability to gauge the temperature of the unit and to be making informed decisions about how and when to be involved.

Another key tool is the way that external managers are involved. Internal managers have to know when they need to take advice, or ask for help, or to take time out, and not be too proud to do that.

There is a further major task which involves certain skills from managers, and that is getting the team to gel. To do this, a manager needs to be able to assess what a team needs, bearing in mind that a team is made up of different people who each have different strengths and weaknesses, as well as different skills. As a manager, you have to assess what will work in terms of a team's resources and how you put these to best use, so that they are the most effective team possible, in the optimum combination on shifts. Alongside this runs the need to ensure that new staff are equipped well through induction, mentoring and shadowing and being able to identify staff who are very good at taking a newbie under their wing.

Above all, as a manager you have to be one hundred percent confident in your own ability, and comfortable with making decisions - and sometimes making decisions that might make you unpopular - and to be the person of last resort. That involves having a good, honest, reflective view of yourself and your own abilities and fallibilities!

Thank you, Graham, for sharing your insight on these important aspects of residential child care practice. There is much here to stimulate practitioners' reflections on their own experiences, knowledge and systems. I'm sure that we all look forward to continuing and widening conversations around these topics.

Leslie Hicks