
MANAGEMENT MATTERS

Team and teamwork

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Earlier this year I visited Professor Paula Jorde Bloom and her team at the University of Illinois Centre for Early Childhood Leadership in Chicago. One of the members of the team is a lawyer who works full time on advocating for children and families with the City and State legislature. Her current project was to obtain sustained funding for an Illinois-wide programme called TEACH. This programme seeks to address the problem of constant staff turnover in early childhood centres: at present 40% of staff 'turns over' every two years, with consequent problems for centre programmes.

There are two elements to this proposed programme: a generous training grant to full time staff who contract to stay in a centre for longer than two years, and an increased wage supplement for trained staff who stay in the centre. Part of the reason for this approach comes from research in the States that shows a strong relationship between staff salaries and quality programmes in childcare centres. Deborah Phillips and her co-researchers say that staff salaries are 'a consistent and strong predictor for the quality of care' for children of all ages. This is because of the effect on other structural and process determinants of quality, including staff stability.

In New Zealand we too have problems with staff turnover, and although there is a Working Party looking at pay parity for early childhood teachers, it is unlikely that money will be spent immediately on attempting to slow this turnover. The extent of staff turnover can mean that building teams is a constant process in some services. There is, however, research and theory about teams and teamwork that can be helpful in helping to set up teams and to mould them into units in which it is a pleasure to work. This article will describe some of the ideas about teamwork that it may be helpful to understand, for leaders and team members.

~~Teams change and develop in relationships and expertise~~

There are several catchy phrases for describing the stages of team development. Probably the most helpful one for early childhood practitioners is Jillian Rodd's: she writes from an early childhood perspective. Her stages are:

- getting together
- confronting conflict
- consensus and cooperation
- effective performance, and
- separation and closure.

Rodd describes a path where there is an experimental phase after the team has established its first direction. Team members may be jockeying for position and questioning the purpose, roles and working relationships within the group before making appropriate changes in order to address the task. The team moves through some sort of consensus to a state of effective team performance, where everyone is contributing to the solution of the problem or the accomplishment of the task.

Rodd adds a phase called 'separation and closure' which acknowledges that teams change and fall apart. She gives two reasons for this.

First, when a task is completed, successfully or not, the team can be at a loose end -- they have lost their reason for being a team. Team members need an opportunity to talk about the way in which they worked together, what their successes and failures were and how they might do better on another occasion. This is what is commonly called 'debriefing'. If this is not acknowledged, people can feel that closure has not happened. They tend to become 'stuck' and unable to move on to the next task, or they are resentful and may feel that their work has not been acknowledged.

Second, staff members change, and this means that teams can be disbanded before they are ready to dissolve. This happens often in early childhood, and if the team was a very successful one, where everyone enjoyed his or her work, there can naturally be a time of grieving for those times. People remember with sometimes misplaced nostalgia 'the time when Jane was here' and can often feel that the replacement is not up to scratch. New Head Teachers or Supervisors can understandably find such a situation threatening. Again, some debriefing is necessary to signal the closure of the group. As well as a more deliberate review of the attainment of the group, both in terms of relationships and achievements, a party or occasion that acknowledges both the loss of the staff member and what happened while s/he was here can help with the process of closure.

Having new group members can also mean that the process of team development slows down or goes backward for a while. Team development resembles a continuum, but as in human development, there are times of consolidation and also times when behaviour reverts to that of an earlier age or stage. This can be very frustrating for long term staff members who may find that many of the previously agreed ideas and relationships are now up for negotiation again. All group members need to be aware of this possibility, so that everyone can put their minds to questioning assumptions and negotiating group processes once more. If this doesn't happen, then the group may take much longer to re-form as a successful functioning unit.

A good working team has varied membership

There is some very interesting research that suggests that the teams that are most successful are not made up of people who have a similar way of going about things. Meredith Belbin, a Canadian psychologist, researched the personal characteristics of the members of successful teams, that is, teams that get things done. He found that the way in which the members of the team interacted was more important than their technical expertise.

Belbin found that there were at least eight roles that need to be fulfilled. These are:

- *implementer*: the practical person who turns the plan into action;
- *co-ordinator*: controls the way in which the team works, and makes sure that everyone's abilities are used;
- *shaper*: tries to keep people on track;
- *plant*: the 'ideas' person;
- *resource investigator*: explores the new ideas, both within and outside the group;
- *monitor/evaluator*: evaluates the group's ideas and suggestions;
- *teamworker*: fosters team spirit and supports team members;
- *completer*: pays attention to detail in order to get the project finished.

Of course, very few early childhood teams are likely to have all of these roles filled by different people. Often, a person will find that they are fulfilling more than one role. But Belbin asserts that groups that work together best need to have at least a co-ordinator and a plant. These two - the person who organises the team and the ideas person - need to get on well together, or the ideas will never come to fruition.

So if we want a team that gets the job done well, it may be that our ideas of who should be included need to be revised. Services who employ a large number of teacher/educators may need to encourage all staff to think about these characteristics and ~~to decide what they can contribute to the particular team, rather than feel that they have to be involved.~~ There may be occasions when some members of the group will choose not to be part of a team. Provided that they are prepared to abide by the decisions of the group, and not want to revisit them, this may be a helpful decision, rather than a hindrance.

Quality What do we mean by collaborative decision making?

Commonsense and research tell us that people work best when they have had a hand in making the decisions that underpin their work. Programmes where this happens have a better chance of achieving a ~~higher quality.~~ Paula Jorde Bloom suggests that there are three reasons for this:

- there is a synergy in a group that can lead to 'the possibility of better decisions';
- people have a right to be involved in making decisions that effect their lives; and
- people involved in making decisions have a greater stake in carrying them out.

In other words, if you involve staff in making decisions and understanding them they are less likely to sabotage ideas and ~~more likely to work for successful implementation.~~ But ensuring that people are involved can be complicated, especially when centres have to cope with involving teachers who work shifts, staff with uneven training and sometimes sheer inertia.

Some of the further constraints to do with collaborative decision making include:

- the increased time that decision making involves;
- the difficulties in having the money to pay for additional staff meetings;
- the difficulties caused by staff changes: informed, committed staff are more successfully involved in participatory decision making; and
- the influence and perspectives of various stakeholders such as the government, owners and parents which can limit the amount of choice available.

Sometimes supervisors and head teachers take on more responsibility than they need to because they are reluctant to overwork their often-underpaid staff, but this reluctance can be interpreted by the staff as a lack of trust. Supervisors also need to acknowledge that they have the major power in decision making. It is to them that Ministry directives come: they negotiate with the owner or the management committee; and they often call and chair the meetings and set the majority of the agenda.

Implementing collaborative, shared decision-making means more than agreeing that 'we should all be involved' in making decisions. Most writers and researchers on decision-making agree that staff (and other stakeholders) need to agree about the extent that they desire to have consensus in decision-making. They also need to decide about the extent to which they want to be involved, and be prepared to trust some members of the staff to form a team and make some of the decisions without them. A rule of thumb for who should be involved might be:

- how important is it to me? Will this decision influence the way in which I have to work?
And
- how much do I know about the topic? Can I make a useful contribution to the decision?

Above all, an open, trusting environment, where decision making processes are flexible, will mean that people are less likely to work from a position of self interest and more likely to work collaboratively.

What are the pitfalls with working in teams?

Teamwork has problems, especially when there is pressure for everyone to agree. This can result in a condition that Irving Janis calls '*groupthink*'. This is the likelihood of a cohesive group to want to agree uncritically, rather than think carefully about a problem. Groupthink is especially prevalent within groups that are isolated and under stress. Members put pressure on each other to conform. It becomes very difficult to hold a dissenting view, so members keep quiet rather than 'rock the boat'. In addition, strong leadership can unwittingly cause groupthink, especially if the leader is liked and the group want to please her by agreeing.

The conditions that foster groupthink are very prevalent in early childhood. People often work in small, isolated groups, with little contact with other early childhood professionals. Early childhood services seem always to be under threat, so there is pressure to put forward a united front. And an emphasis on not implementing a decision until there is agreement by everyone can mean that is very difficult to hold a dissenting view, as this is regarded as 'letting the side

down'. Disagreement often takes up time too, and there can be emphasis on making decisions quickly, for practical or financial reasons.

Sometimes belonging to a team can be very pressured in other ways. We all want to do our best for children and families and this can put pressure on group members to 'perform'. John Smyth warns that 'teamwork' and 'team relationships' can be a type of peer pressure, where what teachers do is controlled by the group: we carry on so that we won't 'let the team down' or so that other people won't have to work harder. For early childhood staff, the discourses of 'supporting our colleagues' and 'supporting families and children' can mean that teachers put themselves under stress and eventually experience burnout, in the interests of supporting the team.

Yet often what the team has to do and the way in which it is done is actually controlled by the institution or the government. Smyth warns that there has been pressure over the last few years for teachers to work harder, but a lot of this work goes into supporting systems rather than providing better programmes for children. The endless revision of policies and management plans in education can be seen as an example of this.

Similarly, we would be deluding ourselves if we thought that being part of a team is always 'empowering' for participants. Mike Bottery points out that what is called empowerment is often, in the modern world, just a way of encouraging people to implement others people's ideas. He says:

It is very easy for 'empowerment' to become a weasel word: for it to become the excuse for nothing more than the delegation of extra responsibility and work. Just as bad, it may be genuinely intended to free creative thinking, but then not be supported by the time and resources necessary for concepts to be assimilated, modified and implemented (p. 42).

There is nothing the matter with implementing other people's ideas: many of us spend a great deal of time doing this. But this is delegation, not empowerment, and we need to acknowledge this.

Finally....

Colin Riches identifies the following indicators of successful and effective teams. He says:

Such a team

- is value driven;
- has good communications;
- is collaborative in its dealings;
- maximises the use of the abilities of its members;
- has a willingness to solve problems;
- offers enjoyment of membership;
- has dynamism and flexibility;
- has the ability to cope with confrontation and conflict;

- relates to other teams; and, of course,
- has effective quality leadership (p.4).

How does your team measure up?

References and further reading

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