

4 Overcoming leadership challenges

In this chapter I want to focus on the three particular issues research tells us are the most challenging for leaders in all the sectors, not just early years. These are:

- Communication – the ability to communicate a message effectively
- Decision-making – the ability to make decisions
- Conflict – dealing with conflict.

That said, there are myriad challenges to leaders and some come all at once, but this chapter looks at the three listed above. I have collected together what I consider to be helpful guidance, ideas and suggestions offered by a range of people to enable leaders to consider how best to respond.

Of course in highlighting these three issues I am not suggesting that other concerns are not equally important and taxing. Issues such as staff management and motivation and keeping up to speed with new ideas and developments are a continual challenge and considered in later chapters. Managing change merited a whole chapter given the significance of the leader in the change process and a successful outcome.

Communication

Communication seems such an obvious thing, but for leaders it has disproportionate significance when they do not get it right. Siraj-Blatchford and Mani (2007) found that early years leaders who encouraged and created effective communication among the staff were more successful at imparting their vision which led to the vision being better understood and consequently embedded more consistently by staff in all areas of practice in the setting. In late 2008, MPs were asked what was critical for a successful prime minister. The answer: the ability to communicate, persuade and enthuse, otherwise the message was lost. Wise words! Leaders are judged on their ability to communicate at every level as an individual as well as the head of a service, team or organisation. There is an expectation that leaders need to be great orators as well as good listeners, able to write and communicate through presentations and also tell the story. It is quite a daunting task and many leaders need a bit of help to get it right.

In 1992, when researcher Warren Bennis introduced the concept of leadership competency, he pressed for four competences, quoted by Tomlinson (2004) as:

- 1 Management of attention: the communication of an extraordinary focus of commitment which attracts people to leaders.
- 2 Management of meaning: the communication of a leader's vision, making their dreams apparent to others and aligning people with them.
- 3 Management of trust: the main determinant of which is reliability and constancy.
- 4 Management of self: knowing one's skills and deploying them effectively – without which leaders can do more harm than good.

(Tomlinson, 2004, p. 127)

Clearly, Bennis saw communication as critical. He maintained leaders were the focus of attention and how they presented themselves to people was significant in terms of how people responded. As leaders, therefore, we have to accept that our personal presentation is critical.

Think and reflect!

When we communicate, words convey 7% of the message, tone conveys 38% and body language, 55%. Words are the least important factor in oral communication. Do you think before you speak?

The art of communication

In order to communicate well you need to consider the audience, the information you want to share, the context within which you are communicating and how you will present the message. It never ceases to amaze me how what seems like a clear message is completely misread even though there are only two people in the conversation. The chance of this happening at a meeting hugely increases. I used to send a list of action points to the nursery managers who had sent a representative to meetings as we always had a bet as to how wrong some people got the message. Therefore, in order to guarantee the best chance of getting it right, consider doing the following:

- Prepare
- Think through what you want to say
- Be authentic, people prefer to hear the truth
- Remember who you are talking to
- Try to be clear and concise, and avoid jargon

- Sound as if you know what you are talking about
- Be honest – don't make up the answer; say you are not sure and you will find out
- Listen
- Show your interest by looking and sounding interested
- Confirm you both understand what you discussed, especially if the conversation included a request.

Nowadays, communication is even more of a challenge with the use of technology. There is what I think of as 'death by email' and the expectation that, because an email is sent in a nanosecond, you should get or give an equally immediate response. Email is dangerous because when you click on Send you enter the point of no return. The number of people who send emails without thinking through the message, either lacing it with sarcasm or just an angry rant still amazes me. I suggest you open your emails no more than twice a day. Don't jump to respond every time you hear a ping and think long and hard before you press Send. Consider the attachments and who needs to be copied in. Does everyone need to be involved in the correspondence? Is there any real reason for copying certain people in? Finally, and this is just my idiosyncrasy, I treat emails as a form of letter so I always begin them with a greeting and end them with a salutation. I have no time for people sending emails as if they were part of their stream of consciousness. It strikes me as bad manners. And sending an email in anger, well, you are just looking for trouble!

When writing your communication policy, remember to consider all the modern ways staff use technology including Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube. There are many risks regarding how information can be shared using these methods and reputation risk is high.

Meetings

Leaders rely on their credibility to win the respect of colleagues and meetings are one of those places where leaders are on show. Meetings are never the place to look or sound ill-prepared, be unable to answer questions or interpret the information shared. Not only is there a risk to professional credibility but there is a chance that the failure to interpret the information at the meeting may be detrimental; for example, losing out on critical funding or the opportunity to sign up for a key policy-making opportunity with long-term benefits for the organisation. Sometimes it is hard to stay focused until the end of a meeting as some of the information seems inappropriate or not useful, especially if it is a difficult meeting where people are complaining, moaning and keen to disrupt and distract at every opportunity. The stalwart leader will stick with it because often it is what is not said that is the issue rather than what is! What, for example, would happen if you, the leader, failed to notice an agreement to reduce the nursery grant funding or open a free school right next to your half-full play group?

Everyone in a leadership position has to run meetings. Sometimes, this feels like all we ever do. Therefore we must learn to run effective meetings that extend our credibility and get things done. Some simple pointers for chairing a successful and productive meeting include:

- Be prepared and read the agenda and the minutes so you are familiar with who will attend and the outstanding action points. Don't leave yourself to the mercy of the unknown.
- Ensure information about existing arrangements and structures, and new ideas and opportunities is presented in a variety of ways so as to take account of the different ways people learn and assimilate information.
- Listen to what people are saying both through their words and body language and follow their cues.
- Make yourself heard and command authority to keep order without shouting or getting irritated (not always easy!).
- Ask questions and interpret the answers so it is clear that those attending the meeting actually understand. (Some meetings, in particular those run by local authority colleagues, rely on jargon and acronyms to the bafflement of many a visitor.)
- Manage the meeting so that you avoid information overload (hence controlling the agenda from the outset).
- Encourage participation but manage domination. Try and give everyone a go.
- Summarise the decisions and ensure the minute-taker has captured the main points.
- Conclude clearly and try to finish on time.

If you are at a meeting either seeking information to make a decision or to impart news of a decision, be ready and prepared. Rehearse the pros and cons in advance and think laterally. If you know the members of the group attending, try and anticipate what they may know or feel about the issue and how that may influence the decision you want. At the same time, don't close your mind and think that your way is the best way. Some of my best decisions were made at meetings where people presented some interesting and thought-provoking information which resulted in my doing something completely different with great success.

If you are sending someone to represent you at a meeting, choose carefully. Ensure they have the knowledge and experience to contribute and the ability and motivation to behave in a way that will get a positive outcome. Give them the authority to make decisions, but also give them a let-out clause if they find the process more complex. This is particularly important when it is a high-level meeting where a decision is needed regarding policy, funding or something that will have a significant impact on your setting.

Getting new ideas

Some people say there is no point in having a meeting unless it is to get new ideas. They argue that having meetings to give information is counterproductive and we should be looking at other more interesting and effective ways to do this.

As a leader you can decide when, how and what type of meetings you want to have. You may not be popular with your choice and may get little buy-in from those staff attending the meeting. However, you could sell the idea of meetings in a slightly more creative way and introduce sounding boards, focus groups or brainstorming meetings specifically to generate new ideas or to check out people's views about existing arrangements and structures, and new ideas and opportunities. For example, having sounding boards towards the end of the day with wine and pizza could bring a new perspective on how you want staff to help introduce the new curriculum, or write and develop a parent strategy. Generating a relaxed environment in which individuals feel comfortable and unthreatened helps to draw out new ideas. Try to encourage lateral thinking as well as logical thought to break down and challenge any long-held preconceptions.

These groups are best kept small, with five to nine members who can add ideas to a decision being made. The ideas need to be recorded and shared. Put together all the ideas generated into themes so that you end up with a logical collection of useful information.

Ideas need to be valued and welcomed from all staff, not just senior staff or those whom you value. The more ideas generated the better and good leaders will remember to tell people what they have done with the ideas. Use a whiteboard, newsletter, staff update, website or whatever means you have to thank people for their time and contributions and be very clear how you will use the information. At London Early Years Foundation we use the 'We asked, You said, This Happened' Technique. It's quite a simple approach but it reminds people of the journey.

It can be agreed, therefore, that effective communication is multi-functional, reciprocal and can open up new paths. It involves talking, listening, praising, supporting, clarifying, translating, debating, discussing, and interpreting and understanding the subtle medium of body language. Early years leaders must be able to communicate their vision about how, together, they and their teams can make a difference to children's lives and those of their families.

Making decisions

It is a management truism that the road to hell is paved with good intentions and the road to management and organisational ruin is paved with decisions which have not been implemented or, worse still, have been implemented half-heartedly. It is a wise leader who knows that what they have decided may not be done automatically.

How many times have you heard staff criticise their leaders because they could or would not take a decision so the staff often felt unsafe, unclear and without guidance. It is quite interesting that staff will be more supportive of a leader who makes wrong decisions than one who shirks their responsibility for making decisions and carrying them through.

A decision is a judgement or choice between two or more alternatives and arises in an infinite number of situations from the resolution of a problem to the implementation of a course of action. Managers of people, by definition, must be decision-makers.

(Heller, 1999 p. 154)

We make decisions all day long and some are complex, others routine, some urgent and some can wait. Recently, I have spent a lot of time considering the principle of making a decision by not making one. Aggressive people try and force your hand; some staff are more demanding than others and are not satisfied until something is done, and there are always contract officers ringing up and demanding immediate action. Sometimes the best way to respond is to ask for some time to consider the matter and watch and wait. Think about the 'amygdala hijack', a term coined by Daniel Goleman in his 1996 book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. He used the term to describe emotional responses from people that are immediate, overwhelming, and out of measure with the actual situation because they have triggered a much more significant emotional threat. These responses often mean that we react or respond in a way that is highly emotional and this does not leave us in control or command of either our emotions or the situation. Goleman recommended a number of personal strategies to avoid this, from a deep breath to a short walk around the room, until we have taken control of the emotional churn and can respond calmly and more rationally. It certainly helps before making a decision.

This matrix of decision-making is a useful tool to review your current process and review whether the way decisions are made in your organisation lead to effective outcomes and actually make a difference to what you do.

	High urgency		
Low importance	Decisions that are urgent but not important	Decisions that are important and urgent	High importance
	Decisions that are neither urgent nor important	Decisions that are important but not urgent	
	Low urgency		

Figure 4.1 Urgency and importance of decisions (Elsevier, Pergamon Flexible Learning, *Decision Making*, 2005)

Top tips

When handling urgent decisions you should:

- Consider the problem
- Get help if possible
- Consider the consequences
- Prioritise and delegate
- Avoid getting sidetracked
- Check progress
- Review the outcome.

Making a decision seems so easy when it is written down in logical steps. Begin with agreeing with yourself and/or others why you need the decision. Check if you have enough information to be balanced and reasoned in your thinking. If you are making a knee-jerk response to something, then be sure the outcome will be worth it. Ask yourself, 'Will the decision meet my objective both now and in the future?'; 'Will it solve the problem or help implement the changes I want?'; 'What will be the possible outcomes?' Consider the worst-case scenario. If it all went wrong, could you cope? Would the outcome of your decision be worse than the problem you were trying to solve? This is when I imagine a *Sun* headline or facing a board of trustees.

Having made a decision, it needs to be implemented. Can you trust those to whom you will delegate? Do they really understand what you are asking of them? Have you broken the decision into logical steps so they can explain it? Do they understand the actions needed to achieve each step and the deadlines for completing each step? Do they really agree or are they playing along? Remember all the times you have made a decision and found that it has been ignored. So how will you monitor and understand the effects and, when necessary, repeat the process? Making the decision is actually the easy bit but finding a way of checking it is happening and measuring the impact is the bit that often gets lost in the busy day. Having a system to build this in is critical. Failing to act on a decision is often perceived as poor leadership and, in a weak team, staff will take advantage.

The most important step in unclogging decision-making bottlenecks is assigning clear roles and responsibilities. Good decision-makers recognise which decisions matter to performance. They think through who should recommend a particular path, who needs to agree, who should have input, who has ultimate responsibility for making the decision and who is accountable for the follow-through. They make the process routine. The result is better coordination and response times.

(Rogers, P. and Blenko, M., *Harvard Business Publishing*, 2006)

There are different styles of decision-making and a leader needs to know when to use which style. This is an example given by Heller (2000):

- Autocratic: a decision is taken without consultation, then others are informed of what is to be done and what is expected of them.

- Persuasive: the decision is taken before consultation and then 'sold' to the others.
- Consultative: the views of others are sought and taken into account before the decision is taken.
- Consensus: decisions are taken on a majority basis.

(Heller, 2000, p. 154)

Can you remember a time when you regretted losing your temper and making a hasty autocratic decision because you were fed up with a situation; for example, where staff could not agree on what seemed like a simple issue, such as getting views on managing the Christmas break? I certainly regret times when I insisted on a decision being made, when, with hindsight, I should have kept calm for longer and let the staff sort it out more democratically.

Leaders, especially in busy and demanding settings, may cut short the decision-making process while believing they have given it their full attention. For example, it is easy to hear the first bit of information and not pay enough attention to the whole, because you want the first bit to be the main factor as it fits your own perception and hoped-for outcome. Sometimes, sticking to what you know is the decision rather than looking at what might be improved through an alternative approach. Then, there is the pride-goes-before-a-fall approach, where you do not want to give anyone the satisfaction of saying 'I told you so' and so continue with a bad idea.

Alternatively, a leader who drives most people mad is the one who fails to make a decision and hopes the situation will sort itself out. This is often seen in leaders facing a conflict-driven situation, either with staff or customers and clients. The outcome is rarely positive as the situation drifts, and some leaders delegate the mess to a junior member of staff and then really lose credibility from all concerned for failing to address the issue. An example of this was when a nursery leader failed to talk to a parent about growing debt. Head office intervened and sent out letters threatening to terminate the child's place. The parent became upset and challenged the leader about not talking to them directly and ascertaining the reason. The leader sidestepped the situation by delegating it to the deputy as part of her training. A failure on all fronts and remarkably commonplace.

Think and reflect!

The C-step approach

I like Sergeant's C-step approach and have adapted it as an example. It's a simple maxim and sums up the key steps. Use this framework as a basis for decision-making in your setting.

Consider – What is the decision? At a recent meeting a decision had to be made about how we deal with serious incidents in the absence of the leader.

Consult – Who should I speak to? I decided the matter needed to be discussed with all senior staff and some frontline staff, particularly with regards to the communication elements.

Crunch – Having sought the information, how could I best analyse it? I decided on a written one-page procedure, filed in the front of the operations file.

Communicate – Who do I need to inform? All staff needed to understand their role and this was written in the procedure and in a summary in the monthly update and via email.

Check – How effective was my decision? We agreed to review this after the first time it was used and to have an annual review in case new legislation or findings from elsewhere influenced our procedure.

(Adapted from Sergeant, 1976)

Things that can go wrong

Decisions frequently go awry, not least because of people's attitude to the change. The statements below capture some of the attitudes that can cause the decision-making process to fail.

- What problem? (Failure to define the problem may be due to: inadequate or insufficient information, lack of analysis, lack of time, people hating the truth or too much information.)
- Would you believe it? What was she/he thinking? Never gets it right . . . Hopeless, never thinks it through . . . So arrogant!
- Will I, won't I? If I do and it's wrong, they will blame me. Oh, I can't bear that . . . Procrastination is best.
- Got two years left; hey ho, not doing anything new . . . just sticking it out.
- Let's just do what we know; we have always done it this way. No we don't need to use technology, just send them a memo.
- Let's just tinker around the edge.
- No, it will be fine; get on and do it and don't think too hard about the consequences.
- Can't take the risk; there's too much at stake.
- Same old, same old . . . what's to decide?
- Who cares? Am I bothered?
- Well I was told it's the decision . . . so get on with it!

As a leader, you may find yourself coming to a decision that is also most likely to expose you to significant risk that could result in you losing your job and reputation; for example, making a decision which takes on employment law or health and safety guidelines which are open to interpretation. Such decisions may include reorganising your team, moving a member of staff, sacking a member of staff, building a huge wooden playground, or embarking on an expensive marketing campaign. In effect, decisions that are complex and high risk. When making such a decision, ask yourself

whether you are really committed to it and prepared to take full responsibility for your actions and are ready to face the consequences if you are proven to be wrong, either immediately or in the long term.

Interestingly, leaders who are willing to accept a failure and take it on the chin get more respect than ridicule; people can be very generous in the face of failure. However, if you make a habit of failing, then it will not take long for questions to be asked. Having said that, I know a number of people who have seemed to emerge blemish-free from a series of catastrophes: they were, for the most part, well liked and had gained people's good opinion, which counted in their favour.

In essence the purpose of a decision is to make the best possible choice based on sound information. Problem-solving precedes decision-making, because the decision must be based on the best understanding of the past and present situation. Decisions are valueless until they are translated into positive action.

Dealing with conflict

Managing conflict is probably the least favourite task for all leaders. It is stressful and unpleasant but best dealt with quickly and efficiently as it rarely resolves itself.

The image conjured up by the phrase 'managing conflict' is often that of an aggressive, angry, rude adult demanding and complaining about some aspect of the service. This can be true and leaders do have to deal with some very unpleasant adults at times. However, most work-based conflict is related to staff. According to the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution (CEDR), one third of managers would rather parachute jump for the first time than resolve a difficult issue. For 69%, the most unpleasant task was addressing an underperforming staff member. This included dealing with people with a negative attitude, such as the continually moaning or sulking staff member, the staff member who doesn't do their work and causes a negative atmosphere which affects other staff, and the staff member who has difficulty accepting their role and responsibility and complains constantly. In today's world where we are asked to improve multi-agency approaches to our work with staff from different professional backgrounds, the risk of conflict is high. The answer appears to lie in finding a coherent philosophy or purpose and getting people to agree to it so the principles really influence practice. Once people buy in, it is harder for them to say 'Well this is not on my agenda' or 'Our developmental plan isn't aligned to this'. Of course, the task of reaching an agreed philosophy is difficult. Many people just want to get on with their job, which is understandable; but then they have less to fall back on when they face an obstacle or conflict. Early years leaders have often resisted going into leadership roles because they are reluctant to take on managing adults, a fact also found by Waniganayake et al. (2000) in their research. Maybe that reluctance translates itself into the avoidance of dealing with conflict until there is no way of avoiding it.

Employment law firm Peninsula conducted a study that found an increasing number of people were losing their temper in the workplace. Eight out of 10 people (79%) suffered from work rage and 91% said what frustrated them was colleagues failing to pull their weight. In addition, 71% said that verbal abuse and yelling was commonplace where they worked. Contributing factors to work rage were disrespectful behaviour from colleagues and/or management and stress at work. Other research examining the impact of morale on the work environment also found that many senior managers failed to create a high-performance working climate and the consequence caused a demotivating climate for staff.

There is no doubt that dealing with any form of conflict is complicated and generally requires a two-pronged response. The first is to respond by using effective problem-solving and decision-making techniques. The second is to have preventative systems and this involves creating a non-threatening, risk-taking environment and having effective policies and procedures, such as complaints procedures, disciplinary and grievance policies, in place to help you respond when necessary.

The disciplinary policy is very useful when dealing with poor performance, which may include conflict and negative attitudes. Using the policy often has a positive effect, because it means the problem is identified and therefore has to be addressed. It is a good route to helping someone get back on track. It also gives the rest of the staff team the message that you are not afraid to deal with conflict. Don't be afraid to use the disciplinary policy; just get some HR advice from an independent source. It can be money well spent to seek advice, either directly or through an annual membership of a national organisation with a free HR helpline as part of the package. Do not let the fear of a tribunal get in the way of you dealing with conflict.

Preventing conflict

Prevention is better than cure, and avoiding conflict in the workplace is more likely if leaders create an atmosphere in which people feel appreciated and believe themselves to be an essential part of the organisation. Generally, treat people with dignity and respect. Build relationships and get to know people. Do it your way; but inviting people in for a cup of tea, visiting and being visible and remembering special facts about people gives you a heads up. People are impressed when you take time to get to know them. Also, staff need to feel confident that, if an ugly situation were to arise, you, as the leader, would either intervene or provide support. Many staff have to endure aggressive behaviour from parents because the leader will not do anything about it, and this gives some people the feeling they can demand anything and no one will challenge them.

Back your staff. If necessary have a code of conduct displayed. Some people I have met have simply never been sensibly challenged and think the only way they will get heard is if they shout and demand. They also know that most people working in early years are child-focused and would not want a child to be excluded because of bad parental behaviour.

I think this needs to be dealt with and I will not tolerate aggressive behaviour at all. I will call the police if necessary; but, funnily enough, when people see you are not going to be backed into a corner they calm down and you can move on from there. Children see enough aggression outside the nursery; the one place they should expect to see adults behaving in an adult way is in their early years setting. Most early years parents are also quite child-focused and also would not want their child to be excluded because of their own bad behaviour. The majority are sadly just used to behaving in a particular way and it takes a bit of time to change.

Staff need to be encouraged to consider themselves as excellent reflective practitioners, and leaders need to continually take every opportunity to generate excitement over what staff have achieved and what challenges must be met for the future.

Leaders who give new ideas careful thought and consideration are more likely to reduce dissatisfaction and conflict in the setting. We are not as good at praise and encouragement as we like to think and I am often surprised when an agency staff member gives you a long look when you say 'Thank you for today, it's been great having you here'. We tend to give praise only for marvellous things and take a lot for granted. We ought to praise staff the way we do the children, giving it in a measured way with a clear explanation that thanks them for their contribution. Generalised continual praise works for no one and that is not what I am recommending, as this has equally unsatisfactory outcomes ranging from arrogance to disregard.

Another way of reducing the chances of conflict at work is to read the signs. If you have introduced a change, no matter how small, the chances of conflict are raised. This is particularly the case for early years settings when tasked with transforming children's services both within the service and in the surrounding environment. Leaders then need to instigate a programme of transformational change that is inclusive and facilitative and operating from a clear value base. Leaders need to be able to articulate the rationale, benefits and impacts of change for individuals, the local authority and partners. Specific changes will often be determined by users, so leaders need to build a high level of responsiveness into the service and to make sure that the pace of change is acceptable to users.

Given this huge agenda it is important to be able to manage those staff who respond by being confrontational and create a very unpleasant atmosphere when they are given new tasks or expected to adapt work practices. Usually, it is because they are worried that new projects mean more work and they may not be able to do it. Their fear of failure may be quite rational as they may be worried that their lack of competence will be judged against them and they will lose face, status, reputation or, ultimately, their job. So, another means of reducing conflict in the workplace is to create a non-blame organisational ethos, where risk taking is allowed and mistakes are treated as learning experiences. This helps build an atmosphere of openness and responsiveness where people's spontaneity and originality are respected.

Leaders need to use their emotional intelligence, which can be described, on the one hand, as being sufficiently self-aware, to be able to recognise their own emotions and

manage and control them, given the impact these emotions can have on relationships in the workplace. On the other hand, as ABBA sing, 'Knowing me, knowing you' is pretty critical, as emotionally intelligent adults also operate a social awareness by being able to sense other people's emotions, see the world from their perspective and take an active interest in their concerns. It is important for leaders to apply their social skills to take charge and inspire and lead the future.

Gossip and the grapevine

Sometimes we can be a bit pious in early years and think we are far too nice to go in for office politics. The truth is, there are politics everywhere and leaders are often the last to know what is really going on. Sometimes it is because leaders are protected by people who make it their business not to let them hear the gossip, or leaders may not be around enough to hear the gossip over a chat at the photocopier. However, office politics, also known as 'the grapevine', are often a source of conflict and bad feeling. Much of this is power-playing, with staff jostling for attention.

The world will never be free of gossip, as people like a little scandal, and gossip can do this, but it must be managed. Keep a rein on it, so it does not lead to bullying but has the cachet of a sneaky look at *Hello!* while in the hairdressers. Do this by walking around, being visible and being human.

Managing conflict

Conflict can cause stress, especially if it is something that smoulders for a long time and is not easily resolved. Dealing with a destructive staff member takes a long time because of the requirements of Employment Law and leaders have to try and manage this. Very often you have no one to talk to in work as you do not want to burden your staff or look unprofessional. Having a mentor is useful for this and many other situations where you need a neutral shoulder to cry on.

Negative stress (some stress is good) is about how we respond to the situation and it can become physical. Symptoms such as sleeplessness and difficulty getting to sleep, fidgeting, dizzy spells, nausea, irritability, difficulty relaxing and concentrating are associated with stress, although these are also symptoms of a range of minor and major ailments. It makes sense to check or seek advice for symptoms, because they can be a sign that something is wrong with the body.

Recent research at Warwick University found that stress at work was closely linked to job satisfaction. It was found that there has been a steady rise in stress in the workplace since 1993 and stress was generally linked to continual uncertainty about what was expected of staff and the demands for more and more work at higher and higher standards with fewer and fewer resources. Staff in the early years sector would recognise this, given the continuing external demands from legislative changes and

the increase in inspection and target-based services delivery. Interestingly, staff across all sectors agreed their job satisfaction came not from higher pay but from happy and positive working conditions, good supportive management and lots of training and development opportunities.

Top tips

Remember: when dealing with an aggressive adult, the best outcome is to resolve the situation. The following tips are useful. Try to:

- Stay calm
- Avoid showing fear
- Give them some personal space
- Understand the amygdala hijack (see page 60)
- Read the body language (much aggression is posturing). Copy their movements and then they will start to copy yours and in that way you move them into a less aggressive pose quite unconsciously. It works but you have to be calm to remember to do it
- Put yourself in their shoes; think what would calm them. What kind of service do they expect? (They often have a point, or it may be there has been a misunderstanding)
- Avoid patronising them or getting on your high horse. Give them a chance to calm down. It is amazing how easy it is to sound judgmental without realising it
- Actively listen to them (it is surprising how many people get cross because they have been passed from pillar to post and all they want is someone to listen and take them seriously)
- Ask questions, but not too many. Balance talking and listening. Hear what people are saying even if you do not like it or agree with it. Allow people to explain their behaviour or performance and to suggest mitigating circumstances
- Recognise your own attitudes and how they might be impacting on progress. Try to see other peoples' points of view
- Aim to resolve the difficulty through negotiation and understanding. Find ways of letting people know that you are acknowledging and being sensitive to their feelings. Look at the issue from both perspectives and find a compromise
- Encourage people to suggest solutions and a way forward. Involve them in designing changes to the service
- Be clear about your own values. Have a bottom line. When you are clear you are less likely to sound defensive. For example, 'I am happy to listen but not if you shout at me'
- Ensure your policies and procedures back up your decision or stance

- Get in touch with yourself and reflect. Did you make things worse? Was their point well made?
- Have you lost sight of the ethos? Has the setting become less open to new ideas?
- Have a post mortem. Talk to staff, examine the issues. What can be learned? Try asking the five Ws: Who, What, When, Where, Why
- Have a follow-up meeting to ensure that the compromise or solution is working for everyone. Agree a review period and make clear what will happen at your end to solve the problem; but remind them that another similar outburst would not be acceptable and explain the consequences
- In some instances, write up and give a contract to people. Ask them to sign to say they agree that it as a fair recording of the meeting and the outcome.

Stress

Some stress is good for you but too much stress can damage your health. Finding strategies to manage stress is the most successful approach. What are your stress management strategies? Answer the following questions and use the answers to help you to make a plan. Do you:

- Look after yourself?
- Start the day relaxed?
- Give yourself breakfast?
- Keep a check on caffeine and alcohol levels?
- Take enough exercise?
- Eating the right foods?
- Take proper breaks? Go out to lunch every now and then: call it networking
- Make sure your working environment is healthy? Do you have a comfortable chair?
- Put yourself first every now and then?
- Protect your own time? Relaxation and leisure are not treats: they are essential
- Have a massage? Hippocrates said a daily oil massage was the secret of good health and success!
- Try to identify what stresses you? Then you can make changes where possible and work realistically with what you cannot alter
- Avoid rushing around trying to do too many things at once?
- Prioritise in a way that works for you?

- Identify achievable steps and then take a small-steps approach to achieve them? Make a list in a lovely notebook and then enjoy crossing off completed tasks?
- Behave assertively, say no when necessary and take control in your working life? Don't say yes if you mean no
- Keep a sense of perspective? Don't try and be perfect and remember what you have done well
- Take your staff to dinner, every now and then, so you can talk about your problems and plan the future?

Taking a different attitude

Consider Tomlinson's (2004) reference to Cleveland's (2002) attitudes being indispensable to leading complex situations. You may need to change your attitude! He suggests you should have:

- 1 A lively intellectual curiosity – to consider that everything is related to everything else
- 2 A genuine interest in what people think – and why they think that way, which means you have to be at peace with yourself
- 3 A feeling that you have a special responsibility for envisioning the future – this is different from a straight-line projection of the present
- 4 A hunch that most risks are there not to be avoided but to be taken
- 5 A mindset that crises are normal – believing that tensions promising complexity are fun
- 6 A realisation that paranoia – and self pity – are reserved for those who do not want to be leaders
- 7 A sense of personal responsibility – for general outcomes of your effort
- 8 A quality I call 'unwarranted optimism' – some more upbeat outcome than from adding up expert advice.

(Tomlinson, 2004, p. 127)

Think and reflect!

Reality test

Self-knowledge and sensitive and empathetic behaviour are critical and key areas for personal examination could be summed up in the following 20 questions.

- 1 Are you positive, optimistic and enthusiastic?
- 2 Do you know what you know?

- 3** How do you show you genuinely care about each child in the nursery, are aware of and empathise with their needs and understand what is important to them and their parents, families and carers?
- 4** How do you foster a learning culture that encourages informal, as well as formal, knowledge sharing?
- 5** Do you know what your staff members' learning styles are?
- 6** How do you check staff understanding?
- 7** Do you have a high level of interpersonal skills? How do you apply them?
- 8** How would you describe your intrapersonal skills?
- 9** What different approaches do you use to share knowledge and experience? Do they work?
- 10** How do you scaffold knowledge to bridge gaps for others?
- 11** Can you articulate your approach to reflective practice?
- 12** How do you, the children and staff learn and develop together?
- 13** Are you open and honest and able to communicate both the good and the bad news in a way that does not de-motivate or antagonise others?
- 14** Be honest: how do you avoid letting emotion sway your judgement and your ability to be objective and impartial even in difficult situations?
- 15** How do you manage conflict?
- 16** Do you investigate, probe and question, in order to get a well-informed and creative solution?
- 17** What systems do you use to ensure continual quality improvement?
- 18** How do you stay on top of current developments, trends and theories in the early years sector?
- 19** Do you have professional credibility?
- 20** Are you building links with the local community, projecting a strong image of your organisation and ensuring the setting is 'the talk of the town'?

Activities to complete at a staff team meeting or training session

These activities are provided for use at a staff team meeting or training session to provoke discussion and get the staff to think about how they would respond and what skills, knowledge and understanding they would use and why.

Activity 1

You have a new trainee member of staff. This is her first job and she seems eager to please. You have been giving her lots of praise and she has accessed quite a few training courses. However, recently you notice that she has been quite moody at times, making little eye contact, being quite brusque and especially sharp and intolerant with a certain member of staff. Staff are inclined to tiptoe around her and wait until she softens up. You are unhappy because it is causing tension and conflict in the room.

- Why are you concerned?
- What do you do?
- What policies will you use to help you?
- How do you respond to the other staff?
- How will this reflect on the employee's future?

Activity 2

You have a contract with the local authority to provide 30 places for children from the Two Year Old Programme. The places are spread between four settings. You discover at a contract meeting that one of the senior staff in the settings is refusing to take any more two year olds unless they have no additional needs and he is also asking for girls.

What decisions do you take? Explain the process for making the decisions and consider how these will support continual improvement of the setting. In answering, remember to describe:

- What information you will need (details, facts, statistics, feedback, relevant internal and external research and examples of good practice)
- Where you will get reliable and sufficient evidence for your decisions
- What challenges you envisage in getting information
- How you will check that the evidence is lawful and fits the organisational values and policies?