



growing pains

During this series of articles I hope to share with you some of the many challenges involved with growing a nursery business; anyone who has started their own nursery from scratch, or who has taken over a going concern, will, no doubt, relate to many of them. I started The Old Station Nursery Group in 2002, when, like so many other working parents, I discovered I couldn't find what I wanted for my own children. The first year was demanding to say the least, but by the end of year two I could see the light; the nursery enjoyed good occupancy levels and was trading profitably. The sensible thing would probably have been to stop there, eased my work load a little, and spent a bit more time with my family. However, life doesn't always work out like that, and after I was offered the chance to bid for a second nursery site, I found myself at the beginning of a small group of nurseries.

Now, nine years on, the group has 16 Ofsted registrations around the country, including 13 day nurseries, two stand-alone out-of-school clubs and a crèche.

Positive people

It has been a fascinating journey, during which I've experienced the highs of creating new teams and the challenges of negotiating the often hazardous path of employment law, cash flow planning, parent relations and working with Local Authorities. The single most important factor has been the people who work within our team. Someone in



In the first of a new series, **Sarah Steel** looks at the challenges involved in building a nursery business...

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business told me right at the beginning: "Surround yourself with positive people, and find people who complement your weaknesses with their strengths". This was excellent advice, and from the very first employee I hired – our super nursery manager at our first site, who is still with us – each and every person has brought their own talents to the party.

One of the difficulties when your business is in its infancy is that you have very little spare time or money to find out what other support is out there, or which other skills could improve your business significantly. It's only since we have been a larger organisation that I have discovered the usefulness of outsourcing some of the tasks that I'd previously done all by myself, often in the late hours of the evening. We now use a PR agency on a retainer basis, the usual accountant and solicitor, HR and IT support, and training providers. By having a good bank of business advisers, it's possible to make the most of their expertise, whilst controlling costs as tightly as you need, flexing your budgets to suit your needs at the time. It may seem expensive when you first start looking, but I recommend getting out to some local business network meetings and finding out who in your area might help your business. Some businesses might even 'trade' services in exchange for services you can offer, and this can be a very economic way to access support. We first discovered this when a parent who was a vet came in and vaccinated our pet rabbit in exchange for an extra hour's childcare!

Staying focused

During growth it's essential to retain a focus on your vision and values, what makes your nursery the place that it is. Once you move into multiple sites, this becomes more difficult, as your original team and tight control can be diluted, and suddenly you need to be in two places at once, overseeing standards. We've tried different options over the years, but the most important choice to be made is the appointment of a manager (of course, if you inherit managers with a setting, you don't always have that choice, so the challenge is to embed your philosophy in the new team and then rely on them, with regular checks and balances, to ensure that each site runs along your own lines).

We now pull our managers together for an 'away day' once a term, where we focus on business issues in the morning and practice issues in the afternoon. It's a chance to share ideas, increase motivation levels and fine tune how we operate. Each meeting is slightly different with a rolling focus; last month we met in the morning to look at employment law and management, then spent the afternoons in the woods enjoying an introduction to forest schools. However you decide to inspire your team, it's essential to make sure you have some way of getting your key people together on a regular basis to share best practice and to steer them back onto the path that you want them to follow.

With growth come many communication challenges; in our last 'Investors In People' report some of my staff commented that they would like to see more of me. My heart sank – not because my great staff should want to see me, but because there's only one of me and with 16 sites to visit, I could spend very little time at home if I was more visible. What are the options? Our plan is that our Operations Managers should each have a patch of nurseries that they're responsible for and that staff should see much more of them than they do of me, but as you grow a business it's difficult to ensure that as the leader your vision remains clear to all, even as you yourself delegate more of the routine visits. I shall see how this pans out over the next few months and review how I manage to visit each site regularly.

Maintaining standards

Just as every individual has their own ideas, so the temptation arises for some people to go 'freestyle' as a business grows. We've had a few interesting moments where one of my senior team has walked into one of our nurseries to discover that someone thought they had a better idea than we did and had changed our policies without consulting. I'm not saying that no one ever has better ways of doing things, just that these ideas should be discussed and then implemented methodically, so that we operate an 'all informed network'.

Again, experience has led to the development of our own standard procedures, and we produced an Operations Manual a couple of years ago, which hopefully provides a useful reference tool and explains 'how we do things around here'. If you've come from a very small business, this may seem overly bureaucratic, but with growth comes the need for standardisation to ensure quality. It's not exciting, but it will provide a framework for growth.

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Sarah Steel is the founder and MD of The Old Station Nursery Group, which operates 14 settings in England. If you would like to get in touch with her about any of the issues raised in her article, you can email her at sarahsteel@theoldstationnursery.co.uk. Next month, Sarah will look at the importance of room supervisors and middle managers.