

# *pulling* together

**I**n my last two articles I've discussed some of the challenges of growing a nursery business, and in particular, the additional issues that arise as you move from running a single site operation to a multi-site operation. I had naively assumed that as I felt I had got to grips with running one nursery, a second one would be pretty much the same. Wrong! In reality, whilst the practice issues are the same everywhere, suddenly your attention is split between more than one site and the issue of communication starts to rear its ugly head.

Even within one nursery, the challenge of getting the whole team to communicate with each other is one which will be familiar to you all, I am sure. Different rooms don't always like to share information; certain individuals may feel that 'knowledge is power', so they hang on to what they have; and there will always be the odd person who likes to gossip and perhaps

spread inaccurate information, often resulting in confusion.

I used to be an Army Officer; there we worked to a really good principle that every team should operate as an 'all informed network'. The basis of this was good information flow upwards, downwards and sideways – i.e. from the boss to all the workers and back up again, and sideways between teams and people doing the same job. Within each of our settings we have worked hard to develop this approach, using the usual methods of team meetings, internal newsletters, noticeboards, memos and so on. However, sometimes the slightly avant garde approach is beneficial – we found that newsletters lying around the staff room didn't

## find out more

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](mailto:sarahsteel@theoldstationnursery.co.uk)



Good communication, sharing knowledge and working towards the same goals are essential to a successful nursery business, says **Sarah Steel...**

always get picked up, so we started putting them up on the back of the loo door in the staff area, so occupants had little choice but to read them! Sometimes a fresh approach is needed, so we are constantly looking for better ways to communicate.

As part of our marketing plan we introduced a company Facebook page about a year ago, intending to use it to communicate with our customers and potential customers. It has certainly been useful for this, but an additional benefit has been the interaction we have gained with our staff. Many of our staff spend a lot of time on Facebook and feel very at home there; those who may not plough through written newsletters or articles may prefer to keep up to date with company news through a social media forum instead. We are hoping to develop this over the next year and use it for more staff updates and to share best practice across the group in a slightly different way.

## Common goals

Another military principle which I think has huge relevance in business is that of 'mission command'. It relies on everyone within the team understanding their 'higher commander's intent'. Basically speaking, everyone needs to know which direction you are heading in, regardless of whether the





## Making an investment

I am a big fan of Investors in People. The rigorous audit process that the IIP framework provides helps to make you look at the communications process throughout your company, and to focus on whether everyone really does know where they fit into the big picture and how important they are.

In many of our nurseries, the cook is a really key person in keeping team morale up, in being 'mum' to many of the staff and in helping out with difficult situations with children that different meals may help with. However, nearly every cook thinks that they just 'do the meals', so we have reminded them that, like nursery cleaners, the role they play is just as important as anyone else in the nursery.

As part of our preparation for IIP the first time we did it, we looked at everyone's roles and prepared a 'charter' which stated what each member of staff could expect from their manager and what, in turn, was expected from them. We also do this for our head office team, and it helps sometimes to remind everyone that it is a two-way process; that 'the boss' is not just there to demand things of staff, but also to assist and develop them too. It's a fine line between getting bogged down in paperwork and statements, and having clear guidelines that can help people focus on how things are done in your company.

boss is there to keep pushing/pulling/nagging them. How often have you watched a junior member of staff handle an interaction with a parent less than brilliantly, and wondered whether they know how hard you have worked to get them in the door and to place their child with your nursery, and that a casual comment or lack of thought can cause upset and the potential loss of a customer? It's really vital to make sure that everyone in your organisation understands where you are all going. This starts at interview, then goes through induction and training and should be reviewed at mid-year appraisal and formal review. It's better to repeat your vision over and over again than to risk one person not knowing where you are heading.

As we have grown, we have tried to map out our communications process a bit more clearly, and technology has certainly helped. I have already mentioned social media, but we also had to go back to basics and look at our IT and systems. It's fairly dull, and pretty expensive, but installing a central server and networking our sites allowed us to share documents and email better, and helps with ensuring standardisation. Our ops managers have regular contact with their settings by phone and e-mail, and we can use Skype when we need to, although face to face is still more popular and effective. We also have termly meetings to get all our managers together for training and sharing best practice, which has been really beneficial.

Whatever the size and shape of your business, you will have your own methods of communication and will have an idea of what works and what doesn't. It might be worth sitting down with a cup of coffee and sketching out what your communication process really looks like and whether there are any gaps that need filling. Any suggestions will be very welcome...