



The **Leading** role

June O'Sullivan identifies the leadership qualities required to successfully steer your nursery through times of adversity and beyond...

Leading through difficult times is the test of any leader. It's easy to be lauded when times are good, so it'll be interesting to see how our new Prime Minister will be judged as he sets out his vision to lead us through the financial crisis and tries to persuade us that we're all in this together. We watch for clues of good leadership, not least his ability to communicate his message and convince us to take up the baton of 'Big Society'. The question we have to ask is whether we trust him and believe him to be credible. If we do, do we throw in the towel and follow him?

The difficult times faced by the Prime Minister are replicated in the early years sector and for early years leaders. We might not be

solving the country's financial deficit (although some of us might make a better go at it!) but we are going to have to cope with its consequences, as they transpire in each of our settings. Some of us are facing occupancy issues, local authority cuts, contract reductions and, consequently, reduced income. The possible outcome is limited funds, low staff morale, quality concerns, redundancies and possible closure or bankruptcy. It's hardly an inspiring picture, but in the hands of the right leader such a situation can be turned into opportunity and success. So, how do we lead our way through this? What do our staff expect of us? What will help us keep the service alive, effective and in demand?

The right qualities

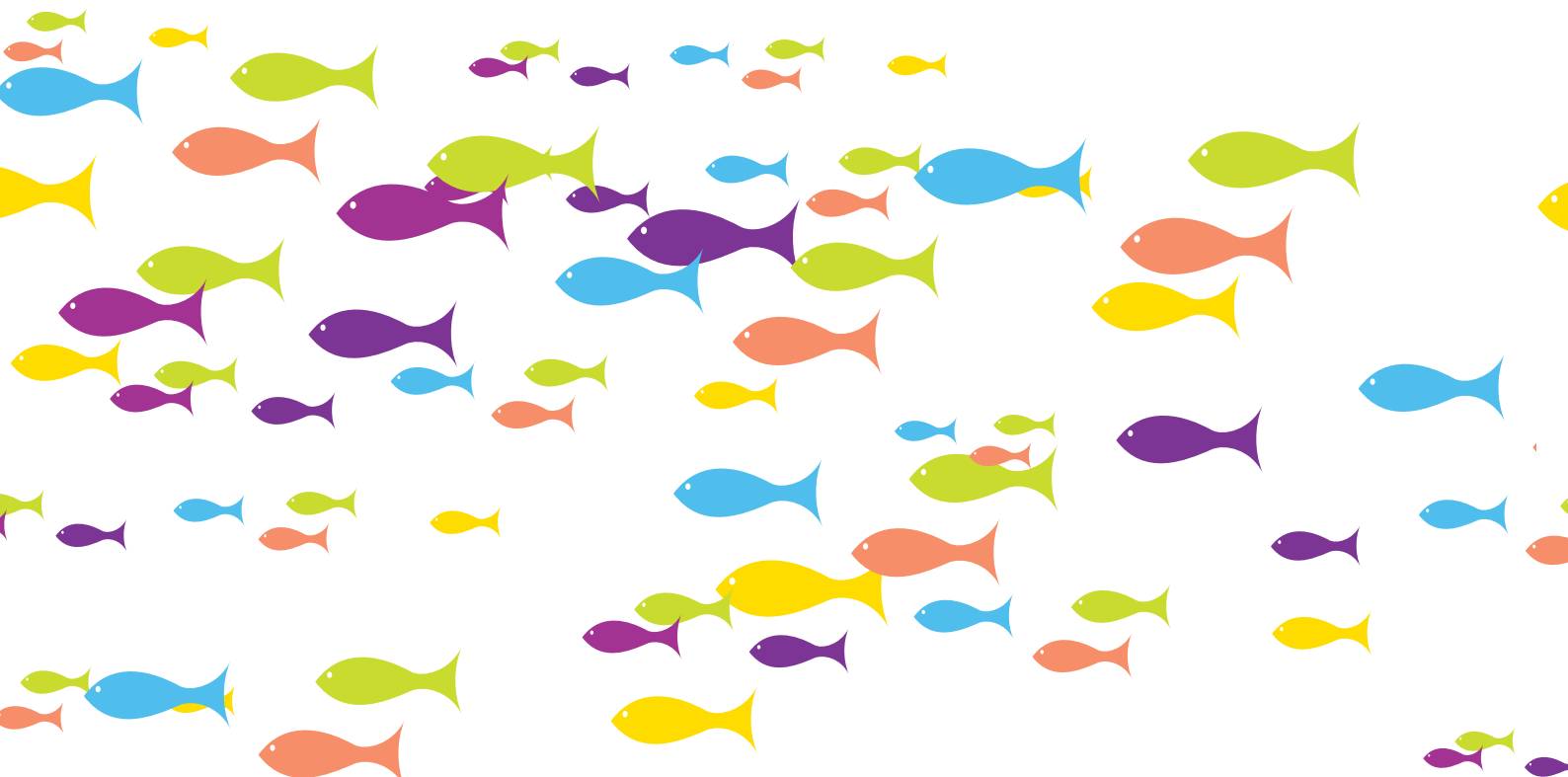
To begin with, we need to have a clear vision – in other words a direction of travel that we can explain to our staff and parents in such a way that they understand the consequences. Mr. Cameron has 70 per cent of the population backing his cuts because he has persuaded us that they are critical to the long-term success of the country. We are all familiar with the figure of £83-billion. The early years leader has to set out their vision in equally clear terms. We need staff and parents to accept unpalatable decisions to reach a shared outcome. So, for example, while a pay freeze for staff and increased fees for parents is a painful message, it can be one that is accepted when all are persuaded that it will contribute to the long-term success of the nursery.

The next step is to be open and accountable. We are encouraged to contribute our views and send in feedback that will be heard. We have to do the same in the early years. One of the common complaints among nursery staff is that they are asked for feedback but never know



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what happens to it. Parents and staff are often critical of the trend towards consultation, which often feels more like a false promise than real engagement. The effective leader has to work with the staff and the customer to engage them in a real dialogue. We have to show what happened to the feedback, in a manner that is clear, obvious and, if necessary, personal. There is no better way to connect with a disaffected staff member than to give them the responsibility for selling the idea and finding out the weakness in your plan. It may be depressing to listen to the litany of what will go wrong, but it's great data to then share with the optimistic, can-do team members who can turn all the problems into a workable plan.

Mr. Cameron could be accused of hiding behind Mr. Clegg, and often leaders in early years settings hide behind their deputies, or the owners, or the local authority – in fact anything they can hide behind. This is a bad move. Good leaders are credible; they gain the respect of their staff by being available, facing the challenges and conflict head on and being brave and courageous. Hannibal

was at the head of his army when they crossed the Alps; he was not in the office doing paperwork!

Making changes

Good leaders must be pragmatic, so they can overcome unnecessary barriers to change and making improvements. Right now, many early years leaders have battered down the hatches, but many more have seen another way forward, a possibility for networks and consortia, shared bids and contracts. Some are using the time to expand and enter into new markets such as new baby places, two-year-old pilot places, apprentices and holiday care for the youngest children. Leaders who manage change rather than let it overwhelm them are more successful and lead better services. They make a real difference to the children in their care as well as to their staff. Good leaders care about their staff and want the best for them. They build in opportunities for improvement and development. Now is a good opportunity to give staff new opportunities within the setting. Leaders share, they don't dump. They find clever ways to extend people and increase their knowledge. There is no better challenge to a creative staff member than to give them £10 and send them to Poundland to buy materials and resources to upgrade the treasure baskets!

So, to conclude, leading is hard at the best of times. It's a complex process – if it was easy we would have a surfeit of good leaders! The logical extension is, therefore, that leading through difficult times is even harder. It requires someone with a clear vision, good

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communication, energy, enthusiasm and the integrity to bring their staff and parents with them on a difficult journey. Mr. Cameron says he wants to be fair and he won't forget the vulnerable. These principles should also resonate in the early years. We too are duty bound to give all children the best service, and to do this we need to be successful, capable and strong leaders.

