

The adoption of leadership styles in early childhood

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I often come across disgruntled early education directors who verbalise their frustration about staff that lack motivation and/or initiative in their workplace. Confronting as it sounds, underperforming staff are a reflection of how well they have been directed and/or managed.

Leading others is not something that everyone can do naturally; therefore, being open to new approaches is highly recommended, especially in the case of newly appointed directors. This article explores the notion of leadership through the lens of competency, using a unique framework that offers practical solutions to manage everyday leadership frustrations.

Effective leaders are experienced professionals with integrity and vision. They are driven, have a clear direction of the organisation's goals and objectives, are able to positively influence and nurture the development of others, embrace responsibility and accountability, have exceptional communication skills, drive standards without compromise, and, most importantly, have the ability to generate leaders. Such leaders are also able to:

- be strategic and identify what needs to be done in their workplace
- facilitate leadership autonomy, not dependency
- be solutions driven
- be proactive, not reactive
- develop workable systems and processes
- organise their time effectively and efficiently

- prioritise and focus on prevention, not cure
- focus on the achievements of others
- drive systematic follow up and feedback
- reflect, revisit and reframe their practices.

Being able to undertake the above leads to the development of a 'well-oiled machine', or a team that works effectively within the service hierarchy, achieving high-quality outcomes for children, families, colleagues and the broader community. In an ideal world, this would be commonplace in early education contexts; however, in reality, there are many struggling directors overwhelmed by the task of 'leadership', with little hope for the future.

The task of leadership, however, needn't be an arduous or overwhelming process; rather, it should be one that is rewarding. The key is recognising the strengths, experience and skills of staff and implementing a strategy that builds their capacity, rather than doing everything in isolation. Building capacity is about approaching daily situations through the lens of ability, or what Blanchard (2004) refers to as 'Different strokes for different folks', as this ultimately leads to shared accountability and service success. With this in mind, the leadership approach should be a reflection of staff ability level, as in the context of early education, staff vary significantly in their experience, knowledge and understanding.

While there are many leadership theories available in readings, they do not necessarily refer to the early childhood setting, as leadership in the context of early education is a relatively new phenomenon. As a way forward, then, we must be willing to research methods that have worked in other industries and adopt their valuable lessons.

In this article, I reflect on the work of Blanchard, a business specialist who proposed a 'leadership styles quadrant', which I believe offers early childhood leaders great insight into better approaches to leading staff, especially for directors out of their depth. In his work analysing effective workplace environments, Blanchard developed four leadership styles based on competency levels.

Using an approach that reflects the ability levels of staff is said to provide an environment for ongoing professional development, something that the new National Quality Standards stipulates as mandatory in Quality Area 7: Leadership and Service Management. Given its usefulness, and in order to better understand the methodology behind the approach, let's unpack Blanchard's framework further.

Blanchard proposed four competence levels and four matching leadership styles to better respond to ability levels of staff and consequently lead to increased achievement in the workplace. The first competence level explored in Blanchard's quadrant is that of staff members who display 'low competence and high commitment'. Staff members that fall into this category are generally fairly new to the context and often lack specific skills to undertake their daily tasks. They are typically 'in training' or have only recently completed their qualifications, with little in-field practical experience. While they may display a very positive attitude and willingness to learn, they lack knowledge of what is required on a practical level. Staff members functioning at 'low competence, high commitment' require a 'directing' approach to guide their daily practices. Providing such specific instruction means that the new training staff member is able to achieve what is required, having very specific instructions and follow-up. Once the staff member demonstrates that they do not require explicit direction, they can move on to the next level of the quadrant.

The second competence level explored in Blanchard's quadrant is 'some competence and low commitment'. Staff that fall into this category are those who may display some relevant skills in their role, but are not in a position to successfully achieve a task without support from their leader. They may also be an existing staff member who is required to undertake a task that is outside of their skills set. Staff members functioning at 'some competence, low commitment' require a 'coaching' approach to guide their daily practices. In this case, the leader must introduce new tasks with clear direction and support. Coaching a staff member at this level requires the leader to explain the need for the task to be completed, monitoring the

member's progress with support and encouragement. Once the staff member demonstrates that they do not require coaching, they can move on to the next level of the quadrant.

The third competence level explored in Blanchard's quadrant is 'high competence and variable commitment'. Staff that fall into this category are those who may be highly experienced and capable, but may lack the confidence, initiative or motivation to implement the task independently. Staff functioning at 'high competence, variable commitment' level require a 'supporting' approach to guide their daily practices. In this case, the facilitative leader supports efforts and drives task accomplishment through manageable deadlines. Often sharing responsibility, the leader will keep the momentum going by providing regular feedback and support. Once the staff member demonstrates that they do not require this amount of support, they can move on to the next level of the quadrant.

The fourth competence level explored in Blanchard's quadrant is 'high competence and high commitment'. Staff members that fall into this category are those who are highly experienced in their role, comfortable with their own ability, self-motivated, experienced and knowledgeable. Staff functioning at 'high competence, high commitment' level require a 'delegating' approach to guide their daily practices. In the case of a highly competent and committed member, the leader can turn over task responsibility fully without the need for specific direction and/or monitoring.

The intention of the four leadership styles is to increase staff competence progressively from needing explicit direction to responding confidently to task delegation. This long-term strategy significantly supports directors in professionally supporting staff regardless of ability; therefore, its adoption is highly recommended.

The aim is to monitor staff at every level and appreciate that each employee will progress at their own pace, something that can be part and parcel of a long-term monitored professional journey – realistically, an ever-changing and evolving journey.

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