

Steve Munby's speech to the National Conference for Sure Start

Children's Centre Leaders

March 2008

Good morning.

I have been Chief Executive of the National College for School Leadership now for three years. I am very proud to have that role. Can I also let you know that my Mum and Dad are very proud too. Not because they know much about the National College but because there was a small photograph of me in the Newcastle Evening Chronicle and my Dad says that if I ever get into the Whitley Bay Gazette I really will have made it.

I have a fantastic job and you all have fantastic jobs too. As early years leaders you have a great responsibility and a great privilege - to provide each child with the foundation upon which their future achievements and wellbeing will depend. To help each child to become the person that they can be. That requires excellent leadership. Today I'd like to consider some of the characteristics and behaviours of effective leaders and, in doing so, to touch on some examples of outstanding early years leadership that I know about across the country.

1. Love the children, the parents, the community and the staff.

I do think that to be successful in early years settings leaders need to have a deep affection for the children, for their parents, for the people in their

community, and for the staff with which they work. If you don't – if you are in fact barely tolerating them; if you secretly long to be in another community with a different set of children or with a different staff then they will soon suss you out.

Excellent leaders believe passionately in the children in their setting, they give the children the hope and the confidence to develop. They help to raise their aspirations and help parents to support their children's development.

They also understand and connect with their local community. I know of one children's centre where the inspirational head identified that serious levels of debt were a real problem for the local community. Parents were affected by financial constraints and obligations and many were suffering from depression, which in turn was having a serious impact on the wellbeing and development of their children.

The leader in question cared deeply for the children and for their community and made it her mission to address this huge issue. Her response was to set-up an onsite Credit Union, encouraging adults and even children to save money and develop good financial habits. She organised a weekly surgery in conjunction with the Citizen's Advice Bureau for all those in need of support and advice. Her work has resulted in a marked improvement.

I know of another example in Birmingham, where the centre leader worked together with parents and the others in the local community in determining

what their real needs were. Once the centre was set up, she went on to hand the ongoing process of reviewing and evaluating the centre's provision over to them. This was a brave move, but it is a clear demonstration of the trust and belief she had in her parents and the community. She has made them true stakeholders of the centre and they have reciprocated by contributing to its work.

In fact, she has gone even further, and mentored parents and members of the community who have become more involved in its day-to-day running. She has given them the opportunity to step up by taking courses and gaining qualifications in areas linked to children's services. This is leadership that has truly empowered a community.

Now the best centre leaders don't just love their community, the parents and the children, they love their staff too. I believe that creating an environment where staff can work effectively is fundamental to good leadership.

A few years ago, I was challenged strongly when I read Goleman's work on six leadership styles.

- 1. Coercive – do what I tell you**
- 2. Authoritative – come with me**
- 3. Affiliative. Harmony. People come first.**
- 4. Democratic. Consensus through participation. What do you think?**

5. Pacesetting. Setting high standards for performance. Do as I do, now.

6. Coaching. Developing people for the future. How about if you...?

The two styles that do not prove effective are coercive and pacesetter. I have not been accused much of being coercive but there are times when I think my leadership style has been too pacey, too challenging and too focused on delivery without taking enough time to ensure that people came with me.

This is how Goleman describes the pacesetter leader:

“The leader sets extremely high performance standards and exemplifies them himself. He is obsessive about doing things better and faster, and he asks the same of everyone around him. He quickly pinpoints poor performers and demands more from them. If they don’t rise to the occasion, he replaces them with people who can. You would think such an approach would improve results, but it doesn’t. In fact, the pacesetting style destroys climate. Many employees feel overwhelmed by the pacesetter’s demands for excellence, and their morale drops – guidelines for working may be clear in the leader’s head, but she does not state them clearly: she expects people to know what to do.”

Goleman, D., Leadership that Gets Results, 2000

As leaders, we mustn’t compromise or lower our standards to accommodate complacency but we have to take the majority of people with us. I suspect most children’s centre leaders would identify more with the affiliative,

democratic and coaching style of leadership and would understand about the importance of taking people with us, when we are trying to achieve complex change.

I have recently read a book called “Why should anyone want to be led by you?”. It is a powerful endorsement of authentic, empowering leadership.

People need to **want** us as their leader and want to be led by us.

Great leaders connect with their staff and know that everyone on their team has their own personal challenges at home and at work and that few people live easy uncomplicated lives. Great leaders show empathy.

“Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

Plato

2. Be courageous and confront the brutal facts.

My wife and I bought a house four years ago and we immediately made a list of all the things that needed to be improved. We set about doing it all and in the first year we got about three quarters of the way down the list. After that we just stopped. Not because we ran out of money – though that was relevant – but also because we stopped noticing that it needed to change.

We just got used to things the way they were. The effective leaders maintain the high expectations even after the first six months or year or two years.

They are honest and realistic about what the organisation’s strengths and weaknesses are. They understand and respect the culture but they also carry on challenging and wanting the best.

The second law of thermodynamics says: “When you put a hot property next to a cold property they soon become a uniform heat.” The effective leader remains a ‘hot property’ and carries on challenging.

They confront the hard issues in their own organisation

Good leaders show kindness and sensitivity but they will confront the tough issues head on if they need to. They avoid ‘slow nos’ – if they mean no, they say no and they make it clear that it is unacceptable.

The hard issues don’t go away if you ignore them: the person who is always late, the person who behaves badly towards somebody else, the person who takes too many days off work.

I have two rules on this.

1. Never react to bad situations hastily, especially if you are cross. Always wait at least 24 hours.
2. Don’t put them off because early intervention is usually the best strategy.

As leaders, once we have thought carefully and made our decision, we need to see through some of the tough implications of that decision rather than changing our mind again when the going gets tough. If there aren’t some difficulties then nothing is changing.

One of the biggest weaknesses in otherwise good leaders is that they don't do the hard things, they settle for an easy life, they won't confront colleagues or take strong action even if it is needed. They need to see their decisions through.

There is an ancient Chinese proverb that says:

“If you are going to stand then stand, if you are going to sit then sit but don't wobble.”

3. Be authentic and a learner

Today I want to speak in praise of the imperfect and incomplete leader.

The best leaders are aware of their strengths and weaknesses and don't try to be perfect at everything – they understand, and are honest about, what they are good at and what they are not good at. They look for people who will compensate for their weaknesses so that they can play to their strengths, they look to create a perfect and complete **team** rather than to be the perfect and complete individual leader.

Let me be even more blunt and honest: my name is Steve Munby, I am Chief Executive of the National College for School Leadership and I am an imperfect and incomplete leader. And that's OK.

Frankly, it is unlikely that we will be able to inspire, excite or motivate people unless we show them who we are, what we stand for and what we can and

cannot do. We need to build complete teams rather than trying to be the complete leader.

Now the relentlessness of leadership makes it even more important that we build in reflection and development time. As Heifitz and Linsky say, good leaders spend time on the balcony as well as on the dance floor. As leaders we must build in opportunities to step back and to stand on the balcony. We also need advice and support from trusted colleagues. I am personally delighted that NCSL is working with Together for Children to develop a network for Children's Centre leaders, which will give you space and time to do this.

Speaking of being learners, as Chief Executive of the National College for School Leadership, I believe our school leaders can learn a great deal from early years leadership. Where it has happened, schools and children's centres working together and sharing expertise has had an extremely positive impact. You know the children well, you know how to engage with the parents, you know about the importance of investing in the needs of the community in which the child grows up and you also have a huge amount of experience of working with other services to improve outcomes for children.

I know of a children's centre in Plymouth that exists on the same site as a primary school. Both school and centre see themselves as working in partnership, sharing services, resources, vision and knowledge. The

headteacher is absolutely clear about the positive difference this is having on his children's learning and development.

This quote from a leader in a school and children's centre in Greater Manchester sums up in one statement much of what I have been saying this morning:

“My vision is one organisation, that exists to improve the lives of children and their families – the school and the centre equally contribute to this vision together. My vision is that an integrated setting demands shared and distributed leadership. My role is to facilitate the climate that helps people to lead, builds cohesion and generates a climate of trust. That’s what’s exciting about leading an integrated children’s centre and a school. I am constantly learning, we have barely scratched the surface of what we could achieve, but now we have a real, once in a professional lifetime opportunity to make a real difference to children’s lives. We’re up for it!”

It is crucial you share your experience and expertise with school leaders, for the benefit of the rest of the system.

We are seeing many talented individuals graduating from NCSL's National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership programme, who have learnt from the experience of others and are now going on to provide exemplary early years leadership themselves. We want to make sure that,

through working with us you have an opportunity to support the development of world class leadership in early years.

4. Enjoy the work and develop your staff

We won't be good leaders if we don't really enjoy what we do. As the prize-winning author and broadcaster Studs Terkel says:

“Work is about daily meaning as well as daily bread; for recognition as well as cash; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying...We have the right to ask of work that it include meaning, recognition, astonishment and life.”

The complexity and the challenge of leadership combined with the joy of working with children and with people does I believe provide leaders in early years settings with work that has deep meaning and life too. Leading an early years setting is just not boring!

As one children's centre leader said recently:

Finally the best leaders develop and coach their staff.

“Talent isn't fixed – unless you believe it is...talent depends on how a person is managed or led.” (Pfeffer and Sutton 2007)

The fact is that as leaders we cast a shadow or shed a light over our organisations, for good or ill. The longer we lead an organisation, the more it begins to mirror our own leadership style and behaviours. If we moan, then the staff in the organisation are more likely to moan, if we look too busy to listen then they will look too busy to listen, if we look in a panic they are more likely to look in a panic. If we inspire they will inspire, if we demonstrate emotional intelligence and kindness, they will develop that too, if we challenge poor performance fairly but relentlessly then they will also. If we don't take ourselves too seriously then they will do the same. If they find working with us stimulating and challenging and they feel valued and they respect us then they are more likely to want to become leaders themselves and to have the skills to be good in the role.

We are all in leadership roles because someone believed in us and encouraged us to be leaders. That is certainly true of me. The biggest challenge is not to go on to put people off leadership but to help others to believe that they too can go on to become leaders. To identify the potential leaders in your setting and give them real and structured opportunities to develop and grow – even if that means that they leave you and become a leader somewhere else. Your legacy can be to develop other leaders who will help to transform the lives of many, many children and who will regard you as their inspiration, their coach and their role model.

I'll end by leaving you with a quote from a Children's centre leader, who describes her job like this:

“It’s tough, it’s a challenge, but because of the difference we make to children’s lives – day in and day out – it has to be the very best job in the world.”

That is a belief I think you will all echo.

NCSL is proud to be working with you and learning from you – thank you.