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IMPLEMENTING A DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP APPROACH IN A LARGE OSHC SERVICE

Background

MacGregor OSHC has experienced significant growth since 2015 and is now one of the largest OSHC services in Queensland. The service operates from a dedicated facility, originally the site of the preschool prior to the introduction of prep in Qld. This facility was not deemed suitable for prep classrooms due to its location across the oval from the main school campus. Fortunately OSHC were located to this area which is now known as the MOSHC campus.

The first increase in August 2015 saw the service grow in its provision from 160 children to 200 with a new, three classroom fixed demountable constructed on the MOSHC campus. This construction was a very positive experience for MOSHC and was completed in only six months. This opened our eyes to future possibilities. This construction presented a unique opportunity due to other renovations at the school resulting in the need for temporary classrooms. It was the preference of the school Principal for the demountable to be placed on the MOSHC campus rather than the oval so that MOSHC could benefit when the school no longer required the temporary classrooms. Together, we worked hard to build and maintain a strong relationship with our school and community.

Unfortunately the increase to 200 children did not meet the community demand for care and we were at capacity almost immediately. Many conversations ensued with our parent committee and the P&C over the next 6 months in regards to the need to expand and how best to do so. We realised following many conversations with management, educators and stakeholders that the best way forward was to build our own facility. This was much more favourable to the typical alternative of renting additional space from the school as this results in the program operating from a number of locations throughout a school site.

We acknowledged that the physical space was only one aspect to consider with service growth. Building the workforce is equally as important and there was much to consider with the existing team and their capacity to increase their workload. We realised that this was not possible and that overworking our existing managers and leaders would pose a significant risk of burn out. An internal audit of position descriptions and employee workloads was undertaken with consideration given to the genuine needs of the organisation. We took a step back and reflected on the service's philosophies and priorities. We undertook some research about how other services operated and their organisational structures, however, we did not find a replicable model within the sector that was the right fit for our service. We then turned to other models such as the school's leadership team.

Research Questions

Do staff feel satisfied and supported within their leadership role?

Does offering leadership roles to educators promote their retention?

Are leadership roles conductive to the forming of a seedbed of skilful leaders at our centre?

How might this leadership approach apply within the broader School Age Care sector?

Research Method and Data Collection

We undertook a review of literature on distributive leadership. For the purpose of our project, we implemented two methods for obtaining data common to Action Research as a qualitative methodology. These are interviews and group discussions.

The first phase of our research involved interviews with nine of our Outside School Hours Care professionals who held formal leadership positions at the centre. These nine staff were chosen as the "pilot group" as they were experiencing first-hand the changes happening within the centre as we transitioned into our distributive leadership model.

As a key aspect of our research focussed on job satisfaction, we recognised the vulnerable position that our research participants were in given the potential implications of expressing dissatisfaction about the workplace or employment. We managed this in such a way that the participants responses would not be named or traceable to an individual to ensure that they felt safe and secure to openly express their thoughts and feelings. A small amount of quantitative data analysis was used to identify trends and qualitative analysis was used to code the content of these discussions into emerging themes.

In the second phase we shared the findings from phase one with different groups including management, lead educators, whole team and P&C. This supported our action research to identify a collective perspective on the issues being raised and discussed. This method was well suited to our research as seeking the different perspectives of stakeholders helped identify barriers to change and find new solutions to guide implementation of our proposed distributed leadership model. The ideas were brought to the group for open discussion and were agreed upon with concrete actions following. We documented this with meeting minutes which stated the who, when and why of all actions.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinnings that informed the analysis of this research were aligned with two main perspectives: Distributed leadership and Peter Senge's Systems theory. Distributed leadership was the model chosen to examine the ways the service has been experiencing and practicing leadership, recognising those in both formal and informal leadership positions. Furthermore, distributed leadership taps into the diverse knowledge, skills, expertise and strengths of staff members which contributes to organisational intelligence and its ability to acquire, process and use information. Instrumental to this model is the sharing of leadership among team members, who take turns at leading and being led. Evidence demonstrates that this leadership approach improves teachers' satisfaction and retention. Senge's approach helped us understand how organisations that nurture learning and innovative thinking can be capable of continually adapting to changing realities.

For the purpose of this research it is important to outline the distinction between "management" and "leadership". At MacGregor Outside School Hours Care, management continues to be in charge of the everyday operations of the centre maintaining 'functions, processes and people'. We refer to Peter Senge's leadership definition as "the capacity of a human community to shape its future, and specifically sustain the significant process of change required to do so." In this framework, managers and educators have opportunities to exercise 'leadership' through innovative enterprise, empowering others and inspiring commitment and collaboration from all stakeholders.

Findings

Educators were intrinsically motivated to take on leadership roles by wanting to make a difference at the centre, in their communities and in children's lives as well as by the opportunity to grow as professionals within the education sector. Research supports the creation of work environments and systems that nurture early childhood educators' altruistic beliefs and caring dispositions, leading to job satisfaction and retention (Kilgallon, 2006). The roles we created were successfully tapping into educators' personal strengths, skills, capabilities and interests providing them with an increased sense of agency and motivation to excel in what they do best. The way the centre has capitalised on educators' strengths has taken a lot of reflection and a collaborative approach. The team participated in redefining some of its leadership roles. When the role could not be clearly redefined, the approach was to ensure that the role under review had clearly defined outcomes which could be approached with process flexibility. Systematically using the strengths of educators leads to work that is meaningful, productive and innovative (Spreitzer & Cameron, 2012) and in turn quality practice and innovation (Brim & Asplund 2009). Participants expressed having appropriate access to human resources especially management support, professional development and material resources that helped them to be proficient and creative in their role. Participants brought to our attention the need for increased ICT's including computers and printers as the team was rapidly growing. Access to adequate human supports and material resources are crucial to support educators' satisfaction and engagement (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Mauno, Kinnunen, & Ruokolainen, 2007; Skaalvik, 2010, 2014).

Tuning of responsibilities and workload was an unavoidable part of the leadership restructure. The lead educator role was initiated as a pilot program and was new to our centre. Consequently the lead educators experienced stress as they transitioned from the familiarity of their previous roles to a new and unfamiliar role. Based on Senge's system theory, it was identified that many of the educators were experiencing the 'discomfort zone', which naturally occurs in organisations going through change, when people experience unfamiliar terrain. However, it is also acknowledged that the 'discomfort zone' provides an opportunity to learn new things and be more creative (Senge, 1999). Reflections on the individual's ability to build the capacity of others, led us to ponder how the new model was allowing the organization to tap into an immense richness of personal mastery and how to transform this into organisational knowledge. Knowledge and leadership expertise now needed to flow across all levels of the organisation to generate more opportunities for change and to build everyone's capacity for improvement (Harris, 2013). Educators in leadership roles are instrumental in creating the environment where distributive leadership can flourish and are now able to share responsibility in creating opportunities for others to lead (Day & Harris, 2002). For this to happen, specific knowledge, tools and guidance were required to understand the new leadership paradigm and to build a shared vision through this process of change. Roland Barth's (2006) four notions of collegiality guided our journey to develop a thriving learning organization; encouraging opportunities for reflection where people can continually learn and visualise holistically together and practice collaboration whilst nurturing new and innovative ways of thinking. It has been proven that where effective relationships and communication thrive, people are able to open up, engage in challenging conversations, and acknowledge that they do not know, take risks, and use their knowledge and expertise to support others in the team (Cherkowski & Walker, 2016). All of which are necessary elements for a learning organisation to thrive.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We have found that a distributive leadership approach is delivering significant results within our organisation, strengthening our ties with community and elevating our program. The educators' strong intrinsic motivations, adequate access to human supports and resources along with the creation of flexible roles that tap into educator's skills, strengths, capabilities and interests have proven to positively influence educators' satisfaction.

However, to further understand if this new leadership model increases job retention, additional studies would be required. We believe that through changing the way our OSHC centre operates and in providing more leadership opportunities to our team we are promoting a culture of lifelong learning. This has the potential to enrich the OSHC sector and help raise its professional profile ultimately improving outcomes for children, families and the communities we serve.

Furthermore, it was noticed during our literature review that while there is an abundance of leadership research, there is limited specific leadership research in the Australian OSHC sector. We were also unable to find a body of research on leadership models that enhance educators' job satisfaction and retention in our sector. OSHC specific research would be useful as the evidence from schools and early childhood, while relevant, requires contextualisation for OSHC.

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