

Leading on a Tightrope

Camila Batmanghelidjh



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Looking at Earth, even a Martian would work out that leading children's services in the current climate is like walking a tightrope. The line of safety is thin, and the potential fall catastrophic. None of us went into the care profession thinking we would be making such tough decisions in conditions of unacceptable risk.

Depleted we are bombarded with recommendations about delivering a plethora of interventions. The bag is empty and everyone wants a lot out of it.

At times like this, good leadership really matters. In essence, the leader has to work out where the gem is in the rubbish. Workers will only be motivated if they believe they are delivering the best, rather than monotonously regurgitating care on a conveyor belt of despondency.

Brain research may illuminate the leadership task. As our ability to look into the brain is enhanced, we're beginning to realise that neuro-physiological functioning is given a limit by genetics. However within these boundaries, there is infinite possibility for development, driven by human relationships.

It's not the therapeutic menu which determines good outcomes, it's actually human contact. The care and love of a thoughtful person delivers better results than anything else. It's compassion, camaraderie, community and hope which make people feel better and motivate them to overcome obstacles.

When parents are afforded care, they help their children flourish. Evidence of the impact of love or lack of it, is now for all to see

PEOPLE - tightrope walkers



see through a scanning machine. Whereas record keeping and process are required to account for work done, they cannot be substituting mindful human contact.

So if the gem is the love one human being can give another, how can we lead the loving without fear of being perceived as 'soppy' or 'shameful'?

Only those who dare get to walk the tightrope.

Camila Batmanghelidjh
founder and director of Kids Company

Lessons from Geese Vicki Lant

Welcome to our first edition of Children's Centre Leader Reader. As co-leaders within the sector that supports the newly created universal provision for youngest children and their families, we witnessed the astonishing resilience of leaders across the country last year as centres faced a year of unprecedented reduction in resourcing. Leaders who have undertaken the National Professional Qualification for Centre Leaders (NPQICL) will be familiar with a thought for the end of a day that describes the uplift of collaborative working and the privilege of working in a team – demonstrated so clearly by geese as they fly in formation and support each other in travelling to their destination. It's an image that motivates and inspires us.

As the support of Together for Children came to an end in March 2011, we recognised that the regular newsletters and synthesis of policy change and development valued by strategic leads in Local Authorities, Lead Agencies and leaders in centres, were no longer produced. Although we are not funded, we felt that in a fast changing world, a digest of current thinking was needed. Not only that, we also recognised that centre leaders had also travelled a significant leadership journey too and may welcome prompts to keep moving forward, even if they had chosen not to undertake further study just yet. So we felt

Uplift of collaborative working and the privilege of working in a team

moved to start something. Something small to begin with, but your involvement will move it where you will and in ways that you value. The flexibility of internet communication makes that possible.

We have scanned the horizon and have pinned our colours to the leadership mast of the National College. National policy has radically changed public organisations including the College. However, it retains a nationally directed remit to develop leadership programmes for the early years and schools' sectors for the immediate future. Its style of operation will change and we will see reshaping of the national standards for leaders in centres and schools around six common themes:

- teaching and learning (pedagogy and practice?)
- developing yourself
- managing your organisation
- developing others
- leading change
- leading in a diverse system

We believe we can create six editions a year, which may become more ambitious with your help and interest so we plan to take a focal leadership theme per edition and begin, appropriately enough with leading self. moving on to leading others, leading research for continuous improvement, leading practice, leading diverse systems and leading your organisation.

One of the most exciting aspects of the NPQICL in recent years has been the development of leadership learning groups, which have created the underpinning trust beneath the wider local and regional networks and communities of practice evolving through the Children's Centre Leader Network. So, we see the role of this reader to offer a space for practising leaders to advance a perspective on the leadership theme (people), a stimulating challenge to our leadership arising from current research (practice), a summary of current policy – links to important documents to read and

catch-up with (policy) and news about events that you want to publicise or engage with (productivity).

We will welcome your ideas through our web page and offers of willingness to share and stimulate practice as we all develop our mastery of leadership in this important, but challenged environment. In a recent public lecture, Tony Benn affirmed that 'hope is the fuel of change'. We begin with hope and we dare – do you?

Vicki Lant
programme leader serco partnership NPQICL

Daring to Walk the Tightrope Kay Dimelow

Times are extremely challenging for families who live on the estate served by our children's centre in Huntingdon town. Historically identified as an area of high need, the economic down turn has seen centre staff not only faced with an increase in demand for family services but also an increase in the range of circumstances directly affecting family relationships.

Loss of, and lack of employment is reflected in the increase in children affected by domestic violence. An increase in drug misuse is reflected in the number of families where one or both partners have mental health issues. This, along side a sharp increase in benefit claims has seen a significant increase in children in workless households who are living on or near the poverty line.

I think that this description will be familiar to many leaders and it is not new but at the moment the issues we are facing feel more acute and this is reflected in the well-being of centre staff.

As leader of the centre one of my priorities is - how to develop staff so that they have a toolkit of skills that build resilience. An inner resilience that will enable them to cope professionally with the sharp end of the experiences of our community and the challenges it brings.

NPQICL has been instrumental in providing a skills and knowledge based framework that I have used to develop centre staff through performance management and further training. By enabling staff originally trained through one

discipline to extend their knowledge and skills to work within a multi-agency environment the centre is in a better position to meet the needs of families through key working. In the past the skills sets of different agencies were 'precious' to that service and some staff felt threatened by others who were expected to take on part of their role. NPQICL helped me to plan the approach to achieve this change and increased my skills in presenting how we could make this vision happen together.

For example, in order to increase the quality of early years' experience in an un-registered drop-in provision in the children's centre reach area, the leadership team supported two members of centre staff to take the Early Years Professional status qualification. Close mentoring helped them to overcome an initial lack of confidence in their own abilities to study. Then by supporting their choice of modules which reflected the needs of the community, they have gained the necessary organisation, management and working with families skills required to run the drop-in independently.

As a result of the 'academic writing' process built in to NPQICL it was possible to tutor the staff reflecting the way I received tutoring on the course. This included setting realistic deadlines to help staff to plan their work so that they were not overwhelmed. Giving staff opportunities to talk through issues, extending their knowledge through my knowledge and helping them to think outside of what they knew and were comfortable with.

In the long term this has built a professional working dialogue between centre staff and the leadership team. It has meant that as we face new issues they do not overwhelm us. It has built a 'can do' attitude which has been really needed over the past months as we constantly respond to the decline in circumstances of some families and more than anything it has given us the skills to see when we have done our job well, we can walk away.

Kay Dimelow
head of centre huntingdon town nursery school & children's centre



Leadership vision

I have always believed that people self-develop better by having experiences in a safe environment in order to challenge their thinking and create new learning. At one stage of my life I worked alongside staff attached to a United Nations peacekeeping force in the Middle East. I observed how they skilfully engaged and encouraged communities and modelled behaviour in such a way as to bring people together to learn to improve their own communities. Later on in my career I worked with a head teacher who used this approach, encouraging staff to challenge themselves and then seek out new career opportunities.

Leadership context

When I was studying for my Masters in Early Years Leadership I used my dissertation to explore further my reflections on working within a community to support them to become more involved in developing their skills to run activities and services for themselves. Our Children's Centre was an Early Designation model and as such received no capital funding and only a small revenue budget. We called ourselves a B & Q model, because we did it all ourselves. By drawing together all early years services in the community, delivering under their own budgets, we were able to create an integrated model of delivering the core offer. However, more needed to be done if it was going to be sustainable for the future as we could envisage how funding could diminish and how our community could then be in a worse position than before we started.

Leadership action

I began working with a group of interested parents who were keen to develop services and volunteer to run them. We worked hard together to create spaces for a playgroup and other parent services needed in our community. We were successful in finding some funding for training and support. This was hugely important as most of the group had no qualifications, whilst others offered skills and experiences that, although not in childcare, were transferable, such as business skills.

From the Tightrope

Gerri Ross



Leadership challenge

I reflected on my earlier experiences and models set for me by others. It would have been easy to use a 'parenting style' with this group of young women. I had already learnt through my development on the NPQICL that this was my natural leadership style and that although it can be nurturing, it can also create a dependency culture. It was important that our parents did not become dependent upon someone who could be moved to another role whenever required by the Council. I had to develop a strategy which supported the group by networking them to others; offering advice and support only and not directing them; allowing mistakes to happen to help them gain experience and being there to motivate people, occasionally picking up the pieces if things fragmented. Above all I wanted them to say "look at what we have done" and not feel that it was only because I was there.

Leadership outcome

Now, four years later, the group has just created a community enterprise model. All the staff involved in delivering playgroup, playschemes and parent groups have at least level three qualifications. Two people have completed BA honours degrees and one person has enrolled on a Masters' programme. There are business plans in place to run an afterschool club and daycare sessions and more opportunities becoming available for local employment. They are working closely with health, social care and the local school to offer dedicated places to vulnerable children. This sustainable work, with a strong community focus, has come at a time when the local authority is withdrawing services due to financial constraints. Our community now has the ability to be able to fill some of these gaps and develop them even further.

Leadership reflection

I have learnt the true value of supporting a community to develop skills. Although I needed to invest time initially and recognise where and when I should step back, I have also overcome my need to use a parenting style as a sole model. I have also learnt the skill of being able to recognise the leadership potential in others and work alongside them to slowly draw it out and then watch them fly. Maybe I will even qualify for that United Nation blue beret!

Gerri Ross

head of Old Moat children's centre (retired)



Is Optimism a 'Fluffy' Attribute

Sue Webster

“The best way to predict your future is to create it.”

Peter Drucker, (1909-2005)

Is optimism a vital or 'fluffy' attribute of children's centre leadership? I choose the word fluffy especially, because it is a word that is often used in National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) learning communities when participants are challenged to reflect upon the emotional aspects of their leadership. But is optimism really fluffy or a key leadership tool? When I meet and work in partnership with children's centre leaders, I always find their optimism contagious. The alternative is to be fatalistic to accept the status quo, social injustice and disadvantage.

As leaders we know that we learn from our experience. If we experience doubt, pessimism and cynical responses it does not make us feel good. As educators we know that we learn best and are more resilient if we are learning and growing within a generative environment. It is what we strive to create for everybody delivering and accessing our services. Yet the wider cultural environment, nationally and locally is often one of pessimism. We are told that 'Britain is broken', communities are 'diseased' and services like children's centres are not as good as they could be. This summer it has felt that national leaders have led us into the current turbulent times by creating a vision that is bleak, pessimistic and hopeless; have they not heard of self-fulfilling prophecy?

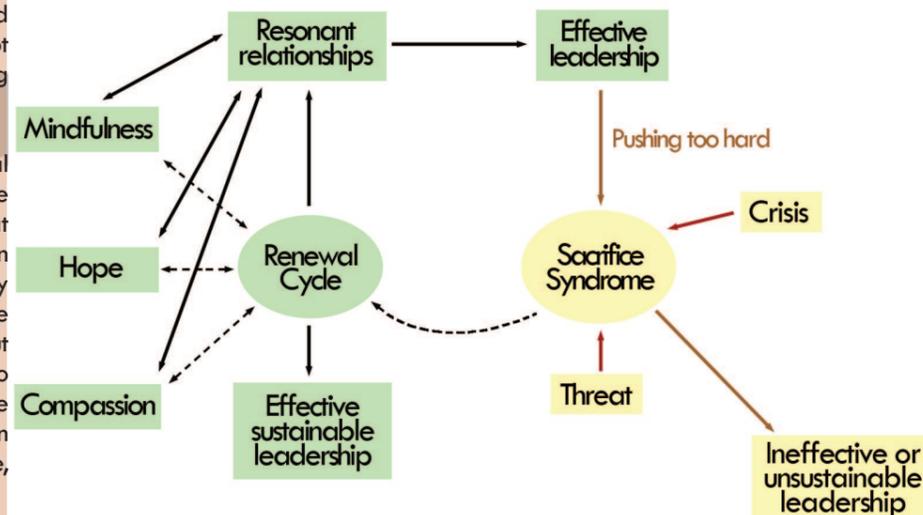
The national financial challenges we face are huge but what followers need when faced with adversity is not a chorus of 'we are doomed' but a 'call to arms' to engage them to create a new realistic vision of the new landscape, identify a

new direction to take, motivate and engage people to join and play their part. According to Tali Sharot (2011) 'hope keeps our minds at ease, lowers stress and improves physical health (...) once people start imagining the future, even the most banal life events seem to take a dramatic turn for the better.' Isn't that what we do in our communities and teams?

Children's centres need people who have the capacity to remain optimistic and energise their teams, families and children. Our centres were introduced to find solutions to the challenging circumstances, widening equality gap and build resilience in children and families experiencing deep social disadvantage. There has never been a real blueprint for our practice in children's centres and leaders have strived to address the range of poor outcomes that have emerged from poverty and poor investment in the structural fabric of the communities where centres are located.

We have a very short history of integrated practice in England and children's centres have evolved from a commitment to improve outcomes for children and meet a broad set of objectives drawing on a wealth of individual experience and knowledge and the few empirical national and international evaluations that have informed the programme (NESS 2010).

“Hope keeps our minds at ease, lowers stress and improves physical health.”



What kind of leadership does a children's centre need? What can an individual leader read, consider and do for themselves to sustain and continue to grow as a leader? This article offers some thoughts about resonant leadership, creativity and leadership style. You may have read that leadership is an art rather than science and it is this theme that tunes beautifully with the work of Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, Resonant Leadership, 2005.

Steve Munby, Chief Executive of the National College of School Leadership (2011) recently drew on these ideas in a speech to leaders in children's services. He argues that effective leaders in children's services need to:

1. Know themselves and develop their own leadership style
2. Motivate and energise others
3. Focus on improvement
4. Collaborate

This keynote speech at the National College's Annual Leadership Conference 2011 is a must read for everyone leading a children's service today.

Listen to or read this speech and consider how in tune you are with your own leadership styles, behaviours and development areas. It is likely that many of you will already have considered leadership in depth on a professional development programme like the NPQICL. Good leaders are lifelong learners and this paper considers creativity in leadership. How can creativity help you to be the mindful, compassionate and hopeful leader that Boyatzis et al (2005) and Munby, (2011) promote?

A recent book Creative Leadership: Skills that can drive change 2nd Ed. by Gerrard J. Puccio, Marie Mance and Mary C. Murdock, (2011) suggests that 'leadership is to creatively solve problems.' Creativity is an area of development that leaders may dismiss in favour of the development of more scientific management approaches. The book suggests that effective leaders must focus equally on their practical and creative intelligences. Practical intelligence alone is limiting

“Be the mindful, compassionate and hopeful leader.”

because it can mean that we develop services to suit our own needs and ideas; doing what we have always done or following the usual path and then being surprised or disappointed when we get the same outcomes. A creative leadership approach explores the development of

a new shared vision to decide 'where' we wish to go. The core skill being to gain the support from others, our teams, partners and line managers, by convincing them that an 'unusual' idea has merit. Creativity leads to innovation and innovative thinking leads to the creation of a culture where new solutions become a reality.

Implementing change or challenging the status quo can be emotionally draining, but accepting poor outcomes, performance and being fatalistic neglects mindfulness, hope or compassion. The challenge of leadership today is around renewal: finding solutions to the problems created in the past, meeting the expectations of the present while ensuring that leaders are sufficiently prepared to meet the demands in an unknown future. Children's Centres are tasked by society to solve what Keith Grint, 2010, calls 'wicked problems'. Complex problems with many facets, these 'wicked' problems have no easy answers or path to follow. We need work towards a solution by collaborating with a range of partners to formulate a series of potential solutions, that Grint suggests will be 'clumsy' rather than elegant. In common with Boyatzis and McKee (2005), and Munby (2011), Grint promoted self-knowledge as a key tool for any leader tasked with finding solutions to wicked problems. He suggests that leaders' styles can be located on two continuums; our attitudes to collaboration or rules and how they are enforced. In this context we need to understand our behaviour when working collaboratively to address 'wicked' problems with leaders with different styles.



Adapted from Grint, 2010

It is a reassuring idea that there is not one dominant style required to lead an organisation. Self-knowledge supports us to adapt and change to develop a leadership approach that is fit for purpose; like a chameleon we should adapt our behaviour to suit to the environment or challenge. Rigidity is a barrier to the creative thinking



required to develop of solutions to 'wicked problems'; analysis of ourselves and others helps the transition from the deadlock of a 'clumsy solution space.'

In terms of resonant leadership, a deeper knowledge and understanding of the perceptions and fears held within ourselves and others support future actions that are more likely to lead to intentional change. Is a belief that we can make a difference, fluffy optimism? I think not, it is a vital instrument in the resonant leader's repertoire but needs to be used with care. The final words are from two children's centres leaders who when asked independently: Is optimism an important attribute for children's centre leaders in the current climate? They responded with very similar ideas:

Self-knowledge supports us to adapt and change

"Absolutely, especially in current climate, although it needs to be tempered with an informed realism as well – blind optimism can be just as damaging as pessimism." (Justine Merton, 2011)

"Optimism is important but so is realism. The two go hand in hand. It is important to have an optimistic attitude to develop into future processes and development." (Julie Hayes, 2011)

So to return to the question posed at the beginning of this article, is optimism a fluffy attribute? I would say no. Optimism with realism and creativity are vital tools for the resonant children's centre leader.

References:

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 Grint, K. (2010), Leadership a very short introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 Munby, S. (2011) Chief executive's speech Seizing success 2011: Annual Leadership Conference, National College for School Leadership 15th June 2011, International Conference Centre Birmingham. (<http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/docinfo?id=150777&filename=conference11-steve-munby-speech-transcript.pdf> Accessed September 2011)
 National Evaluation of Sure Start (2010)
 Puccio, G.J. (2011), Creative leadership: Skills that drive change. London: Sage
 Sharot, T. (2011), The optimism bias. New York: Pantheon Books

Click on any of these titles for further information



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Sue Webster
 early childhood studies, lecturer, University of Warwick

Keeping up to date is a continuous challenge. With personnel changes in Local Authorities and lead agencies, routes to dissemination of important through line management links may have been broken temporarily. We will offer some important links to latest government policy announcements, Ofsted updates and research affecting the sector. Practitioner research arising from national trials (payment by results for example) may become fertile material to share with colleagues on-line through the [National College through the Children's Centre Leader Network Discussions](#) page. It's begging for someone to start!

Government Policy development

The newly launched [Foundation Years](#) website promotes [Supporting families in the Foundation Years](#) launched in September 2011



This new Government policy draws on the key reports published earlier in the year and the government's responses to them:

The Foundation Years: Preventing poor children becoming poor adults. The report of the independent review on poverty and life chances by the Rt Hon Frank Field MP;

Early intervention: the next steps - an independent report to Her Majesty's Government and **Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings** - the second independent report to Her Majesty's Government by Graham Allen MP; and

The Early Years: Foundations for Life, Health and Learning. An independent report on the Early Years Foundation Stage to Her Majesty's Government by Dame Clare Tickell.

Shape the future

Join in with national consultation responses (via the links below):

[Sure Start Children's Centre Core Purpose:](#) via the Foundation years website – no closing date published – so don't be late!

[Early Years and Childcare consultation](#) on Government policy: 12 week consultation period from the beginning of November with events across the country in November – check out the dates near you!

Ofsted [Consultation on the revised framework for inspection of children's centres opens](#) 1st January – 31 March 2012 – make sure your voice is heard.

Be prepared

Ofsted has revised its [documentation for centres](#) and inspectors click the links to the revised self evaluation form and guidance:

[Revised children's centre documents](#) (you can find mainly on page two of the linked area).

These include:

- The children's centre evaluation schedule and grade descriptors
- Conducting children's centres inspections
- Children's centres report template with guidance
- Children's centres report template
- Guidance on completing the children's centre self-evaluation form
- The children's centres evaluation form
- Framework for children's centres inspections
- Inspection of your children's centre
- Guidance for children's centres inspections

Inspection documentation can be found via the link in the [Early Years' Newsletter September 2011](#).

Find out about the [Payment by results](#) trials in the EY Newsletter with a link to the Department for Education website.



Thanks to Terry Connolly (former Together for Children) for regular updates on Government Policy and national guidance alerts.
terry.connolly@mac.com

PRODUCTIVITY



Sue Webster



Vicki Lant

Connect with others to keep your optimism contagious. If you have been putting off the moment to link with other centre leaders in your region, procrastinate no longer! There are meetings arranged for the [Children's Centre Leader Network](#) in your region in the next two weeks:

Children's Centre Leader Reader is created, compiled and edited by Sue Webster and Vicki Lant (former Together for Children and NPQICL)

Join us by offering ideas and material for each theme. We will be publishing in January 2012; last date for contributions 15 December 2011.

Date	Region	Venue
Tuesday 15 November	South	The New North Community School and Children's Centre 32 Popham Road Islington, London, N1 8SJ
Friday 18 November	North	Leeds United Football Club Elland Road, Leeds, LS11 0ES
Wednesday 23 November	Central	IGEM House, High Street Kegworth, Derbyshire, DE74 2DA

Kids Company has events running at their Head Office in Central London that you may wish to connect with:

Wednesday, 30 November & Thursday, 1 December 2011

The Kids Company Keyworking Model For a full [professional development programme](#) offered by Kids Company, please click on the link.



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