

# All change

Making sure standards don't slip and morale remains high amid change in a setting is a vital leadership skill. By **Katy Morton**



**C**hange, planned or unplanned, is inevitable in the workplace. Whether it be the introduction of a different funding regime, new policies or a competitor opening down the road, change can affect people emotionally, mentally and physically.

'Early years settings that manage change while maintaining an outstanding workforce are those with effective leaders and managers in place, who see beyond the delivery of the curriculum,' explains Pennie Akehurst, who runs consultancy Early Years Fundamentals.

'When we move into a leadership role, there is much more we need to take account of. Of course, we need to continue to have a good understanding of child development and what good practice looks like, but we also need to be able to meet

the needs of staff. This is important because adult behaviour can be many things – it can be caring, considerate, compassionate and empathetic, but it can also be aggressive, manipulative, defensive and obstructive.'

She says with the right leadership in place, staff feel safe, that they matter, feel able to share their opinions and speak up. They can be innovative and creative and take risks without fear.

'Developing what is often termed the "soft skills" of leadership and management enables us to not only connect with and respond to the needs of staff and parents, but also to build resilience in ourselves,' she explains. 'Resilience is critical because it enables us to take a breath when things get a bit hairy and to find a way forward that is in the best interests of our children, staff and business.'

Ms Akehurst says another characteristic of outstanding

**When change happens, staff should be supported to ensure quality of provision remains the best it can be**

**“ Many owners find maternity leave very stressful, but we see it as a positive ”**

settings is that they are able to respond to challenges in a positive way and learn from them.

'Settings that are sustaining an Ofsted Outstanding grade see most things as an opportunity for growth because they are constantly reflecting on what they do and thinking about what they can learn from the situation,' she explains.

## Maternity leave

This is the case at multi-outstanding nursery group Kids Allowed, where maternity leave is seen as an opportunity for staff growth.

Owner Jennie Johnson explains, 'When senior members of staff (managers, room leaders) go on maternity leave, we see it as an amazing opportunity for longstanding and experienced employees to take the next step and provide cover, particularly as senior roles don't normally come up.'

For example, she says that one employee had been at Kids Allowed for more than ten years. When an opportunity came up, she didn't believe in herself. However, a colleague urged her to put herself forward. 'The colleague gave her the confidence to apply for the role and she was successful,' explains Ms Johnson, who says that following the cover period, if a senior vacancy comes up, for instance in a new setting, then the member of staff has the relevant experience to put themselves forward.

'We encourage staff to work outside their comfort zone and provide lots of support and mentoring. For staff who are filling in for a role, there is a probation period and opportunities for professional development.'

'Many owners find maternity leave very stressful, particularly if several members of staff are on leave at the same time, but we see it as a positive for business development.'

## Succession planning

According to Ms Akehurst, settings that manage change while maintaining an excellent workforce also have effective communication and forward thinking in place, including the use of succession planning.

'Succession planning is about making sure that there are people with training and knowledge to step into business-critical roles as and when they occur. We already

have a statutory duty to do this for the role of the manager, so it isn't that much of a leap to do it for other roles such as the designated safeguarding lead, the SENDCo and room leaders, for example.'

## What unbalances a team?

Situations that commonly cause unrest include **when too much change is implemented too quickly**, according to business consultant Jacqui Burke, who runs Flourishing People.

She warns this can put undue pressure on staff, leading to a high level of absenteeism because of stress. And if managers fail to anticipate what change is coming and plan for it, this could cause problems.

'For instance, settings that have coped well with the 30 hours have been those that adapted ahead of time, tweaking opening hours, for example. It's about anticipating change and doing it in bite-sized chunks,' she explains.

'I have known of settings that have managed change badly, or refused to change at all, which end up closing because they couldn't retain their staff. Poor relationships with management are the biggest reason why staff move on and management who fail to manage change effectively cause staff a lot of stress. I've seen these situations arise following a bad Ofsted where change has to be made quickly.'

Other common reasons for disquiet are **where change doesn't**

**seem to have a purpose, and where lack of clarity about the plan for change leaves everyone confused.**

'If staff aren't sure why change is happening and what it will mean for them, it can create uncertainty and ambiguity, which makes people nervous. When people are pre-occupied and worried about how change will affect them, they will be focused on that and not on their job. As a consequence, they might not perform well,' Ms Burke says.

According to Ms Burke, other situations that commonly create instability include **when change is imposed from above and without consultation.**

'I've seen situations arise where management have tried to introduce new ways of working such as extending opening hours without proper consultation,' she explains.

The introduction of a new manager, changes to premises and restructuring of teams can also rock the boat, she adds.

'Managers sometimes forget what change is like for staff. Sometimes they need to slow down and just talk to their team. However, often the problem can be finding a chance to do this as it can prove time-consuming. Unfortunately, managers are likely to put off talking to their staff and put it to the bottom of their to-do list.'

## Restoring calm

When change does unbalance a workforce, what can managers do to make things right again?

**“ If staff aren't sure why change is happening and what it will mean for them, it can create ambiguity ”**

Ms Burke says managers shouldn't pretend nothing is wrong, as problems left unaddressed will fester and become more significant.

'Managers should admit they got things wrong and apologise and listen to staff concerns without becoming defensive. Swift action should be taken to address any concerns and let staff know what is being done,' she advises.

To ensure standards of practice are kept high while this is going on and a positive front projected, Ms Burke says managers must be honest with their staff, who need to understand that failing standards put the business and ultimately people's jobs at risk.

'An open discussion with staff asking for their views about how the team can all work together to resolve problems and maintain standards is important. To achieve this, managers need to develop their own changeability skills.'

She explains, 'For an individual this means a willingness to proactively seek out opportunities to change, ability to see change in a positive light, being flexible and resilient when change is being imposed at a rapid rate.'

'For a business, changeability means developing business resilience through the introduction of strategic planning involving scenario planning (looking at the "what ifs"), flexible staffing, succession planning and risk management, rather than risk avoidance. ■

## case study: Rye Park Nursery School, Hertfordshire



Despite numerous team changes and cuts to its budget, Rye Park Nursery School has retained its Outstanding Ofsted grade.

Helen Ackerman, who took up the position of head teacher at Rye Park Nursery School in 2014, explains, 'I inherited a nursery school with four Outstandings. I came from a "requires improvement" setting and didn't realise how much hard work it would be to maintain an Outstanding grade.'

'Staff at the nursery school were very much the former head's team and it was hard work winning them over. The team are outstanding practitioners and I quickly observed that their practice was outstanding.'

Ms Ackerman says another challenge she faced when she took up the role of head teacher was a change to the inspection framework. At the same time, the nursery school lost its contract as lead agency for Children's Centres. On top of this, the deputy head resigned after shortly returning to work following maternity leave, meaning Ms Ackerman was forced to revise her management team. She also had to let the setting's SENDCo go due to budget restrictions.

She says, 'As a head, you need to have a strong ally. Because we lost income from the Children's Centre partnership I was unable to hire a new deputy, so moved two of the nursery school's upper-payscale teachers into the management team.'

'I took on the work of our SENDCo,

drawing on my previous experience. At the setting we have 20 to 30 per cent of children with SEND. Six or seven have with Education Health Care (EHC) Plans.'

During this time of change, Ms Ackerman says what was key to maintaining standards was that her team of staff respected the changes she was making and knew their voices and opinions mattered.

She explains, 'The previous head was strong on confrontation, so staff vote with their feet if there is something they don't like.'

'They are welcome to put forward any ideas. My door is always open. I listen to what staff have to say and always give them time, which I think is very important. I make sure everyone is treated fairly and equally.'