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# Effective leadership: Why is it so important?

***Catharine Hydon explains the importance of effective leadership in early childhood education and care.***

## **Why is effective leadership important in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector?**

Effective leadership is essential if we are to realise the full potential of early childhood education and act in the best interests of the children we serve.

We have inherited a legacy that means we are often uneasy with the authority of leadership, even though many of us have held active leadership positions. We are equally uncomfortable with traditional ‘masculine’ definitions of leadership that

feel too much like power *over* rather than power *with*.

Leadership in early childhood is redefining itself to be the enabling factor that builds communities of learners—children, families and educators. When we think of ourselves as relational leaders first and foremost, we can join others to place children at the centre of decision-making. This style of leadership provides the support and encouragement professionals need to demonstrate their skills and get the recognition they deserve.

## **What are two tips for becoming the best leader you can be?**

Leadership is such a situational endeavour that it is difficult to name two ideas that might apply generally. But thinking about my own experience and noting the strategies I have observed in others, these are my top two:

### **Listen**

Listening, as Carla Rinaldi describes (2014), is more than using your ears; it’s a holistic stance aimed at tuning into what is happening around you.

Listening like this requires discipline and a deliberate plan to seek out the perspective of others. Leaders who stop listening to their people end up, to their detriment, leading shallow empires full of people who agree with them. Listening can be risky, but it builds integrity and mirrors what we teach children about building respectful relationships.

#### Use the art of discernment

Elizabeth Stamopoulos (2012) suggests one of the strategies that effective leaders use is an interpretive lens. Leaders at their best can make decisions that weigh up many different, and sometimes competing, factors in the best interest of the organisations and people they lead. At times this is a complicated and unenviable task. Being able to do this requires the capacity to think deeply and apply ethical principles as described in the *ECA Code of Ethics* (2016).

#### If someone is already in a formal leadership position, why should they enrol in the ECA Leadership Program?

Leaders always benefit from opportunities to explore and deepen their understanding of leading. None of us know everything, and

we are all in need of space to examine new ideas and reflect on our practice from time to time. Enrolling in the *ECA Leadership Program* will do two things: it will reinforce and clarify what you are doing well in your leadership approach and support continued application; and it will alert you to new ideas and approaches that need to be refined or reshaped. It will no doubt be the precursor for more investigation and perhaps more study.

#### What qualities does a good leader possess? What makes a good leader?

Self-awareness, respect and humility are qualities possessed in spades by leaders I admire. They are, of course, knowledgeable, hardworking and courageous, but their capacity to understand themselves and others stands out.

#### How can leaders use the ECA Leadership Capability Framework to guide their leadership practice?

The *ECA Leadership Capability Framework* is a way of defining and mapping the work of early childhood leadership. Just like other

frameworks, notably those developed by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) for school leaders (AITSL, 2019), the ECA framework assists early childhood education professionals in knowing what is expected in leadership roles, and to assess their performance.

Defining leadership capabilities in the early childhood space strengthens our capacity to advocate the critical role of early childhood education in communities. Plus, providing effective leadership in our ECEC settings can ultimately raise the quality of practice.

#### Catharine Hydon

Early childhood education consultant

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# Early Childhood Australia's leadership capabilities:

## A framework for effective leadership

Lewis and Hill (2012) remind us that leadership in early childhood settings requires relational qualities 'that include but go beyond conventional notions of authority' or power. 'The traditional concept of a leader as being an individual at the top of a hierarchy is an incomplete appreciation of what true leadership must be. Leadership is ... enacted by individuals and teams as one connects with one another, to make the changes that reflect shared vision and purpose' (p. 11).

Effective leadership in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings should ultimately be enacted to raise the quality of ECEC practices provided for children and families. The Early Childhood Australia (ECA) *Leadership Capability Framework* (ECA, 2017) has been developed through extensive consultation with early childhood leadership experts and professionals for the ECEC sector. It is a tool that can be used to reflect and build on the values, attributes, skills, knowledge and disputations needed to be an effective leader.

The ECA *Leadership Capability Framework* reflects what is known about leadership in ECEC settings and the nature of leadership more generally, while demonstrating best practice and establishing a vision for leadership that can be applied in all ECEC contexts. It provides a pathway towards building personal and professional leadership capacity and professional identity. The framework covers six capabilities and 21 key aspects, with descriptors organised under three distinct headings: lead self; lead with and for others; and lead within and beyond the organisation.

The six capabilities are:

- Make children's learning, development and wellbeing the core focus.
- Address children's rights and honour diversity of all kinds in positive, constructive and courageous ways.
- Build respectful, trusting, nurturing and equitable relationships.
- Build respectful and genuine partnerships with families and communities.
- Collaboratively develop a culture of ethical inquiry.
- Collaboratively create a cohesive and effective team.

The framework is not intended to be used as a prescriptive checklist or stand-alone professional development resource. The framework provides a structure and the language needed to talk about leadership and build shared understandings about leadership in practice.

#### References

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**Recognising the significance of effective leadership, and furthering its commitment to developing and supporting effective early childhood leadership, ECA has developed a dynamic online program: the ECA Leadership Program. This program is flexible, self-directed and can be undertaken at your own pace. It includes hard copy and interactive online learning materials.**

**To find out more about the ECA Leadership Program visit <http://leadership.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/>**

