

# Emergent leadership: it's about other people



Emergent leadership is a core feature of Playcentre philosophy. But separating the core principles of emergent leadership from the 'rules', or 'philosophy-in-action' (Manning, 2009) is more difficult. Robbie Burke (2008) writes that one of five core principles of Playcentre philosophy is that we are a co-operative movement, and this includes leadership that is "shared, committed, emergent, temporary" (p. 23).

But what exactly is the definition of emergent leadership? In her book on group skills, Tess Conran-Liew (2001) defines it as both a leadership style and a group goal, as well as "an attitude and a collection of group processes that provide a group with a supply of future leaders" (p. 55). Jackie Bedford (2007) writes in the Playcentre Journal that "emergent leadership is where a person experiences situations where leadership is called out of them" (p. 16). In these definitions the focus is on supporting and developing future leaders (a core principle), and not on the length of time that this process is supposed to take (a rule).

Discussing this within the Federation Education team, we seemed to feel that many examples we knew of where emergent leadership had not worked well related to rigid adherence to a rule; a rule that stated how long (how 'temporarily') a leader could remain in a position. A risk with such rules is that they can be manipulated to allow someone to stay on and thereby undermine the principle of allowing new people to take on challenges. Another risk is that these rules can become too restrictive, as different people take different lengths of time to learn a job and to be productive in it. Further, we felt that the complexity of roles, especially at Federation level, seemed to be increasing and time was a necessary factor in coping with this. This brings also the idea of

the value of continuity, at a time when the average time spent involved with Playcentre anecdotally appears to be decreasing.

These factors combine to make the traditional three year leadership time span problematic. In the traditional view, the first year is for learning the job, the second year is the productive year, and the third year is spent mentoring your replacement. But what if it takes longer than a year to understand the job? What if nobody is willing to identify as your replacement before you actually leave?

Alternatively, leaving the 'rule' open can lead to people staying on in a job and blocking the way for others to follow. When the long-term person becomes the one with all the knowledge and does not follow the principle of 'shared leadership', their position becomes that of gate-keeper and the principle of mentoring new leaders can be lost.

For the Federation Education team, emergent leadership is about supporting future leaders, and we can see this as taking a variety of forms. Where there is conflict, the core values that Robbie Burke (2008) listed can be of help, some of which are:

- Generosity of spirit: accepting people for who they are, having confidence in others, sharing knowledge/skills without expecting anything in return, putting others ahead of self.
- Endeavour: exercising self control and discipline, accepting responsibility and giving our best effort.
- Compassion: building esteem in self and others, nurturing a sense of inclusiveness, of being a community.

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