

Promoting leaderful practice in team-oriented settings



ECE resources

Leaderful practice describes a democratic approach to leadership—a practice that many people enact together rather than a role someone takes on to exert power over others. It is an inclusive approach to leadership that acknowledges all those who contribute to improving the overall mission of a community, such as an early childhood setting, as part of everyday practice.

What is leaderful practice and why is it important?

The link between effective leadership and quality education is well-established in the literature. Also well-endorsed is the traditional image of ‘the leader’ as a heroic and gifted individual whose followers are keen and willing to be influenced. However, this image is problematic as it doesn’t always reflect the leadership activity that occurs in many educational settings. In fact, there can be many ‘leaders’ with or without formal leadership positions who negotiate, collaborate, and inspire colleagues towards change as they engage in shared practice. Acknowledging this reality encourages us to challenge the heroic leader image as being sufficient to address the wide range of situations that may occur in real-life practice.

Leaderful action – reflect on the heroic leader image and ask yourself:

- Where are teachers and their joint efforts towards improved teaching and learning in this heroic leader image?
- How does the heroic leader image acknowledge the potential of all those who influence others based on their positive attitude, expertise, and relationships?
- What do, and why should, we know about more inclusive and collective forms of leadership?

The thinking about leadership activity and the ideas in this resource have been inspired by the work of organisation leadership scholar Joe Raelin¹ and his notion of leaderful practice. Raelin’s theoretical work on leaderful practice is inspired by his empirical research on work-based learning. His ideas are transformational in the sense they help to shift thinking about leadership from a position of authority to a mutual social practice. The empirical evidence base on leaderful practice is still relatively new, but some early childhood research studies² have drawn on Raelin’s notion of leaderful practice to inform empirical investigations of leadership in real-life settings, and the activities and strategies developed for this resource draw on those empirical studies.

Leaderful practice as a concept is an alternative to the heroic leader image. Moving away from leadership as a set of individual traits, behaviours, and the power that one might exert over another, leaderful practice promotes leadership as a set of collective practices that many people carry out together to enact change. This means that everyone can contribute to, and be recognised for, achieving the overall mission of their community. Leaderful practice is, therefore, a social and collective process that can mobilise leadership potential in everyone. It is an inclusive approach to leadership whereby everyone’s views matter and change within communities is co-created. The notion of leaderful practice is particularly relevant to the team-oriented nature of teachers’ work in early childhood education.

Being leaderful – read this scenario with a colleague and discuss your thoughts

Alina's team was in a good place. They were continuing their team inquiry into how to slow down and be more present with the infants. Teachers were leading some of the inquiry dialogues and working hard at establishing direction and progressing goals based on everyone's input. The team had also recently presented their inquiry work-in-progress at the centre's yearly staff conference and were still buzzing from what they had learned from and with centre colleagues. Team meetings happened fortnightly, providing scheduled times to share and discuss progress made in relation to their work with children and families. Alina often opened these team meetings and introduced practice-related items for discussion. Each discussion would then take on a life of its own as everyone was given opportunities to share their ideas and viewpoints with one another. At times, colleagues would finish the sentences of others as their talk became more fluid and organic. Clearly, this way of talking, collaborating, inquiring into practice, and learning from and with one another was not a burden, but a valuable way of coming together, learning and growing.

This is a leaderful environment: there is lots of collaboration within the team and across the centre community. Everyone is able to share their views during team dialogues and take part in shared decision-making. Everyone's ideas and viewpoints are also heard and considered. Alina as their formally designated team leader is very much part of the team, but her formal position is not always obvious or needed. Others step up and take on leadership activity, sometimes concurrently and collectively. Colleagues are considerate of one another. They listen to each other while embracing what they can learn from them. This is a compassionate environment, a caring, learning and growing community. The climate is open to learning, enthusiastic, and dynamic. Overall, we can say that the scenario reflects Raelin's four principles of leaderful practice.

What are Raelin's four principles of leaderful practice?

Leaderful practice is not just any activity involving multiple individuals. Rather, it is collaborative activity that reflects four key principles. Some or all of these principles may occur at the same time:

- **Concurrence** – during collaborative activity, there are several leaders willingly leading at the same time, formally and informally. Colleagues are naturally sharing power with one another. What the positional leader does and what the non-positional staff do are equally important to their joint work. The positional leader doesn't give up her/his role but acknowledges and appreciates the contributions of others.
- **Collectivity** - there are many leaders enacting leadership together, reflecting leadership as a group phenomenon. Leadership influence emerges from colleagues working together, not from individual influence. Decisions are shared and/or made by whoever has responsibility at the time. Progress is not dependent on any one member, but on everyone's input and participation.
- **Collaboration** - anyone can speak on behalf of the group and/or advocate a viewpoint they believe aligns with the good of their community. This involves being considerate of each other's ideas and sharing one's own beliefs and values with others.
- **Compassion** - colleagues look out for one another, they preserve the dignity of their colleagues, and they consider others when making decisions on behalf of the group. Everyone is valued, democratic participation is promoted, and practices are values-based.

Being leaderful – initiate a dialogue with colleagues using the following questions

- Think of a 'scenario' based on your own collaborative activity with colleagues.
- Consider how this collaborative activity reflects some or all of the principles of leaderful practice.
- What changes do you think are needed to promote or strengthen leaderful practice in your community?
- What could you and your colleagues do differently to be more leaderful in practice?

What can everyone do to be more leaderful in practice?

There are several attitudes and practices that everyone can develop to be more leaderful in practice. Changing and sustaining attitudes and practices may not happen overnight. Thus, teams might need to consider collaborative ways to work towards them over time:

- **Be open to learning:** commit to learning about yourself and learning from and with others. Doing so will contribute to a culture of learning in your setting.
- **Be self-aware of your actions and the consequences of these on others:** critically reflect on areas of your social practice that might be improved and for what purpose.
- **Be an empathetic listener:** remain open to hearing different viewpoints and to seeing yourself reflected in the eyes of others.
- **Be willing to share your ideas, values, beliefs and dilemmas** with others you trust.
- **Embrace the possibility of being changed** from what you can learn.
- **Be willing to learn** and employ collaborative problem-setting and solving skills.

What can positional leaders do to foster a leaderful environment?

Leaderful practice is about everyone. However, this inclusive stance doesn't mean that more formal roles of management and leadership are not needed. Positional leaders play an important role in fostering a leaderful environment. They become leaderful change agents when they take up the following attitudes and practices, supporting an environment that is full of leadership, not leaderless. Doing this well relies on the understanding that leaderful practice is not about stepping back or delegating responsibilities to others.

- **Embrace the idea of collective leadership:** without this belief, the potential of leaderful practice will be stifled.
- **Establish relational trust amongst colleagues:** for example, support team-building sessions, be trustworthy, and communicate clearly using a range of methods.
- **View oneself as part of a system of activity:** understand that what everyone does contributes to achieving the overall mission. There will be many who serve as leaders around you.
- **Build and nurture relationships** with and within the community.
- **Be willing to relinquish power and control:** learn to let go. Pay attention to what happens when you loosen your grip. Some situations may still need you to take the lead.
- **Be open to hearing others' ideas and be willing to change** as a result of new learning.

- **Reflect on how you walk the talk:** Ask: 'How do I role model what collaboration and contribution look like? In what ways do I show I am a good listener? How do I show others that I trust them to step up when and as needed?'
- **Invite and support others to lead from their knowledge and expertise:** Ask: 'What do my colleagues enjoy doing and what are they good at? How do I show that this knowledge and expertise is valued?'
- **Teach and encourage collaborative problem-setting and solving skills:** avoid the assumption that everyone has the skills they need to collaborate well in shared tasks.
- **Establish processes and structures for reflective collaborative dialogue:** ensure that everyone has opportunities to contribute to the rules, structures, and processes for team dialogue.

What are the possibilities of leaderful practice?

Leaderful practice is a liberating way of working with others. It supports the idea that everyone involved in an activity knows about and has a say in relation to that activity. This sense of democracy is the heartbeat of leaderful practice. Although shared decision-making can sometimes lead to disagreement amongst the group or even time delays in reaching a final decision, it is important to remember that having access to more viewpoints and a broader range of knowledge and expertise can make decision-making more effective. It is also useful to note that leaderful practice is less about the heroic individual, and more about what colleagues can do together to support and progress their communities.

Further Reading

Cooper, M. (2014). Everyday teacher leadership: A reconceptualisation for early childhood education. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*, 29(2), 84-96.

Raelin, J. (2004). Don't bother putting leadership into people. *Academy of Management Executive*, 18(3), 131-135.

Raelin, J. A. (2005). We are the leaders: In order to form a leaderful organization. *Journal of Leadership and Organisational Studies*, 12(2), 18-30.

Raelin, J. (2011). From leadership-as-practice to leaderful practice. *Leadership*, 7(2), 195-211. doi:10.1177/1742715010394808

Raelin, J. A. (2016). It's not about the leaders: It's about the practice of leadership. *Organizational Dynamics*, 45, 124-131. doi:http://dx.doi.or.10.1016/j.orgdyn.2016.02.006

Endnotes

¹ Raelin (2004, 2005, 2011, 2016).

² Including Cooper, 2018 and Thornton, 2005.

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