

Leadership – be careful it does not kill you

In a personal and emotive piece, Peter Bewert, managing director of care and organisational development group Meaningful Care Matters, explores what it means to be an effective leader in the social care sector

So, we got you to read the first sentence. I write this after having yet another heart-wrenching discussion with a well-known leader in the sector who has impacted the lives of millions, and her words were: "Leadership, it's killing me". I understood this from the root of its distress to the aching despair that comes with it. I knew how it felt, what it sounded like, what it looked like, I knew, because I have lived it myself.

There is a plethora of peer-validated research that is highly respected on this topic, not so much suicidal ideations, and impacts, although these are becoming more common.^{1,2} Others are more colloquial and lack evidence-based research as their primary motivation for their literary works.³

What does this say? There is also a growing amount of anecdotal evidence on social media of leaders who are exhausted and broken. There is a very real issue when we consider leadership and its impacts on our mental wellness and without direct disruption of this pathway, it will become a killer of significant proportion.

A tough gig

Leadership is a tough gig! It is not for the faint of heart and requires a level of resilience that is beyond anything you could imagine. Leadership, when it is not



supported for the leader to succeed, is like a constant vortex spinning around you, with debris that requires your every attention.

It keeps you awake at night, working 16-hour days and perpetually glued to an electronic device that contains the key to every cloud-related app for you to access the things you need to do your job. Sound familiar? Well, for some this is what leadership can be like.

Certainly, it is tough. Many people hold an oversimplified idea about what leadership means. Some think it is just a matter of guiding others to complete a task. Others confuse it with motivation. In truth, leadership is a complex blend of

competencies and capabilities. For others sadly, it can be a matter of life or death.

One recent morning as I sat in church, I listened to the preacher recount her own journey of growth and I was struck by the following. "In days of the past, status in leaders was obtained in the ability to support you and your team to achieve by doing far less than we do today. Today we have created a status of the more we do and the busier we become that this has become our alleged achievement of achieving leadership status".⁴

Far too many people's experience of leadership is not as it should be. A career in health and social care is rewarding, impactful and the best decision I have made personally and as a health professional.

The last two decades have truly developed me as a person and taken me through management and into a leadership role where my experiences generally have shaped me to be the best version I could be. Little did I know, the most defining moment of my professional career, my leadership ability, and my life

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were about to occur.

As a child where I accompanied my grandmother to 'help' at the nursing home where she worked, I learned so much. By the time I was 14, the investment in me as a person and as a nurse to be, and dare I say it, the beginning of my leadership journey had been sown. This was person-centred leadership and care in action by my grandma.

In the two decades since this moment, I had seen a type of care that, while clinically efficient, was devoid of love, heart, and soul. I remember being yelled at as a trainee nurse for making a woman a cup of tea after her mother had died, but the bed needed to be carolised. Or the time that a group of nurses played a horrendous practical joke involving somebody who had died.

Disrespectful at the very least, this was abusive disregard for the value of human life at best. Where was the love? It was still there; it was just harder and more secretive as it no longer had a status deemed important.

Covid hits the heart and soul

Covid-19 has seen this dichotomy of person-centredness being played like Russian roulette. This sad tale has been our lived reality and the dichotomy is more critical than ever. Leaders are resigning in droves,⁵ unable to care,⁶ which has become more of a reality since the Covid pandemic, where loneliness, isolation, and a loss of core spirit for people who live in care homes has manifested.

The leaders and workers who used to love their job more than anything

were 'losing their family',⁷ and this was a hard reality to live and learn as a human being, let alone trying to lead a team through this. Despite this hardship, the increase of regulatory burden due to lack of government attention to repeated reports indicate a lack of resources, crisis and a pandemic of loneliness and depression.

Person-centredness did not appear to extend to those who were on 'the front-line' of dealing with this crisis and expected to respond to constantly changing demands and priorities.⁸ Covid was a catalyst, but the cause has been deep-rooted for some time within health professions.⁹

Horizontal violence

We have seen people in leadership roles who have had their core spirits crushed. This is clearly a serious and very sad outcome. While this is the extreme end of the spectrum, a study of 200 industry leaders found that 100 per cent of leaders experienced a level of ill-being at some point in their lived experience in a role of leadership.¹⁰

There was a shared theme that leadership roles at some point have an experience of reaching their breaking point at work. Furthermore, 24 per cent of the leaders who participated in this study indicated they had suicidal ideations.

Sadly, 'horizontal violence' is not limited to a single silo of health professionals, it is pervasive, damaging to wellness, mental health and every aspect of our lived experience and core spirit. Sadly, as some people have progressed into leadership roles, the

intensity and severity of ill-being caused by behaviours from colleagues is where the most damaging of impacts can be seen.^{11,12}

This is not unique. Bredemeier and Miller indicate that the levels of people in leadership experiencing psychiatric conditions, burnout and suicide cannot be ignored.¹³

The loss of one life from suicide is one too many. Our stories matter, every life matters, leadership matters, so why do evidence-based research studies identify that leadership roles generally result in 54 per cent of individuals having long-term impaired executive function, ultimately leading to higher rates of suicide? When we accept this as the norm, we no longer can see past this experience, and we lose sight of what wellbeing as leaders can look, sound and feel like.¹⁴

True leadership

For person-centred cultures to be truly effective, palpable, something that you can look, see, feel, and almost touch, we must be person-centred with each other as leaders and as teams. We will never create a true person-centred culture until we can replicate what we purported to be achieving in our policy statements with each other as leaders, workers, and colleagues. This means everyone organisationally.

Personally, this is part of my lived experience. My life almost ended due to the ill-thought belief that I was a failure at leading my team. The fact was that I was ill-prepared, ill-equipped, and unsupported in a role which was a significant step personally.

The fact was this did not come due to changes beyond people's control and lack of understanding when corporate knowledge is lost.¹⁵ Ironically, this too is a long-term systemic issue when the citation supports the same challenges we face today.

I was lucky. I was provided a second chance and now the most horrific work experience in my professional career is the one that has made me the most aware that leadership, just like person-centredness, is not something we can simply do. It is in us, it is our personhood, it is our core spirit.

Some years later, I realised despite person-centredness being centric to what we did, it was not who we were. It was toxic, and I became too burnt out and was too ill-prepared as a leader to know what to do. So, I did nothing, and no-one stopped me, but no-one knew because my mask was strong, and I was someone who was not me.

The key to true authentic leadership is the same for person-centredness, be real.¹⁶ We implore our teams to bring their real selves to work, so why do we as leaders feel that we need to moderate our emotions? There is a difference between a difficult decision and being real with the feeling and emotions that it may cause. True and authentic leadership will not be achieved if we are not able to be our true selves.¹⁷

No (wo)man is an island

To find your way back from the brink, you must surround yourself with people who will support you to be the leader you do not yet see yourself to be. These people

In whatever way it is the most relevant to you, take time out to recharge your batteries. This is not a luxury, this is not something which needs to resemble the 'status' thought to be associated with what, where and how a good leader is supposed to be

are not necessarily the people you would ordinarily choose as a friend.

They are people who will challenge, but challenge with respect; will correct, but correct in love; will push you beyond what your capabilities are, in a way where there is a safety net; and always want to see you become a better you.¹⁸

A key to true person-centred leadership is having a trusted mentor whose leadership capacity and development is greater than yours, so you can seek advice and collaboratively run through what may be the unknown to you, but are well-trodden paths to your mentor. They will guide you to be true to who you are throughout.¹⁹

No-one is ever perfect; we all make mistakes. Some of them are bigger than others. By owning these in leadership and acknowledging the learning, we can grow in authenticity, integrity and respect for ourselves and others. All these things are essential in achieving leadership being at the heart of personhood.²⁰

Do not be afraid to reach out and admit you are struggling. As the writer Charlie

Mackesy shared in his story, "What is the bravest thing you've ever said?" asked the boy. "Help", said the horse... "Asking for help isn't giving up", said the horse. "It's refusing to give up."²¹

Relax - just do it

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Being able to relax has become particularly hard when our phones and electronic devices are never far from our sides and always 'on'. As partners and parents, we can find ourselves constantly distracted, because our mind is always elsewhere.

This is not only bad for us, but also does not help our relationships thrive. How often do we see people out with their young children with their heads down looking at their mobile phone, rather than relishing the joy of the moment?

Many of us will need help with finding our way back to being more 'present' in our daily lives, whether it is using mindfulness techniques, meditation, going for walks in nature, listening to music, or whatever works best for you. However we do this, we need to give ourselves permission to press the 'off' switch more.

Conclusion

Leadership is not a road which is easy to travel at times. It means communicating and empathising, directing and modelling, teaching and mentoring – and, above all, trusting and serving. Be real, surround yourself with people who truly have your best intentions at heart, and know mistakes are normal.



I Care management

So let us not punish ourselves continuously and use mistakes as learning opportunities to better ourselves for the future. Begin to prioritise yourself. There are too many leaders operating within a continual crisis mode which plagues health and social care and leads to burn out, mental health and without remedial action, worse.

Believe it or not, true person-centred leadership wants to see you succeed in every way and this will only come when you begin to prioritise self. **TCHE**

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