The importance of leadership in early childhood services is a feature of the National Quality Standard (NQS). Leaders create a positive culture, empower others and work to continually improve the quality of care and education. The Guide to the National Quality Standard tells us that ‘Well-documented policies and procedures, well-maintained records, shared values, clear direction and reflective practices enable the service to function as a learning community’ (ACECQA, 2013, p. 163).

In this set of case studies, we visit two services to discuss leadership: the first, a long day care centre in western Sydney; and the second, a family day care service in Brisbane.

Case study No. 1 | Punchbowl Children’s Centre
Punchbowl, NSW
NQS Rating: Exceeding the National Quality Standard

‘I think change is good. So being a leader means not being afraid of change and taking it on—really being motivated to find out why things need to be changed.’

The Punchbowl Children’s Centre in western Sydney has been operating for more than 25 years, but the key to its success—according to long-standing director Karen Whitehorn—is understanding and embracing change.

The 50-place service has been rated as Exceeding the NQS in every Quality Area, an achievement that Karen attributes to ‘continually improving our practices’: ‘We had our policies and practices and procedures in place, and we’re constantly reviewing them,’ she says. ‘We’ve moved with the times and we’ve maintained that momentum to improve our practices.’

Karen says the service has also benefitted from being ahead of some changes in the sector. In the birth to two years age group, the Punchbowl centre has been operating with a 1:4 educator-to-child ratio for more than 15 years, which eased the adjustment to the NQS.

According to Karen, the leadership team at the Punchbowl Children’s Centre works well because of respect and confidence. ‘We realise we have different qualifications and experiences and idiosyncrasies, but we have a healthy respect for each other,’ she explains. ‘We’re able to listen to different points of view, raise questions or concerns wherever we need to, maybe have serious discussions about our values—and that’s OK, to provoke those discussions.’

Karen observes that it is ‘really important’ for leaders to have effective communication skills: ‘So that you’re sharing part of your professional experience, but also listening to people as well, about what they feel and their own values’.

Embracing change is also part of the leadership skill set at Punchbowl. ‘I think change is good,’ Karen says, ‘so being a leader means not being afraid of change and taking it on—really being motivated to find out why things need to be changed.’

Karen is adamant that leadership is not a quality restricted to educators and staff at the top of any hierarchy. A leader isn’t necessarily the director or manager of our service—we have natural leaders within our team. They mentor less experienced educators by sharing their life experiences, knowledge and skills, but without making others feel less worthy. They encourage their team members by celebrating successes and praising their achievements. And they suggest alternative solutions and problem solving if disagreements arise.’
For example, when educators change rooms, Karen is keen to provide professional learning to help in the adjustment. At the centre, as a group of children transition into a new room, one of their educators makes the shift with them. This provides continuity for the children, but it can also present a knowledge gap for the educator. ‘Say an educator has been in the nursery with under-twos for two years, and I move them up into the two- to three-year-old room—that age-group is very dynamic and egocentric,’ Karen explains. ‘It’s a really different group to the nursery, so the educator may need some ideas or professional development around teaching those children.’ When asked what advice she would give to services that want to improve their leadership capacity and performance, Karen says that four things are particularly important:

- **Be organised:** ‘Have your practices, procedures and policies in order and review them regularly.’ Karen also collates evidence of practice throughout the year, so she has no need to rush before a formal assessment.
- **Be proactive:** ‘When something comes in that you have to change, do it straight away, because you’re forever getting information, you often get information overload. Don’t just procrastinate and leave things.’
- **Show integrity:** ‘Leaders should be sensitive to others, but shouldn’t compromise on children’s wellbeing and safety.’
- **Be reflective:** ‘It’s all about collaboration with your educators and other staff. You have to have a commitment to early childhood education and care, and to that ongoing improvement and professionalism, always reflecting and learning—you never stop learning.’

**Reference**