



## Ruth Weinstein

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We all try to create a sense of ownership of the program—it is not just me even though it is my business. We go away together a lot as a group and this helps form relationships. The first time we went away together I couldn't get them to stop talking. The staff instigated monthly meetings between our two centres. They pick a topic to discuss, I research it, find readings and then we discuss what we have read/thought about. It allows everyone to have a voice and they all feel they can speak and be listened to. We look at each other from a strengths-based approach. We use our individual strengths and go to individuals we know who have a particular strength. Often in a meeting we start by saying what the strengths are of the person we are sitting next to.

For me it is very important that all staff have a voice. For example, with their documentation they look at it and plan together. Every staff member has focus children. They share their learning stories; for example, if one staff member did a learning story that included three children they would pass it onto the other staff who had these children as their focus. All our portfolios are online so it is easy to add a learning story. It also means that staff can discuss the same children and collaborate. As we are a single unit (five staff in one room) they are constantly sharing ideas and collaborating. Even untrained staff see things from different viewpoints.

There is no real hierarchy in the rooms and this has made a big difference to the staff working together. I do a lot of monitoring and this helps me to see who needs support. The more qualified staff mentor the less qualified staff. For instance, if a Certificate 3 is doing a portfolio entry they will be mentored and given lots of support—a bit like a critical friend. Staff members mentor the person who is under them and they want to do it and help each other.

When we hire a new staff person all staff have a say. I would say to the staff I think I have found someone and then we ask them to come for a couple of days to work at the centre to see if they fit in. I am very aware of the strengths of the staff and I listen to the staff. I do a lot of observing and if I see that something doesn't look right I will quietly talk to them to see if anything is going on. There are not a lot of rules like this is your job, this is your morning tea break etc. Instead, staff negotiate and work it out between themselves. For example, they might say can you do the beds today and I'll do them tomorrow. There are jobs to be done but they share them around. The staff support each other and it is a relaxed atmosphere. There are opportunities to relax together outside of work, for example, quiet dinner, bowling. The staff also get paid above award rates and I give presents. For example, after an accreditation visit I give all the staff a present to show my appreciation of their hard work and commitment. They also get a bonus each year. I feel they are very loyal and don't see me just as their boss. I also like to give positive feedback on what I see them doing well. For example, I like the way you set that experience up this morning. This helps make a happy team and the staff also start to provide this positive feedback to each other as well.

I have had little direct experience with staff bullying in 35 years. I have only had two people who have done that. Partly it is because of the way I choose my staff, as all staff have a say. I also don't let problems fester. I tell staff I can't fix things I don't know about. For example, if someone says so and

so is not pulling their weight I would deal with it through watching and mentoring. I have been really lucky as I do hear stories about staff bullying and I think a hierarchy can lead to bullying. At my centre no one is allowed to lord it over someone else. I do run weekly mentoring sessions with every staff member. I did try to book in times but it doesn't work for us that way. I make sure I have contact with each staff member every week, sometimes in the playground and sometimes I might chat to them when it is their office day each week (every staff member gets one office day for programming).

I think my saving grace has been that I grew up in this centre. I started the centre when I was 26 and I knew nothing management-wise as I had only been a teacher in a school previous to that. I didn't know anything about business so what I did with my staff has been very instinctive. I don't always get it right or do it the way the literature tells you but it works for me. For me this is not a company, we are a family.