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How can I improve my practice as a manager and a leader in Children's Services at a time of transformational change?

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Background

The imminent financial constraints, as well as structural and philosophical changes taking place will transform Children's Services.

'Transformational change' is journey where learning takes place on the way, leading to changes in direction and more likely than not, the goal (Harvey and Denton, 1999). How can I as a leader, encourage others to take this journey; to take the necessary risks, to learn from mistakes and create a climate where there is mutual interdependence, involving trust, honesty and openness, through difficult times (Golman, Boyatzis and McKee 2002)? Many organisations deny the complexity of transformation and the influence of leadership. They rely heavily on creating formal structures rather than on how leaders create a climate of learning and support and influence their followers on a day-to-day basis. What is it about good leaders, deep down, in every interaction, that supports transformational change?

The research focuses on creating a 'learning organisation'; one which recognises experience and expertise and develops and empowers employees and the creation of an environment of mutual trust and openness. The concept of a learning organisation is an ingrained philosophy for anticipating, reacting and responding to change, complexity and uncertainty (Malhora 1996). From a position of devastating cuts and redundancies, I aim to create an organisation that is fit for purpose; staff who are highly motivated to learn, take risks and 'transform' what they do.

Research Questions

I want to find out how I, as a leader, influence others and contribute to the process of creating a 'learning organisation', at a time of immense change.

In particular I focus on:

- Contributing to the understanding of myself, embedded within a context of others and of systems, which creates a knowledge base that can be shown to inform educational practice;
- What it is, within me that creates the ability to influence others;
- The development of new living standards of judgement relating to transformational change and the way people and systems interact.

Methods

A living theory methodology (Whitehead, 2008) has been produced specifically for researching and answering questions of the kind, 'How do I improve my practice?' This methodology is focused on enquiries that are grounded in the ontological values and understanding of the practitioner-researcher. That is, the values and understandings the individual uses to give meaning and purpose to their lives and work. Within this methodology, systematic action reflection cycles are used to engage with the question; to clarify and evolve the meaning of the explanatory values and understanding, through practice and through a critical engagement with the ideas of others. An analysis of the explication of my values emerges throughout the research, as I explain the principles and my living standards of judgment. Within this framework, the validity and rigor of the explanations are strengthened through the use of validation groups who focus on questions of comprehensibility,

truth, rightness and authenticity (Habermas, 1976) and apply Winter's (1989) six principles for enhancing the rigor of action research. Within this methodology, insights are used from grounded theory, ethnomethodology, narrative enquiry and phenomenology and case study (Cresswell, 2007) to enhance the range of the data collection and the validity of the interpretations.

Frame

The research can be located within an autoethnographic framework described by Ellis and Bochner (2000) as a genre of writing that, "...displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural" (p739). Whitehead and McNiff (2006) suggest that Living Theory allows for the generation of explanations of educational influence in ones own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of organisations. Such explanations are dynamic, generative and transformational; they support the learner to liberate and understand themselves in their own lives and learning, in relation to others. The robustness of the theoretical frameworks of living educational theories can be judged by their global spread in processes of valid and legitimated enquiry.

Research findings

This paper contributes to the development of a new epistemology (Schön, 1995) for educational knowledge and to how transformational change can be managed and addressed positively, by creating a learning organization where all concerned are able to explore their contributions and judge those contributions against their own living standards of judgment.

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