

HEARTS THAT LEAD

Transforming Early Learning
Through Inspired Leadership



MARK WAGER

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Mark Wager: Leadership Redefined

Mark Wager is the Chief Leadership Coach at the Australasian Leadership Institute, a trusted advisor to leaders across the Asia Pacific region. Originally from the United Kingdom and now based in New Zealand, Mark has dedicated his career to transforming how leadership is taught. Frustrated by the ineffective workshops he encountered during his 30 years in managerial roles, Mark turned his passion into a mission: to equip modern leaders with the tools to influence, motivate, and inspire their teams effectively.

Known for his ability to simplify advanced psychological theories, Mark makes leadership accessible to professionals from all backgrounds, industries, and experience levels. Through bespoke workshops and individual coaching sessions, he combines real-world scenarios with cutting-edge psychological insights to develop practical leadership solutions. His philosophy is simple: leaders are not born, they are made—with the right guidance, anyone can become a great leader.

Mark has coached leaders from some of the region's most respected organisations, including the European Union, Weta Workshop, Amnesty International, UNICEF, Fisher & Paykel, NZ Rugby League, NZ Netball, the Ministry of Justice, and the NZ Defence Force, among many others. His insights and strategies have helped elevate team performance, strengthen morale, and empower leaders to make a lasting impact.

Are you a manager struggling with team motivation, poor performance, or ineffective delegation? Mark specialises in

tackling these challenges head-on. With over 30 years of experience, he provides tailored strategies to help you transform your team, improve productivity, and lead with confidence. Take the first step toward exceptional leadership by booking a free 30-minute strategy session today.

Contact Mark: Mark@ALI.org.nz

Dedication

To the early learning teachers—
the quiet heroes shaping futures before the world even notices.

Your days are long, your impact immeasurable,
and your hearts bigger than most will ever understand.

This book is for you.
In admiration, in gratitude, and in full recognition
that the work you do matters more than words can say.

Thank you.

— Mark Wager

Preface

Over the years, I've had the privilege of working with leaders across a wide range of industries—corporate executives, government managers, hospitality teams, engineers, retailers, health professionals, and many more. And if I'm honest, every time I step into a new environment, there's always a tiny part of me that thinks, "I reckon I could probably do this job."

It's not arrogance—it's curiosity. A natural instinct to understand how things work and to imagine what it would be like to walk in someone else's shoes.

But the first time I worked with an early learning centre, something changed.

That little voice—the one that normally whispers, "You could do this"—fell completely silent.

Because for the first time in my professional life, I encountered a world so unique, so emotionally intense, so incredibly demanding, that I knew—without question—I couldn't do what you do.

Not because I didn't respect it. Quite the opposite. I was, and still am, full of admiration.

You work in a sector that blends education, care, leadership, regulation, and raw human emotion—often all before morning tea. You manage the expectations of parents, the development of children, the wellbeing of your team, the pressure of compliance, and the responsibility of shaping little lives, all while leading with empathy and heart.

And you do it, not for the money, not for the glory, but because you care.

That kind of work is rare. And the people who do it well? Even rarer.

This book was born from that deep respect. It's written specifically for you—the emerging leader in early childhood education who is figuring out how to lead without losing your humanity. Who wants to grow your confidence without growing a thick skin. Who believes that strong leadership and a caring heart can coexist.

You'll find no jargon here. No complex models or theories. Just practical tools, honest insights, and gentle reminders that you're not alone on this journey.

I can't do your job—but I can help you lead with more clarity, confidence, and compassion.

Because when leaders in early learning thrive, entire communities benefit.

And that's the kind of legacy worth building.

— Mark Wager, Leadership Coach

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Chapter 1: Why Leadership Matters in Early Learning

If you're reading this book, chances are you've either just stepped into a leadership role in early childhood education or you're seriously considering it. First of all—well done. That decision alone takes courage. Leadership in ECE isn't like leadership anywhere else. It's a beautiful, complex, emotionally rich space filled with meaning. It's also one of the hardest sectors to lead in well.

Let's talk about why.

At its heart, early learning is about purpose. People don't go into this line of work for fame or fortune. They do it because they care—deeply. They want to shape young lives, give children the best start possible, and contribute to a future they may never personally witness. And that's what makes this space so powerful—but also so fragile.

A Purpose-Driven Industry With Commercial Pressures

Here's the paradox: early learning centres are businesses. They have budgets, ratios, compliance obligations, and profit margins. But they're also purpose-driven at their core. The mission isn't just to operate a successful business—it's to make a difference in the lives of children and their families.

That's a rare mix. Most industries are either commercial-first (driven by results and profits) or cause-first (like charities or

advocacy groups). In ECE, we're both. That means as a leader, you're not just managing tasks or hitting targets. You're stewarding people's purpose—and that is sacred ground.

This purpose gives you an enormous advantage: your team likely wants to do good work. They care. They're not clocking in just for a paycheque. That kind of motivation is gold in leadership.

But there's a shadow side too: when people care deeply, everything feels heavier. A throwaway comment can feel like criticism. A change in procedure can feel like a betrayal of values. A new policy can be seen as a personal attack. And if you're not prepared for that emotional weight, it can wear you down.

The Emotional Weight of Caring

Here's what many new leaders find surprising: sometimes the most challenging people to lead are the ones who care the most.

Why? Because when we pour our heart into something, we become emotionally invested in the way things are done. So when a leader comes in and says, "We need to make a change," the message isn't just about systems—it's felt as a personal judgement.

Suddenly, you're not just asking someone to follow a new routine—you're asking them to let go of something they've anchored their identity to. That's not resistance for the sake of being difficult. That's resistance because they care.

And that's what makes leadership in early learning so different from other sectors. In a corporate office, a feedback conversation might take five minutes. In ECE, that same conversation might

leave someone in tears. Not because they're weak, but because they're emotionally attached to the work. They're not just doing a job—they're living a calling.

The Challenge of In-the-Moment Leadership

Another layer of complexity is how, when, and where leadership happens. In a lot of organisations, you can call someone into a meeting room, shut the door, and have a long, uninterrupted coaching conversation. In early learning? Good luck.

You're leading in real-time, surrounded by children, noise, routines, and chaos. There's rarely a perfect moment to pull someone aside. Conversations have to happen in the moment—in between nappy changes, centre tours, parent pickups, and calming an anxious child.

That's why clear communication becomes your most valuable leadership tool. You don't always have time for long explanations or formal meetings. Sometimes, you need to say something meaningful in under 30 seconds—without sounding abrupt or dismissive. And when those opportunities are missed, boundaries don't get established.

And here's the hard truth: where boundaries aren't clearly formed, people will find them by testing them.

When Boundaries Are Blurry, Tensions Rise

This isn't because people are trying to be difficult. In fact, it's often unconscious. But in the absence of clarity, people will

explore where the line is.

“Can I leave five minutes early without mentioning it?”

“What happens if I don’t do the sleep check exactly on time?”

“No one said anything when I skipped the team meeting...”

And without consistency, confusion sets in. Confusion leads to misalignment. Misalignment leads to resentment. And resentment is the breeding ground for culture issues.

That’s why leadership matters so much in early learning. Because when it’s absent, inconsistent, or reactive, the culture suffers. And when culture suffers, so do staff, families, and ultimately, the children in your care.

You’re not just managing a team. You’re setting the emotional tone of an entire centre.

Leadership Isn’t About Control—It’s About Influence

Let me be clear about something: you don’t need to be perfect. No one is. In fact, if you try to be a flawless leader, you’ll only burn yourself out. Leadership isn’t about being the smartest, the fastest, or the most experienced person in the room. It’s about being intentional.

You’re there to create a space where others can succeed—not because you’re micromanaging every step, but because you’ve laid the groundwork for success.

And it starts with influence—not authority.

Think about the kind of leaders you've looked up to. Were they the ones who barked orders and enforced rules? Or were they the ones who inspired you to be better—who gave you permission to grow, to be seen, to be heard?

Leadership in ECE works best when it's not about control, but about direction, clarity, and care. You become the compass. Not the map.

Wellbeing, Culture, and Child Outcomes Are All Linked

So what's at stake if leadership is weak or reactive?

Staff wellbeing declines. People become defensive, passive-aggressive, or disengaged. Some burn out, others quietly quit. Culture erodes. Gossip increases. Trust decreases. Teams start working in silos or cliques.

Children are affected. Because children don't just learn from what's taught—they absorb what's felt. If adults are stressed, short-tempered, or emotionally unavailable, it ripples straight through to the tamariki.

You are the keystone in this system. Your leadership either supports the whole structure or lets it wobble.

But don't let that scare you—because there's good news, too.

You Don't Need to Have All the Answers

Leadership in early learning is not about knowing everything—

it's about being present, curious, and willing to grow. Your team doesn't need perfection. What they need is clarity. Consistency. And courage.

You're going to make mistakes. That's part of it. You're going to have conversations that don't land. Decisions you question. Moments where you feel out of your depth.

But here's the secret: even when you mess up, if people can feel your heart is in the right place—they'll follow you.

That's why this book isn't about becoming a textbook leader. It's about becoming a heart-led leader. Someone who sees people. Holds the line. And creates a culture where everyone can thrive.

You're More Ready Than You Think

If you're doubting whether you have what it takes, let me tell you something: most great leaders start out with doubt. Doubt isn't weakness—it's awareness. It means you care. It means you want to do this well. And that's the first sign of a great leader.

You won't get everything right. But you will grow. And more importantly, you'll help others grow too.

That's what this journey is about.

You are stepping into one of the most meaningful roles in the world—not just as a leader of people, but as a shaper of environments that shape children. You're not just managing routines. You're cultivating potential. You're building trust. You're creating a space where tamariki and kaiako alike can thrive.

And that's why leadership matters.

Chapter 2: The Leadership Mindset: Moving Beyond People-Pleasing

If you've ever found yourself lying awake at night wondering whether someone is upset with you, or if you've replayed a difficult conversation in your head a hundred different ways—welcome to the club. You're not alone. In fact, many early childhood educators arrive in leadership roles carrying the same emotional backpack: a deep desire to make people happy, to keep the peace, and to avoid conflict whenever possible.

And it makes sense. After all, people who choose caring professions—like early childhood education—tend to be empathetic, nurturing, and driven by purpose rather than ego. These are beautiful traits. They make you the kind of person children feel safe with, parents trust, and colleagues turn to for support.

But when you step into leadership, that same desire to please can become a trap.

Because here's the hard truth: you can't please everyone. And more than that—you shouldn't try to.

The Cost of Pleasing Everyone

In leadership, every decision has a consequence. Sometimes,

doing what's right for the centre means upsetting someone. Sometimes, prioritising long-term goals means disappointing short-term expectations. And sometimes, standing firm on values means someone won't like you for it.

If your sense of self-worth is tied to being liked, you'll find leadership exhausting. You'll twist yourself into knots trying to avoid conflict. You'll hesitate when clarity is needed. You'll delay hard conversations until resentment builds. And slowly, without even noticing it, you'll stop leading—and start managing emotions.

Leadership isn't about being liked. It's about being trusted. And those are two very different things.

So how do you make the shift? How do you go from being a people-pleaser to a purpose-led leader—without losing your empathy along the way?

It starts with understanding how your mind works.

The Probability Machine: How the Mind Predicts the Future

Think of your brain as a probability machine. It's constantly scanning for information—past experiences, social norms, cultural cues, tone of voice, body language—and using all that data to predict what might happen next. Its goal? To keep you safe.

This is especially true in leadership, where every decision carries perceived risk. What if they think I'm being unfair? What if I make the wrong call? What if this conversation backfires?

These questions are all part of your brain's internal algorithm. It's trying to assess the probability of threat or rejection. But here's the catch: when your brain doesn't have enough information, it often assumes the worst.

This is known as negative bias—and it's a survival mechanism. If there's a 50/50 chance someone might be upset, your brain would rather assume they are upset than risk being caught off guard. It's a primitive instinct to help you avoid danger. The only problem is: this survival software doesn't always suit leadership in modern workspaces.

Key message: Your thoughts are often just defence mechanisms—not objective truths.

The Challenge of Missing Information

Let's say you give someone feedback, and they respond with a tight smile and say, "Okay." That's all.

What does your brain do? It starts filling in the blanks.

"They're upset with me."

"I didn't say it the right way."

"They probably think I'm a terrible leader."

But are those thoughts true? Not necessarily. All you really know is that they said "okay" with a certain tone. Everything else is a story your brain created because it didn't have enough data.

In leadership, your ability to recognise this mental pattern—this tendency to predict doom when information is incomplete—is

vital. The goal isn't to silence those thoughts. The goal is to challenge them.

"Is this fear or fact?"

"Do I know this for sure, or am I assuming the worst?"

"If this wasn't about me, what else could it be about?"

Self-awareness starts with learning to separate signals from stories.

Self-Doubt as a Signal—Not a Stop Sign

Here's something you need to hear: self-doubt doesn't mean you're incapable. It means your brain doesn't yet feel safe about the outcome. That's not failure—it's a signal.

It's your mind telling you it needs something.

Usually, it needs one of these three things:

A clear definition of success

A clear plan to achieve it

Reassurance that you can handle the consequences

For example, if you're worried about giving feedback, ask yourself:

"What does success look like in this conversation?"

"What's my plan to approach it calmly and constructively?"

"What will I do if it doesn't go well?"

By answering those questions, you're not just calming yourself—you're feeding your brain the information it needs to feel safe. That's what confidence actually is: not the absence of doubt, but the ability to manage it.

Imposter Syndrome: A Matter of Missing Data

Many new leaders—especially in emotionally demanding fields like ECE—struggle with imposter syndrome. You've probably felt it too.

It's that voice that says:

"Who do you think you are to lead this team?"

"You're not experienced enough."

"One mistake and everyone will see through you."

Imposter syndrome isn't a reflection of your ability. It's a reflection of your uncertainty. It's what happens when your mind doesn't have enough evidence to believe you belong—so it defaults to the safest conclusion: "I must be a fraud."

Key message: Imposter syndrome is not a skill issue—it's an information issue.

And the best way to deal with it? Gather more data.

Track your wins. Reflect on your growth. Seek feedback from people who see your strengths clearly. Over time, those new pieces of information help update your brain's prediction model.

Supporting Others With Imposter Syndrome

You're not the only one facing this. As a leader, you'll likely support team members who struggle with their own imposter narratives. The instinct might be to say, "You're doing great! Don't be silly!" And while reassurance is helpful, there's something more powerful you can do: help them reflect.

Ask questions like:

"What evidence do you have that you're failing?"

"If you had to list three things you did well this week, what would they be?"

"What would you say to a colleague feeling the same way?"

Be a mirror, not just a comforter. Help them see the gap between their fear and their facts. That's how you develop self-aware, resilient educators.

Rewriting the People-Pleaser Script

Now let's return to where we began: the people-pleaser. The person who wants to avoid conflict, keep everyone happy, and absorb all the tension in the room so others don't have to.

If that's been your identity for a while, stepping into leadership can feel like a betrayal of that role. But here's the shift: leadership doesn't require you to stop caring. It requires you to care with boundaries.

You will sometimes upset people.
You will sometimes be misunderstood.
You will have to make decisions that others don't agree with.

And that's okay. As long as you're guided by purpose, values, and fairness—you are doing the work of a heart-led leader.

Defining Success on Your Terms

One of the most important mindset shifts in leadership is learning to define success in a way that's within your control. People-pleasers often define success as, "Everyone is happy with me." But that's an impossible goal.

Instead, redefine success as:

"I communicated clearly and kindly."

"I made the decision that aligns with our values."

"I listened, reflected, and acted with fairness."

When you define success based on your actions, not others' reactions, you take your power back. And that's how confidence grows.

Purpose-Driven, Not People-Driven

Let's be clear—there's nothing wrong with wanting people to be happy. In fact, great leaders want the best for their people. But there's a difference between being purpose-driven and being

people-driven.

People-driven leaders say yes to avoid conflict.

Purpose-driven leaders say no when necessary to protect the bigger picture.

People-driven leaders fear disappointing others.

Purpose-driven leaders focus on what's right, not what's easy.

If your heart is in the right place, and your actions align with your values—you're doing the job. Not everyone will see it immediately. But over time, your consistency will speak louder than approval.

The Mindset of a Heart-Led Leader

To wrap this chapter, let's clarify what mindset you're stepping into as a heart-led leader:

You will not get everything right. That's okay.

You will feel doubt. That doesn't disqualify you.

You will grow through practice, not perfection.

Leadership isn't about eliminating fear or always knowing what to do. It's about making space for fear while choosing courage. It's about holding discomfort in one hand and compassion in the other.

And it all starts by challenging the story in your head.

Because the truth is, you are not here by accident. You're here because you've shown the qualities that great leaders are built on:

care, self-awareness, and a willingness to grow. The rest? That's what this journey is for.

Chapter 3: Leading Yourself – Boundaries, Balance and the Power of ‘No’

Let's be honest—leading others is hard. But you know what's even harder sometimes? Leading yourself. Especially when your default setting is to help, say yes, and take responsibility for everything.

If you've recently stepped into leadership, you've probably felt the pressure. Suddenly you're no longer just looking after the tamariki—you're juggling rosters, answering parent emails, supporting team members, covering for sick staff, attending meetings, and making sure the centre stays afloat during a storm of competing demands.

And in the midst of all that, it's easy to forget the one person you're also supposed to be leading—you.

Why Leaders Burn Out in ECE

Early childhood education is a deeply emotional and relational field. It's not just about systems and schedules—it's about people. And for most of us, we entered this profession because we care. We want to make a difference. We want to be helpful. We want to support others.

But here's the trap: that same caring nature that makes you so valuable can also make you vulnerable. Vulnerable to burnout. Vulnerable to overcommitting. Vulnerable to guilt when you say

no, and exhaustion when you don't.

This is especially true when you step into leadership. Suddenly, you're not just managing tasks—you're holding the emotional weight of the team. And that weight doesn't clock off at 5pm.

So let's say this clearly:

You cannot lead others sustainably if you don't learn to lead yourself first.

That starts with one word many leaders struggle to say—no.

Why “No” is a Leadership Word

Saying no doesn't make you selfish. It doesn't make you unhelpful. It makes you a leader who understands limits—and respects them.

Think about it: every time you say yes to something, you're also saying no to something else. That might be your rest, your family, your lunch break, or your mental clarity.

We often say yes because we don't want to let people down. But in doing so, we often end up letting ourselves down—and ironically, we eventually let others down too, when our energy runs dry and our patience wears thin.

Key leadership truth: Boundaries protect your ability to be generous over time.

Saying yes to everything is not generosity—it's unsustainable. Leadership is not about doing everything yourself. It's about making intentional choices that allow you, and your team, to thrive.

The Cost of Always Saying Yes

Here's a familiar scenario: a team member comes to you and says, "I know it's not your job, but could you just help with this one thing?" And before you even process what they've asked, you hear yourself say, "Sure, no problem."

Sound familiar?

You're not alone. Many leaders in early learning—especially new ones—default to yes because they want to be supportive. They think it's the quickest way to maintain harmony. But over time, that habit builds resentment. Not just from you, but from your team too.

When you take on too much:

You model overwork as the standard.

You send the message that boundaries aren't important.

You unintentionally create dependency instead of empowerment.

People don't respect leaders because they do everything. They respect leaders who model clarity, balance, and discipline.

Setting Boundaries Without Guilt

Let's be clear: boundaries aren't walls. They're fences with gates. They help people understand where your capacity ends and where theirs begins. They're not selfish—they're self-respecting.

Here's a helpful shift if you find "no" difficult: instead of flat-out rejecting a request, explain the consequence of saying yes.

For example:

“I’m happy to help with that, but if I do, I won’t be able to finish the curriculum planning that’s due tomorrow. Which would you prefer I prioritise?”

Or:

“That’s something I could take on, but it would mean working late again tonight. I’ve promised my family I’d be home on time, so I’ll need to say no this time.”

These responses are respectful, honest, and firm. They give the other person clarity, and they give you protection.

You are responsible for setting the standard of how people treat you. If you consistently say yes to everything, people will assume you’re okay with it. But if you model thoughtful decision-making, others will learn to respect your time—and their own.

Discipline Isn’t Just About Saying No—It’s About Creating Space

Another form of self-leadership is learning how to switch off. I know that might feel impossible some days, especially when you’ve got a to-do list longer than a toddler’s bedtime story. But here’s the truth: rest isn’t a reward for finishing everything. It’s a requirement for doing anything well.

You can’t keep giving from an empty cup. You have to refill.

That means:

Setting boundaries on work hours (and sticking to them).
Turning off notifications when you’re off the clock.
Planning your week to include breaks, not just tasks.
Letting go of guilt when you take time for yourself.

Self-leadership is discipline. It's having the courage to say, "My wellbeing matters too." It's resisting the pressure to be constantly available. And it's realising that when you take care of yourself, everyone benefits—your team, your family, and the children in your care.

Create a Vision for Your Life—Not Just Your Centre

Too many leaders spend their time planning rosters, projects, and parent nights—but have no clear plan for their own life. You need goals too. Not just for your role, but for your relationships, health, and happiness.

Ask yourself:

What kind of life do I want to live outside of work?

What do I want my mornings and evenings to feel like?

What would "balance" look like for me this year?

Start with small commitments:

I will leave on time at least three days a week.

I will keep one evening per week completely for myself or my family.

I will take my lunch break outside twice a week.

These may seem minor, but they matter. They help you reclaim your identity as a whole person, not just a leader.

And when your team sees you living with balance, it gives them permission to do the same.

Boundaries Strengthen Relationships—They Don't Weaken Them

Some leaders fear that if they start saying no or setting firmer boundaries, their team won't like them. But the opposite is usually true.

Healthy boundaries create:

Trust – people know where they stand with you.

Respect – your time and energy are valued.

Consistency – you don't burn out or snap unpredictably.

People don't want perfection from their leaders. They want predictability, honesty, and care. When you lead yourself well, your presence becomes steady and safe—something your team can rely on.

And let's not forget the children: tamariki thrive when their environment is calm, consistent, and emotionally stable. Your self-leadership flows into every corner of the centre.

Practical Tools for Leading Yourself

Let's bring it all together with a few simple tools to help you stay aligned, energised, and balanced as a leader.

1. The "Big 3" Check-In

At the end of each week, ask yourself:

What gave me energy this week?

What drained me?

What will I change next week?

This helps you stay self-aware and make micro-adjustments before burnout sets in.

2. The “If-Then” Boundary Script

Prepare scripts for common situations. For example:

“If I’m asked to cover last-minute again this week, then I’ll check my priorities before saying yes.”

“If I feel overwhelmed, then I’ll take a five-minute pause before responding to new requests.”

This makes boundary-setting feel less reactive and more intentional.

3. Time-Blocking for Yourself

Book time in your calendar for:

Admin tasks (so they don’t spill into personal time)

Breaks

Thinking / planning (not just doing)

Treat those blocks like important meetings—because they are.

Let Go of the Guilt

If you’re someone who feels guilty when you say no, or when you take time for yourself, let me offer this truth: you don’t have to earn rest. You’re allowed to have limits.

Leadership isn’t about doing it all. It’s about doing what matters—sustainably.

You’re not being selfish. You’re being smart. You’re protecting your energy so that you can show up as your best self for the people who rely on you—not just today, but in the months and

years ahead.

Leading Yourself is the Foundation of Leading Others

So much of leadership starts here: with your own habits, your own mindset, and your own boundaries. If you can't lead yourself through stress, pressure, and overcommitment, how can you model that strength for others?

The good news is—you don't have to do this perfectly. You just have to start paying attention. You have to practice. You have to be willing to put yourself on your own priority list.

Because you matter. Your wellbeing matters. And the more you honour that, the stronger and more impactful your leadership will be.

So today, take a moment to pause. Reflect. Breathe. Ask yourself:

“What do I need to lead myself well this week?”

Then give yourself permission to honour that answer.

That's not weakness. That's leadership.

Chapter 4: From Teacher to Leader – Making the Identity Shift

One day, you're working shoulder-to-shoulder with your team—planning, teaching, wiping noses, calming tears—and the next, you're in charge of the roster. You're the one making decisions, having difficult conversations, and being introduced as “the leader.” And while the promotion might feel exciting, it can also feel... strange.

There's a quiet discomfort that often comes with stepping into leadership from within the team. You're no longer just a teacher, but you're not yet comfortable calling yourself a leader either. You might even find yourself stuck in between—trying to lead while still wanting to belong.

That's the identity shift, and it's one of the hardest parts of becoming a new leader in early childhood education.

You're Not One of the Team Anymore—But You Still Care Deeply

For many new leaders, the fear of “losing” your connection with the team is real. You worry that if you change how you act, they'll think you've changed who you are. You don't want them to see you as bossy, distant, or worse—disloyal.

So, you keep trying to prove that you haven't changed. You downplay your title. You keep doing all the little tasks you used to do. You soften your feedback so it doesn't sound too

“managerial.” And for a while, it might feel like it’s working.

But slowly, the cracks start to show.

Decisions get delayed because you’re too worried about upsetting people. Boundaries blur because you don’t want to seem controlling. Team dynamics shift and suddenly people aren’t sure who’s in charge of what anymore.

And worst of all—you begin to feel stuck. Torn between the person you were and the leader you’re supposed to become.

It’s Not About Being Better—It’s About Stepping Into a New Role

This is where the mindset shift really matters. Becoming a leader doesn’t mean you’re better than your team. It means your responsibilities are different now. Your job is no longer just about doing the work—it’s about creating the environment where others can do their best work too.

That means your focus moves from tasks to people, from participation to facilitation, and from doing to deciding. And yes, that will change how some people relate to you. But it doesn’t have to change who you are.

You can still be kind, approachable, and supportive. But now, those qualities must be balanced with consistency, clarity, and courage.

You don’t have to become someone else. You just need to become a little more of who you already are—with purpose.

Friendship vs Leadership: The Emotional Tension

One of the most common struggles new leaders face is redefining relationships—especially with those who used to be peers. Maybe you shared lunch breaks, inside jokes, or frustrations with leadership together. Now you are the leadership, and that's a tough shift to navigate.

You may feel like you're betraying friendships when you have to hold someone accountable. Or you may sense that people are testing boundaries to see if the friendship still gives them immunity from consequences. It's an awkward dance—one that many new leaders try to avoid by staying "one of the gang."

But leadership requires a new kind of emotional maturity. You'll need to be okay with not always being liked. You'll need to sit with the discomfort of someone being disappointed in you. And you'll need to draw new lines—not out of punishment, but out of respect. For your role. For the team. And for yourself.

True friendship, the kind that's built on mutual respect, won't disappear just because you've changed roles. If anything, those relationships have the potential to deepen—because you're showing up with honesty, courage, and authenticity.

The Quiet Isolation of Leadership

There's something else we don't talk about enough—the loneliness that can come with leadership. When you're no longer part of the group in the same way, it's easy to feel alone. You might start second-guessing yourself more. You may miss the sense of camaraderie. You might even wonder whether the promotion was worth it.

This is normal. In fact, it's one of the clearest signs that you're actually making the shift.

Leadership can feel isolating at times, but that doesn't mean it has to stay that way. You just need to find your new supports—people you can talk to honestly, who understand the weight of leadership. Sometimes that's a mentor, a coach, or another leader in a different centre. What matters is that you no longer expect your team to be your emotional sounding board.

They need your steadiness. You need your outlet.

Part of leading yourself well—as we discussed in the last chapter—is recognising when to seek support. It doesn't make you weak. It means you care enough to grow.

Small Decisions, Big Shifts

Often, the identity shift into leadership doesn't come from one big moment. It comes from dozens of small decisions made over time.

It happens the first time you say, “That's not acceptable here,” even though your voice is shaking.

It happens when you give feedback, even though you'd rather avoid the conversation.

It happens when you choose the long-term health of the team over short-term harmony.

Each time you do something that prioritises your new role, you reinforce the identity you're stepping into. And over time, you'll notice something important: the discomfort starts to fade.

Confidence grows. Your team begins to respond differently. And you feel less like an imposter and more like... a leader.

You Don't Have to Be Perfect—You Just Have to Be Clear

The fear of getting it wrong is one of the biggest reasons new

leaders hesitate. But here's something worth remembering: people don't expect you to have all the answers. They just want to know where you stand.

Clarity builds trust. Even if people don't agree with every decision, they'll respect your consistency. It's when leaders waffle, delay, or bend their values to avoid discomfort that confusion sets in.

You don't need to be cold or distant to be a strong leader. You just need to be clear, consistent, and courageous.

You can still have lunch with the team—but maybe not every day. You can still join in conversations—but you might sometimes need to guide them back on track. You can still care deeply—but now you must care with a wider lens—for the whole centre, not just individuals.

Leadership as a Journey, Not a Destination

If you're still feeling like you haven't fully “become” a leader yet, that's okay. Leadership isn't a fixed identity—it's a journey. And the truth is, many experienced leaders still wrestle with moments of doubt or awkwardness.

But what separates heart-led leaders from positional ones is this: they choose to show up with purpose, even when it's uncomfortable. They make the hard calls when needed. And they keep learning—not just about others, but about themselves.

So if you're still figuring it out—good. That means you're paying attention. That means you're trying to lead with heart, not ego. That means you're already further along than you think.

A Quiet Shift That Changes Everything

The move from teacher to leader isn't loud. It doesn't always come with a title or a pay rise or a sudden change in status. It often begins quietly—with a choice to take responsibility for more than just yourself. To think bigger. To hold space for others. To set the tone, not just follow it.

And slowly, without even realising it, you'll notice the shift:

You'll catch yourself seeing the bigger picture.

You'll find yourself thinking before reacting.

You'll realise people are looking to you—not just for answers, but for how to be in uncertain moments.

That's leadership.

And you're already doing it.

Chapter 5: Uncovering Subconscious Bias – Seeing What Others Don't See

One of the hardest truths for any leader to accept is this: you don't see everything.

No matter how caring, observant, or emotionally intelligent you are, there will always be blind spots. And they don't exist because you're unkind or unskilled—they exist because you're human.

Our brains are wired to make sense of the world quickly. They take shortcuts, make assumptions, and use past experiences to fill in the gaps. That helps us function in fast-moving environments, like early learning centres, where decisions need to be made on the fly. But those same shortcuts also create hidden distortions in how we see people, situations, and ourselves.

That's where subconscious bias comes in.

This chapter isn't about shaming you for having bias. It's about shining a gentle light on the assumptions you might not even realise you're making—so you can lead with more clarity, fairness, and impact.

The False Consensus Trap: “But I Thought We Were On the Same Page...”

Let's start with a common trap that many leaders—especially new ones—fall into: false consensus.

False consensus is the quiet assumption that others see the world the way we do. That they interpret our words the same way. That our values and theirs are naturally aligned. That if something seems obvious to us, it must be obvious to everyone else too.

But more often than not, it's not.

You might think you've explained something clearly. You might think your intention is obvious. You might believe that your team agrees with your definition of "high standards" or "good communication" or "professional behaviour."

Then something happens—a decision is questioned, a message is misinterpreted, or a small issue snowballs into a big misunderstanding—and suddenly you're left wondering, How did they get that so wrong?

But they didn't get it wrong. They just heard it differently.

You see, communication isn't about what you say—it's about what people hear. And what people hear is filtered through their own experiences, fears, values, and assumptions. Just like yours are.

That's why one of the most powerful things you can do as a leader is to slow down and check for understanding. Not by asking, "Do you understand?" (most people will just nod to avoid looking silly), but by saying things like:

"Just so I know we're on the same page, how would you describe this in your own words?"

"What does that word mean to you?"

"If someone was watching us, what would they see that shows this value in action?"

Those little moments of clarification can save hours of confusion and frustration later on.

The Assumptions We Don't Know We're Making

Subconscious bias doesn't always show up as big, obvious stereotypes. Often, it's subtle—like the assumptions we make about people's intentions, work ethic, or ability based on how similar or different they are to us.

Maybe there's someone on your team who's very direct, and you find yourself assuming they're abrupt or difficult. Or maybe someone is quieter and you assume they're disengaged. Or perhaps a colleague disagrees with you in a meeting and, without realising it, you begin to see them as less loyal or less aligned.

It happens fast, and it happens quietly. But it changes how we treat people. How we speak to them. What we delegate to them. Whether we offer them opportunities—or withhold them.

And often, we're not aware it's even happening.

One of the most common forms of subconscious bias in leadership is attribution bias—where we assign intent to behaviour without enough information. We tell ourselves stories like:

"They didn't do that task because they're lazy."

"They're always late because they don't care."

"They pushed back because they have a bad attitude."

But we rarely stop to ask, What else could be going on here? Maybe they didn't understand the instruction. Maybe they're overwhelmed. Maybe they're navigating something at home. Or

maybe they just see things differently—and that's not wrong, just unfamiliar.

The key here is not to abandon standards or avoid difficult conversations. It's to pause before we label people. It's to be curious before we conclude. And it's to lead from a place of understanding, not assumption.

Positive Intent and Honest Feedback Can Coexist

A helpful mindset shift for leaders is to start with the assumption of positive intent—not because it's always true, but because it gives you a better starting point.

When you assume someone is trying their best, you speak differently. You ask better questions. You stay calmer. You make space for real conversations instead of jumping to conclusions.

But assuming positive intent doesn't mean ignoring real problems. It just means you lead with empathy instead of judgement. You can still be clear, firm, and hold people accountable. In fact, when people feel you see the good in them, they're often more open to hearing where they need to grow.

That's where feedback becomes a partnership, not a punishment.

And here's the other piece—invite feedback about yourself too. No one sees their own blind spots without help. Create space for your team to share how your communication lands, where they need more clarity, or how your decisions impact them. It might be uncomfortable at first, but it's one of the fastest ways to grow as a leader.

And when they see you modelling humility, it encourages them to do the same.

The Danger of Labelling People Too Quickly

One of the easiest ways bias creeps in is when we start putting people into mental boxes. “She’s the reliable one.” “He’s the tricky one.” “They’re just difficult.”

And once those labels are applied, it becomes harder to see anything else.

Even when that person does something great, your brain is likely to dismiss it as an exception. That’s the trap of confirmation bias—we only notice what confirms the story we already believe.

The real risk? You start to lead people based on who you think they are—not who they actually are. And in doing so, you limit their growth and your own effectiveness.

The antidote is to stay open. Keep looking for new evidence. Remind yourself that people are complex and changing—just like you. Be willing to update your assumptions. And always leave room for someone to surprise you.

Falling Victim to Hubris: The Illusion of Certainty

There’s another, sneakier bias that affects leaders as they gain confidence—and that’s hubris.

It’s the quiet belief that because you’ve been in the role for a while, or because you’ve dealt with a similar situation before, you already know what’s going on. You stop asking questions. You stop listening fully. You start trusting your instincts a little too much—and ignore signals that don’t fit your assumptions.

This isn’t arrogance in the loud, braggy sense. It’s more subtle.

It's the mental shortcut that says, "I've seen this before, I know what to do," without checking if this time is actually different.

And sometimes, that confidence is earned. But sometimes, it blinds us.

The best leaders stay open. Not just open to new information, but open to being wrong. Open to learning. Open to course-correcting when needed. They don't just trust their instincts—they test them.

You don't have to second-guess everything. But you do have to stay curious. Especially about the stories you're telling yourself—about others and about yourself.

Bias Isn't a Moral Failing—It's a Leadership Challenge

Here's the most important thing to remember: having bias doesn't make you a bad person. It makes you a human person.

What matters is not whether bias exists in your thinking—it does. What matters is whether you're willing to see it, to reflect on it, and to choose differently when it counts.

The strongest leaders aren't those who think they have no bias. They're the ones who are humble enough to keep looking for it. To ask better questions. To listen longer. To lead with enough self-awareness to say, "Maybe I don't see the full picture yet."

That's the kind of leader people trust. That's the kind of leader people grow under. And that's the kind of leader who builds a culture where everyone feels seen—not just those who think, act, or communicate the same way.

So, as you continue to grow in your leadership, remember this:

You won't always see everything.

But if you stay open, you'll keep learning to see more.

And that's the difference between leading by default—and leading with wisdom.

Chapter 6: Creating a Culture of Trust and Psychological Safety

If you walk into any early learning centre and spend a little time observing, you'll quickly notice something: the children are always watching. Watching how teachers talk to each other. Watching how adults solve problems. Watching how mistakes are handled. They're not just learning through play—they're learning through culture.

And the adults? They're watching too.

Culture isn't about posters on the wall or values written in a handbook. It's about how people feel when they show up each day. It's what people whisper about in the staffroom. It's whether they believe it's safe to speak honestly, or whether it's better to stay quiet and go along with things.

At the heart of every strong, healthy workplace culture is one essential ingredient: trust. And not just the kind of trust that says, "I think you'll do your job"—but the deeper trust that says, "I believe this is a safe place to show up as I really am."

This deeper level of safety is called psychological safety. It's what allows people to be open, to take risks, to admit mistakes, and to grow. Without it, even the best strategies fall flat. Without it, feedback becomes frightening, change feels threatening, and people start playing it safe—emotionally and professionally.

So how do you build that kind of culture? Especially in a field like early learning, where emotions run high, the pace is relentless, and there's rarely time for long reflective chats?

You build it in the small moments. Through presence. Through clarity. And most of all, through consistency.

What Psychological Safety Really Means

Psychological safety isn't about avoiding conflict. It's not about making everyone happy or cushioning every conversation so no one ever feels discomfort. That's not safety—that's fragility.

True psychological safety means people believe they can:

Speak up without being punished or embarrassed.

Make mistakes without fear of humiliation.

Offer a different perspective and still be respected.

Be human—and still belong.

In an early learning setting, this might look like a kaiako saying, "I forgot to finish that learning story," without fear of being judged. Or a teacher admitting, "I'm not sure how to manage this behaviour," and being met with support instead of silence.

It might mean a new team member feeling confident enough to ask questions. Or a senior staff member being willing to receive feedback.

Psychological safety isn't just nice to have. It's the soil where all other things grow—collaboration, creativity, accountability, and wellbeing.

You Can't Demand Trust—You Have to Earn It

It would be lovely if trust came with the job title. But it doesn't. Just because someone reports to you doesn't mean they trust you.

That takes time. And in leadership, trust is built through predictability.

When people know how you're likely to respond, they feel safer. If you're calm when things go wrong, they'll come to you early. If you react with anger or sarcasm, they'll avoid you—or hide things. If you say you're open to feedback but get defensive when it's offered, people will stop telling you the truth.

As a leader, you set the tone. You teach people how to interact with you—not by what you say, but by how you show up when it matters.

And in early learning, this often happens in the in-between moments. How you respond when someone's running late. How you handle a mistake in documentation. How you speak about someone who's not in the room.

Every interaction is a vote for the culture you're building. So the question becomes: what are you modelling?

Listening is Your Superpower

One of the simplest—and most powerful—ways to create psychological safety is to become a better listener. Not just listening to reply. Not listening to fix. But listening to understand.

In early learning centres, the pace is fast. It's tempting to solve problems quickly, give advice, and move on. But people don't always need fixing. Sometimes, they just need to feel heard.

When someone comes to you with a concern, ask yourself: Am I making space, or am I trying to move past this quickly?

That moment of stillness—where you truly listen—can be more impactful than any solution. It says, “You matter. Your voice matters.” And that creates safety.

You don’t need to have the perfect words. Just presence. Curiosity. And the discipline not to fill every silence.

Being Vulnerable—But Not Oversharing

Creating safety doesn’t mean you have to expose every fear or mistake you’ve ever made. But it does mean being human. Letting people see that you’re still learning too. That you’ve had doubts. That you’ve faced similar challenges.

There’s power in a leader who can say, “I don’t know, but let’s figure it out,” or “That was a hard moment for me too.”

Vulnerability opens the door to connection. It shows your team that being a leader doesn’t mean having all the answers—it means being willing to learn alongside others.

Of course, there’s a balance. Your team shouldn’t carry your emotional burdens. They don’t need to hear every detail of your stress. But sharing your humanity—the realness of leadership—helps others find the courage to be real too.

How Safety Transforms Performance

Here’s the real magic of psychological safety: when people feel safe, they stop playing small. They stop hiding. They stop pretending everything’s fine.

Instead, they:

Ask for help before things spiral.
Take ownership of mistakes without shame.
Offer new ideas, even if they're unsure.
Hold each other accountable—with kindness.

In other words, they become more responsible—not less. Some leaders worry that creating a safe culture will make people complacent. But the opposite is true.

When people don't have to waste energy protecting themselves emotionally, they have more energy to give. They take more initiative. They bring more of their full selves to the work. And that's when centres begin to truly thrive.

Repairing Safety When It's Been Damaged

Let's be honest—sometimes, even with the best intentions, we get it wrong. Maybe you snapped at someone when you were tired. Maybe you dismissed an idea too quickly. Maybe someone trusted you with something and you didn't respond as well as you'd hoped.

It happens. We're human.

But here's what separates strong cultures from fragile ones: the willingness to repair.

You don't have to pretend it didn't happen. In fact, ignoring it is often what causes the most damage. A simple moment of accountability—"I didn't handle that well, and I'm sorry"—can go a long way in restoring trust.

You can't erase the moment, but you can show that you see it.

That it matters. And that you're still committed to creating a safe space.

Repair is part of the culture too. It teaches your team that mistakes aren't the end of connection—they're an opportunity to deepen it.

Culture Isn't a One-Off Conversation

If there's one trap to avoid, it's thinking you can fix culture with a single workshop or staff meeting. Culture isn't built through events—it's built through habits. Through how you lead, day in and day out.

The best cultures are often the quietest ones. Not because no one speaks, but because everyone feels heard. Not because there's no conflict, but because it's handled with maturity. Not because everything is perfect, but because people believe they can talk about what's not.

That doesn't happen overnight. But it does happen. Slowly. Deliberately. With leaders like you who are willing to model it first.

You Are the Culture

It can be easy to think of culture as something separate from yourself. Like it's out there, floating around the centre. But here's the truth: you are the culture. Every email you send. Every decision you make. Every look you give in a meeting. Every time you do—or don't—address something.

It all sends a message. And when those messages are aligned with your values, you create a centre where people don't just follow

instructions—they feel inspired to bring their best.

Because in the end, people don't remember the exact words you said. They remember how they felt around you.

Did they feel safe to speak up?

Did they feel trusted?

Did they feel like they mattered?

If the answer is yes—even most of the time—then you're doing more than leading. You're building something special.

And that's how real culture is created.

Chapter 7: The Language of Leadership – Communicating With Confidence

If there's one skill that can elevate a leader more than any other, it's communication. Not just speaking, not just giving instructions—but truly communicating. In early childhood education, where emotions run high and time is short, your words carry weight. Every conversation, every passing comment, every pause can either build trust or erode it.

Communication in leadership isn't just about conveying information—it's about creating connection. It's about how you make people feel when they interact with you. And it's about using language with purpose—not manipulation, but intention.

Why Words Matter More Than We Think

Let's begin with a fascinating example from psychological research. In a well-known study, two police officers interviewed separate groups of eyewitnesses after a staged car crash. One officer asked, "How fast was the car going when it bumped the other vehicle?" The other asked, "How fast was it going when it smashed into the other car?"

The results? People who heard the word "smashed" reported the cars were going faster, and some even "remembered" seeing broken glass—even though there was none. The only difference?

A single word.

Now think about your conversations as a leader. The way you frame a question or a statement has enormous power. You're not just describing reality—you're helping shape how others perceive it.

This is called priming. The words you use prepare someone's brain to interpret a situation a certain way. So if you ask, "Why haven't you done the planning yet?" you've already planted a seed of blame. But if you ask, "Where are you up to with the planning?" you're inviting a more open, constructive response.

It's a subtle shift—but one that can transform a difficult conversation into a productive one.

Clarity is Kindness

In early learning, we're used to being gentle. Soft tone, patient language, lots of checking in. That works well with tamariki—and it often helps in staff relationships too. But there's a fine line between being gentle and being vague.

One of the biggest communication mistakes leaders make is assuming they've been clear, when in reality they've only hinted.

You might say, "I'd really appreciate it if you could stay on top of the sleep checks," thinking you've given clear direction. But what the other person hears might be, "This isn't urgent, and I'll only follow up if I really have to."

Clear communication doesn't mean harshness. It means removing confusion. It means being brave enough to say what you actually

mean—and doing it in a way that honours the relationship.

Instead of softening your message so much that it loses its meaning, focus on being respectfully direct. Say what needs to be said, then stay present for the conversation that follows. That's leadership.

Questions and Statements: Knowing When to Use Each

Here's something that will serve you well as a leader: know the difference between a question and a statement—and know when to use each.

When a situation is open to negotiation, or when you're seeking understanding, use a question. It gives the other person agency. It invites them into the solution.

For example:

"What do you think is the best way to handle this?"

"How are you feeling about the new routine?"

"What would help you feel more confident with this task?"

But when a situation is non-negotiable, or when you're establishing boundaries, don't disguise it as a question. Use a clear statement—then ask for a response.

For example:

"We need everyone to arrive by 7:30. How will you make that happen?"

"This documentation must be completed weekly. What support

do you need to stay on track?"

When you say something that sounds like a suggestion, but really isn't, it creates confusion. People aren't sure what's optional and what isn't. And eventually, they stop taking you seriously.

Being direct doesn't mean being harsh. It means being honest and consistent. You're not taking away choice—you're creating clarity.

Speak to Potential, Not Just Performance

There's a quiet magic in the way leaders set expectations. Some leaders speak to people as they are, focusing on current performance, gaps, and corrections. But the most inspiring leaders speak to people as they could become.

They don't just point out what's missing—they reflect back what's possible.

Here's a small but powerful example. Imagine you're checking in with someone about a phone call to a parent. You could ask:

"Have you made the phone call yet?" That question carries an undertone of suspicion, as if you're expecting they haven't.

Now try:

"How did the call go?" This version assumes competence. It communicates belief that the task is already handled, and the conversation becomes about reflection, not accountability.

That shift changes how people see themselves. When you speak to someone as though they are capable, responsible, and trustworthy, they're more likely to rise to that standard. That's not just positivity—it's leadership through expectation.

Belief doesn't guarantee success, but it increases the likelihood of it.

Praise That Lands, Not Just Praise That Sounds Nice

Praise is one of the simplest tools a leader has—but it's often done poorly. Generic praise like “good job” or “you're amazing” might feel encouraging, but it doesn't always connect. People want to feel seen, not just complimented.

Meaningful praise is:

Specific – What did the person do that mattered?

Genuine – Does it reflect something real and observed?

Connected to values – How did it align with what we stand for?

For example:

“I noticed how you stayed calm when that parent was upset today. That kind of patience really helps build trust in our centre.”

That praise is clear, grounded, and reinforces what matters. It's not about boosting egos—it's about reinforcing culture.

People grow where they feel recognised. And recognition is most

powerful when it's not just about outcomes—but about the way someone showed up.

Handling Tension Without Losing Connection

Even with the best intentions, conversations get tense. Maybe someone is underperforming. Maybe there's been a conflict. Maybe feedback hasn't landed well.

This is where your language becomes even more important. In moments of tension, people's brains often go into self-protection mode. They're not listening with curiosity—they're scanning for threat.

Your tone, body language, and choice of words can either defuse that tension or escalate it.

Start with empathy—but don't dance around the issue. Speak directly to what you've observed, and stay anchored in your intention to support, not punish.

For example:

"I've noticed you've been quieter in team meetings recently. I want to check in because your input is really valued, and I want to make sure you're feeling supported."

That kind of language creates space for dialogue, not defence. It communicates care, not criticism.

You're not avoiding hard topics—you're approaching them with humanity.

When Emotions Are High, Slow the Conversation Down

Sometimes, a conversation starts well but suddenly gets emotional. Someone tears up. Or shuts down. Or raises their voice. In these moments, many leaders panic. They either retreat into niceness or push forward too hard.

The best move? Slow it down.

Acknowledge what's happening. Pause the agenda. Say something like:

"I can see this has brought something up for you. Let's take a moment."

That pause helps both of you regulate. It gives space for reflection. And it sends the message: You matter more than this moment.

You don't have to solve everything right then. Sometimes, a follow-up conversation later is more productive. What matters most is the emotional message your words deliver.

Your Voice Shapes the Room

Every leader brings energy into a room—through their presence, their tone, and their words. Your voice has the power to calm storms, clarify confusion, and inspire action.

You don't need to be loud to be powerful. You don't need to be eloquent to be clear. You just need to be intentional.

So before you speak—especially in moments that matter—ask yourself:

What outcome do I want from this conversation?

How do I want this person to feel?

Am I speaking to their potential—or their past?

Am I leading through clarity—or trying to soften discomfort?

When your language reflects both courage and compassion, people listen differently. They feel seen. They feel safe. And they're more likely to respond with openness and growth.

Leadership Is a Conversation That Never Ends

As a leader, you're never just managing tasks. You're managing meaning. You're constantly shaping how people experience their work, themselves, and each other—through language.

The way you speak becomes the way your team thinks.

So speak with care. Speak with clarity. Speak with belief.

Because in early learning, where hearts are tender and work is meaningful, your words can become the bridge between survival and success.

And that's where leadership truly begins.

Chapter 8: Leading a Moving Team – Navigating Turnover and Transitions

If there's one certainty in early childhood education, it's change. People come and go. Some leave suddenly. Others give plenty of notice. Some are new to the profession. Others bring years of experience—and their own way of doing things.

You're not just leading a team. You're leading a team that's always in motion.

Turnover is part of the landscape in early learning. It's not always a reflection of poor leadership. Sometimes it's the nature of the sector—tight wages, life changes, burnout, study, or family commitments. But that doesn't mean turnover has to unravel your centre's culture.

In fact, how you lead during transitions often defines the strength of your culture more than how you lead when everything's stable.

So let's explore how to lead a team that's in flux—without losing clarity, connection, or momentum.

Change Doesn't Have to Break the Culture

It's easy to think that team culture is something fragile—something that disappears the moment a few key people leave. And yes, change can be disruptive. When someone goes, especially if they've been with you a long time, the gap can feel more emotional than logistical.

People might grieve the loss of a trusted colleague. They might worry about the future. They might even resist welcoming someone new out of loyalty to the person who left.

That's why your role as a leader is to steady the waters. Not by pretending the change isn't significant—but by narrating the transition in a way that gives people a sense of direction.

It starts with acknowledging the change. Not just in passing, but meaningfully. Say something like:

"I know it's hard when someone we value moves on. That feeling is real. But our values, our purpose, and how we treat each other—that's what makes this place strong. And that doesn't leave with one person."

By framing change as part of an ongoing story, you help your team focus forward—even while they honour the past.

Strong Onboarding Starts with Real Conversations

New staff don't just need a checklist—they need context, connection, and clarity. And you, as a leader, set the tone from day one.

How you welcome someone into your centre tells them everything about the culture. Is this a place where they can ask

questions? Where mistakes are okay? Where relationships matter?

Rather than trying to explain everything perfectly, start with conversation. Let them know you're not just here to manage them—you're here to support them.

Here are four simple, powerful onboarding questions you can use in that first week:

"What do you need from me to do your job well?" This invites trust. It signals that their voice matters and that you're listening. "Here's what I need from you so I can do mine." This creates mutual respect and clarity. It shows leadership without being overbearing.

"When you do a great job, how would you like me to acknowledge it?" Not everyone likes public praise. Some appreciate a quiet word. Others love to be celebrated. Asking removes guesswork and makes recognition meaningful.

"When mistakes happen, how do you prefer I approach you?" This one catches people off guard—in the best way. It shows maturity and respect. It opens a door for ongoing feedback and makes future conversations easier.

These questions won't prevent every issue. But they do build a strong foundation of trust and communication. And in a sector where people are often expected to hit the ground running, that human connection can be a game-changer.

Keeping the Team Grounded Through Transition

When someone new joins the team—or someone leaves—existing staff often feel the shift before you even realise it. Routines feel

different. Conversations are more cautious. People may start venting more, or pulling back emotionally.

In these moments, it's tempting to just "push through." But often, the best leadership response is to slow down and check in.

You don't need to hold a big meeting. Sometimes a few intentional moments—asking how people are doing, what they're noticing, and what support they need—can make all the difference.

You might say:

"I've noticed things have felt a bit unsettled since the team changed. That's understandable. Let's talk about what's working and what needs adjusting."

You're not looking to fix everything instantly. You're helping people feel seen. You're reminding them that you're leading with them—not just over them.

Change is Normal. Uncertainty is Optional.

Turnover may be common in early childhood education—but uncertainty doesn't have to be.

When people don't know what to expect, they fill the gaps with fear. That's human nature. But clear leadership can help reduce that fear—even when the path ahead isn't fully mapped.

You don't need all the answers. But you do need to communicate the ones you do have—and be honest about the ones you don't.

Try saying:

“Here’s what’s changing. Here’s what’s staying the same. Here’s what we’re still working out—and I’ll keep you updated.”

Even a little clarity can quiet a lot of anxiety.

And don’t forget to repeat key messages often. People don’t always absorb information the first time—especially when they’re stressed or distracted. It’s not patronising to revisit things. It’s kind.

Don’t Motivate People—Create Conditions for Motivation

It’s easy to think that part of your job as a leader is to “motivate the team”—especially during times of change. But here’s a little secret: you can’t actually motivate anyone. Not directly.

What you can do is create an environment where people feel motivated from within.

That starts with understanding what matters to each person. For one, it might be feeling competent and trusted. For another, it might be creative freedom. For someone else, it might be connection and belonging.

You don’t have to guess. Ask them:

“What makes you feel most energised in your work?”

“What kind of tasks light you up—or drain you?”

“What helps you feel connected to the team?”

When you discover individual motivators, you can start aligning

those drivers with the team's goals. You can delegate more meaningfully. Offer feedback that lands. Create space for ownership.

You're not pushing people—you're inviting them to bring more of themselves to the work.

And when the team sees that you're leading with their motivations in mind, even the hard days feel more purposeful.

Preserving Culture When the Cast Changes

One of the biggest worries leaders have during high turnover is losing the essence of the team—the unique rhythm, connection, and way of doing things that made it feel special.

But culture doesn't live in people alone. It lives in behaviours. And behaviours can be taught, modelled, and maintained—even as people change.

Here's what that means in practice:

Keep talking about your shared values—not just in meetings, but in everyday conversations.

Celebrate the behaviours you want to see more of.

Let new team members experience the culture, not just hear about it.

When someone joins a team where collaboration is normal, honesty is safe, and feedback is kind—they'll naturally start to mirror those behaviours. That's how culture is sustained. Not through pressure, but through pattern.

As the leader, you become the keeper of that pattern. Not perfectly. Not rigidly. But deliberately.

Transitions Can Be Growth Moments

It's easy to treat transitions as something to get through. But they're also a chance to reflect, reset, and realign.

When someone leaves, ask:

What strengths did they bring that we want to maintain?

What habits or challenges are we ready to let go of?

When someone joins, ask:

What fresh perspective do they bring?

How can we use this as a chance to improve systems or practices?

Every new face is an opportunity to evolve—not because the old team wasn't good, but because teams grow best when they're not static.

You don't have to reinvent everything with each change. But you can stay open to the idea that something valuable might emerge—if you're willing to look for it.

Your Presence Is the Anchor

In a moving team, the most powerful stabiliser isn't a policy or a plan. It's you.

Your calm presence. Your clarity of communication. Your consistency in values. These are the things people cling to when the waters get rough.

You don't need to have the perfect onboarding process. You don't need to solve every ripple of tension. You just need to show up—aware, steady, and willing to lead from your centre.

Because when people trust the leader, they trust the transition.

Chapter 9: Empowering Autonomy in a Regulated World

One of the great paradoxes of leading in early childhood education is this:

You're working in a space built on creativity, play, and relationships...

Yet surrounded by checklists, audits, and regulations.

It's a world where you must simultaneously meet compliance standards and nurture a team that feels trusted and empowered.

And if you're not careful, that balance can tip too far in either direction.

Too much freedom? Things feel chaotic.

Too much control? People disengage.

Either way, your team suffers—and so do the children.

So how do you give your people a sense of ownership, pride, and autonomy—without breaking the rules?

That's what we'll explore in this chapter.

Compliance Doesn't Have to Mean Control

Let's be honest: the word "compliance" doesn't exactly inspire joy. It often conjures images of rigid systems, looming paperwork, and a fear of getting it wrong.

But compliance isn't the enemy.

At its best, regulation ensures that children are safe, that learning environments are consistent, and that no child falls through the cracks. Most of the rules exist for good reasons. The problem arises when those rules start to shape how we lead—not just what we need to achieve.

Some leaders respond to regulation by tightening control. They check every box personally. They give specific instructions for every detail. They hover, re-check, and redo.

This may feel safe—but it's exhausting. And worse, it tells your team: "I don't trust you to do it right."

The truth is, you can meet high standards without micromanaging—but only if you're willing to shift your focus from control to clarity.

The Difference Between Telling and Trusting

Let's say you've got a licensing visit coming up. You know the documentation needs to be spotless. The environment needs to be tidy. Staff need to know their roles.

You've got two options.

You do all the thinking. You write the checklist. You delegate every task. You follow up on everything. You run yourself ragged

trying to carry the whole thing on your back.
You bring the team in. You start with a conversation:

“Here’s what’s coming up. Here’s what we need to show. Let’s talk about what’s working, what’s missing, and how we each want to contribute.”

In option two, you’re not being passive—you’re being strategic. You’re still holding the standard. But you’re allowing people to think, decide, and lead in their own space.

And what you’ll often find is that people rise to the occasion when they feel ownership.

Because trust is a powerful motivator. More powerful, in fact, than pressure.

Ownership Starts With Outcome, Not Instructions

One of the easiest ways to shift from control to autonomy is to stop leading with instructions and start leading with outcomes.

Rather than saying:

“Make sure the resources are packed away exactly like this.”

Try:

“We need the space to feel calm, clear, and inviting by 3pm. How do you want to approach that?”

This doesn’t mean letting go of expectations. It means changing

how you express them.

Instead of prescribing every step, you describe what success looks like—and let your team figure out how to get there.

When people feel like they have a say in how something is done, they're more likely to engage deeply with the work. They're not just completing a task. They're solving a problem. Using judgment. Thinking creatively.

And over time, they build confidence—not just in the task, but in themselves.

It's Not About Doing Less—It's About Leading Smarter

Sometimes leaders worry that giving people autonomy means backing away from leadership. That couldn't be further from the truth.

Empowering autonomy is actually harder than controlling every detail—at least at first.

It requires patience. It requires being okay with people doing things differently than you would. And it requires the courage to let people learn from experience, even if that means a few bumps along the way.

But here's the long-term payoff:

You free up your time to focus on strategy and support—not just supervision.

Your team becomes more self-sufficient and proactive.

You build a culture of growth, not just compliance.

That's not a step back from leadership. That's leadership on a deeper level.

Creating Psychological Permission to Lead

It's one thing to say you want your team to take ownership. It's another thing entirely to create an environment where they feel safe doing it.

Many educators have spent years being told what to do and how to do it. Even when you invite them to lead, they may hesitate. Not because they're lazy—but because they've learned not to take risks.

So your job is to create psychological permission—a space where it's safe to speak up, experiment, and fail without fear.

That might sound like:

"There's no one right way to do this. I'm interested in your approach."

"Even if it doesn't work the first time, we'll learn something useful."

"You've got good instincts—I trust your judgment."

You might not see people jump into leadership straight away. But keep reinforcing the message: You don't need to be perfect to take initiative. You just need to be willing.

And when they do take ownership—even in small ways—notice

it. Celebrate it. Let them feel what it's like to be valued for more than compliance.

The Power of Reflective Dialogue

Another tool that helps build autonomy is the simple act of reflective questioning.

Rather than telling someone what to do or correcting a mistake immediately, try asking:

“What do you think worked well today?”

“What would you try differently next time?”

“How did that feel for you?”

This isn't just about helping them find the right answer. It's about helping them build the mental muscle of leadership.

Because autonomy isn't just about action—it's about thinking like a leader. We want our teams to feel confident making decisions, solving problems, and learning from experience.

That only happens if they're in the habit of reflecting—and if you're in the habit of encouraging it.

When Compliance and Creativity Coexist

Let's be honest: there are non-negotiables in early learning. Safety protocols. Ratio requirements. Curriculum expectations. Certain things must be done in certain ways.

But even within those boundaries, there is often room for flexibility and innovation.

Take planning, for example.

You may need to link activities to learning outcomes. That's the compliance side. But how your team observes children's interests, how they document learning, and how they share that story with families—that's where creativity comes in.

Encourage your team to bring their voice into the process.

Let someone create their own visual documentation style. Invite a discussion on how to capture learning in ways that feel meaningful rather than mechanical. Show that following rules doesn't have to kill the joy of the work.

When people feel like they can bring themselves to the process—even within the rules—they're more likely to own the result.

A Leader's Job is to Hold the Edges, Not Fill the Space

Think of yourself like the frame of a painting. Your job is to hold the edges—to set the tone, the boundaries, the expectations.

But you don't have to paint every stroke.

Your team fills in the colour. They bring the texture, the perspective, the life. And the more space you give them to do that—the more you hold the edges without crowding the centre—the more powerful your culture becomes.

That's autonomy. And it starts with trust.

Not blind trust. Not passive trust. But intentional trust, backed by clear expectations and ongoing dialogue.

The Best Kind of Compliance

Here's the irony: when people feel trusted, valued, and empowered—they often exceed compliance.

They don't just tick the box. They do what's right because it's right. Not because they're afraid of being caught.

And that's the culture we want to create.

A team that knows the rules—but doesn't feel ruled.

A team that feels safe to lead, try, speak, and grow.

A team that isn't just meeting standards—but setting them.

That's the power of autonomy in a regulated world.

Chapter 10: Staying Steady in Times of Change

If there's one constant in early childhood education, it's change.

New regulations. New funding models. Shifts in ownership. Restructures. Revised curriculums. Unexpected resignations. And, just when you think everything's settled—another policy announcement lands in your inbox.

It's no wonder leaders in this sector often feel like they're juggling flaming torches while walking a tightrope. And when your team looks to you for calm, clarity, and confidence, the pressure can multiply quickly.

So how do you stay steady when everything around you feels uncertain? How do you lead your team through change without losing momentum—or morale?

The answer isn't about pretending everything's fine. It's about becoming the kind of leader who creates stability, even when you can't guarantee certainty.

This chapter is about building that kind of leadership presence—one that keeps people grounded through the storm.

People Don't Fear Change—They Fear Loss

One of the biggest myths about change is that people resist it because they don't like change. But that's not quite true.

People embrace change all the time. We move cities. Start families. Try new food. Pick up new hobbies. Book holidays. What we don't like is loss—and change often comes with the fear of losing something we care about.

In early childhood settings, that fear might sound like:

“Will I still feel valued in this new structure?”

“Will the children's learning suffer?”

“What if the new owners don't respect our culture?”

“Will I have a job in six months?”

“Are the values I care about still safe here?”

Even small changes can stir up these internal questions. And when people don't feel safe, they fill in the blanks with worst-case scenarios.

That's why your role as a leader isn't just to manage tasks—it's to manage emotions. And that starts with understanding what people are afraid of losing.

Create Certainty Wherever You Can

You can't control everything. But you can create pockets of certainty inside the storm.

That might be as simple as:

Letting people know when the next update will be—even if there's no new information yet.

Clarifying what won't change, like your centre's philosophy or

how children are cared for.

Repeating core values and routines that people can anchor to.

Uncertainty creates anxiety. But clarity—any clarity—builds trust.

Even just saying, “I don’t have the full picture yet, but here’s what I do know,” is more powerful than silence. Because silence creates space for worry to grow. And worry, when unspoken, can quietly erode team culture from the inside out.

So share what you can, when you can, and keep coming back to the foundations your team knows: care, respect, and shared purpose.

Be Honest, Even When It’s Uncomfortable

One of the hardest things about leading through change is knowing when to share uncertainty. There’s a natural temptation to sugar-coat, delay, or put a positive spin on everything.

But people can smell inauthenticity a mile away. And nothing breeds distrust faster than being caught off-guard by a reality they weren’t prepared for.

It’s okay to say:

“This is going to be tough, and I’m still working out how we’ll get through it together.”

That kind of honesty doesn’t weaken your leadership—it strengthens it. Because it tells people: you’re real, you care, and you’re with them in it.

People don't need their leaders to be invincible. They need them to be present.

So be the one who names what others are feeling. Acknowledge the fear. Name the frustration. Invite the doubt into the conversation instead of pretending it doesn't exist.

The moment someone hears, "I get that this is unsettling," they can breathe again.

Keep the Mission Bigger Than the Moment

One of the most effective ways to anchor people during change is to reconnect them with the purpose behind their work.

Because when things feel chaotic, people need to remember why they do what they do.

Remind your team that:

Children still need love, care, and stability.

Families still rely on your centre as a safe, supportive place.

What happens in your classrooms still shapes lives, every single day.

This doesn't erase the stress. But it gives the stress context. It shifts the mindset from "We're surviving this" to "We're still making a difference, even as we adapt."

And purpose, when clearly expressed, is one of the most powerful antidotes to fear.

Don't Just Communicate—Connect

Change management advice often says, “communicate more.” That’s good advice. But it’s not just about saying more—it’s about connecting better.

A poster in the staffroom isn’t a conversation. An email with bullet points isn’t reassurance. Real connection means checking in. Listening. Asking questions. Making space for feelings.

You might ask:

“What’s feeling most uncertain for you right now?”

“What do you need from me to feel supported?”

“Is there anything you’re wondering about but haven’t said?”

Sometimes, just being available—even for five minutes between nappies and transitions—can diffuse tension and restore trust.

You don’t have to have all the answers. You just need to be a leader people feel safe turning to.

Use Anchoring Routines to Protect Culture

One of the most fragile things during change is culture. It’s easy for tension, frustration, or fear to sneak into conversations and shift the mood.

That’s why, as a leader, you need to be intentional about

protecting what makes your culture strong—even in the middle of uncertainty.

That might mean:

Starting meetings with appreciation or good news.

Keeping professional rituals going, like planning circles or shared lunch days.

Giving space for humour and lightness, even during hard conversations.

These routines aren't just nice extras—they're emotional stabilisers. They remind people: "This is who we are, no matter what's happening."

Because culture isn't built when things are calm. It's revealed when things are hard.

Notice Who's Coping—and Who's Not

In times of change, not everyone responds the same way.

Some people throw themselves into work and keep going. Others pull back. Some become emotional. Others go quiet. It's easy to miss the signs, especially when you're under pressure yourself.

So pay attention to the emotional undercurrents. Check in on your quieter team members. Notice who seems more irritable or withdrawn. And remember, people often don't ask for help until they're close to burnout.

You don't have to fix everything—but you can acknowledge it:

“You’ve seemed a bit flat this week—how are you holding up with everything going on?”

Sometimes, just being seen is enough to help someone reset.

Change Without Chaos: The Role of a Steady Leader

Let’s come back to the title of this chapter—Staying Steady.

Because that’s your true task in times of change.

Not fixing everything.

Not carrying everyone’s emotions.

Not having all the answers.

But being the calm in the storm. The consistent voice. The honest, thoughtful leader who doesn’t panic—even when things feel uncertain.

That kind of steadiness doesn’t mean you never wobble. It means you know how to ground yourself, so others can steady themselves too.

So when change comes—and it always does—ask yourself:

What can I clarify?

What can I control?

What can I connect people back to?

The rest will fall into place in time. You Are the Culture Carrier

During change, people often look around and ask, “Are we still the same place? Does this still feel like home?”

As a leader, your presence answers that question more than any policy ever could.

The way you speak. The way you listen. The way you show care, hold boundaries, and navigate uncertainty—that’s what shapes the emotional tone of the team.

You are the culture carrier. And in times of change, that’s more important than ever.

So stay steady. Stay human. And keep leading with heart.

Chapter 11: Creating a Learning Culture in Your Centre

Centres thrive when people grow. That's the heart of it.

Growth isn't just for the children we teach—it's for the adults guiding them too. Yet, somewhere in the day-to-day rush of nappies, learning stories, team meetings, parent chats, and the sheer logistics of running a centre, professional growth often takes a back seat.

Not because leaders don't care. Quite the opposite. In early learning, people care so much they sometimes forget they're allowed to grow, too.

But here's the truth: you can't pour from an empty cup. And the most resilient, inspiring teams are the ones where learning isn't something that's added on—it's something that's built in.

This chapter is all about how to make that happen. How to cultivate a culture where learning is part of everyday life, without adding overwhelm or turning it into a checklist. And it starts with a simple, powerful idea: mindset.

Fixed vs Growth: A Shift in Worldview

Let's talk about Carol Dweck.

In her ground-breaking book *Mindset*, she introduces the idea that people generally operate from one of two perspectives: a

fixed mindset or a growth mindset.

A fixed mindset says:

“I’m either good at this or I’m not.”

“If I fail, I’ve proven I’m not good enough.”

“There’s no point trying if I’m not naturally talented.”

A growth mindset says:

“I can improve through effort and feedback.”

“Failure is part of learning.”

“I haven’t mastered it yet—but I can.”

It’s easy to see which one fuels a healthy learning culture. But here’s where it gets interesting: most people aren’t one or the other. We all have a mix.

A teacher might have a growth mindset about their teaching, but a fixed mindset about public speaking. A leader might be open to feedback on practice, but defensive about admin skills.

So the goal isn’t perfection—it’s awareness. When we become aware of our mindset, we can begin to shift it. And as a leader, your mindset is contagious.

If you view mistakes as learning opportunities, your team will too.

If you speak openly about your own growth, they’ll feel safer to do the same.

It starts with you—but it doesn’t end there.

Coaching Conversations: It's Not About Having All the Answers

One of the biggest myths about leadership is that you need to be the expert on everything.

You don't.

In fact, some of the best leadership moments happen not when you provide answers—but when you ask the right questions.

That's the essence of coaching. And you don't need a qualification to do it.

Coaching, at its core, is simply this:

Helping someone think more deeply, act more clearly, and grow more confidently—by asking better questions.

It sounds simple, but it's incredibly powerful. Especially in a profession like early learning, where reflective practice is already part of the culture.

Let's take a practical example.

Imagine a teacher comes to you after a tough session and says, "That activity didn't work. The kids just weren't engaged."

You have a choice.

You could give advice, jump into problem-solving mode, or offer sympathy.

Or—you could coach.

You might say:

“What do you think made it fall flat?”

“What did you notice about how they responded?”

“If you ran it again tomorrow, what would you tweak?”

These questions don’t just fix a problem. They build capacity. They help your team develop their own internal compass—and that’s what creates long-term growth.

Make Learning Visible

If you want a culture of learning, then learning needs to be seen. Talked about. Celebrated.

That doesn’t mean tacking on another meeting or printing off more resources.

It means weaving learning into what you already do.

Try asking reflective questions during:

Daily huddles: “What’s one thing that went well in your room today?”

Team meetings: “What’s a challenge we’re facing, and what can we learn from it?”

One-on-ones: “What skill would you love to develop more confidence in?”

Over time, these little moments build a shared language. They tell

your team: growth is expected here. Not perfection. Not pressure. Just curiosity, effort, and improvement.

And when people feel safe to grow, they stop fearing mistakes—and start learning from them.

Be the First to Go First

Vulnerability is the birthplace of learning.

That might sound a bit fluffy, but it's true. You can't learn something new without admitting you don't already know it. And in many workplaces—including early learning centres—that can feel scary.

People worry:

“What if I look incompetent?”

“What if others judge me?”

“What if I get it wrong?”

This is where leadership matters most.

As the leader, you have to go first.

Be the first to say, “I found that hard.”

Be the first to ask for feedback.

Be the first to admit you're learning too.

When you do this, you're not showing weakness. You're creating permission.

You're telling your team, "This is a place where we're allowed to be learners—not just teachers."

And that's powerful.

Learning Doesn't Have to Mean Training

Here's something worth remembering: professional development doesn't always mean a big, formal training session.

Sometimes it's:

Swapping strategies with a colleague.

Watching someone model a great interaction.

Reading a short article and reflecting.

Trying something new in the classroom and talking about what happened.

In fact, some of the most effective learning happens in the flow of everyday practice.

So give your team permission to learn on the job. Encourage peer observation. Create space for reflection—even if it's five minutes at the end of the day.

It's not about doing more. It's about noticing more. And talking about it.

Balance Curiosity With Compassion

As you encourage a learning culture, be mindful that growth can feel vulnerable.

Not everyone is in the same place. Some staff may feel defensive. Others may be burnt out. Some may have never experienced a workplace that valued development—and may carry baggage from being criticised rather than coached.

That's why your approach matters.

Lead with curiosity, not judgement.
Offer support before critique.
Ask before assuming.

For example:

Instead of “Why haven’t you improved at this?” try “What do you think is getting in the way of your confidence here?”
Instead of “This isn’t working,” try “Can we explore this together and see what’s possible?”

Compassion fuels growth. Because when people feel psychologically safe, they’re far more willing to stretch, risk, and try.

Celebrate Effort, Not Just Achievement

One of the core principles from Carol Dweck’s research is that praise shapes mindset.

If we only praise results—“That activity was amazing!”—we risk reinforcing a fixed mindset: either you nailed it or you didn’t.

But if we praise effort, process, and resilience, we reinforce a growth mindset.

Try:

“You really persevered through that.”

“I noticed how you adapted on the fly—that took skill.”

“I loved how you reflected and tried again today.”

This kind of feedback builds confidence from the inside out. And when you model it, your team will start doing it too—with each other, and with the children.

That’s when you know your learning culture is taking root.

Keep the Flame Alive

Creating a learning culture doesn’t mean everyone needs to become an education theorist or sign up for endless courses.

It means keeping the flame of curiosity alive.

It means believing your team is full of potential—and helping them believe it too.

It means making growth part of the fabric of your centre, not something extra on the to-do list.

And it means remembering this:

You are not just building a team.

You are growing people.

And every conversation, every reflection, every question—adds fuel to that growth.

So keep asking. Keep sharing. Keep growing.

You don't need all the answers. Just a willingness to learn—and a heart that leads.

Chapter 12: Navigating Conflict Between Staff

In a perfect world, everyone would get along. Every team member would feel seen, valued, and respected. Disagreements would be resolved quickly, and every conversation would feel easy.

But you and I both know this isn't a perfect world. In early childhood education—where emotions run high, pressure is constant, and people care deeply—conflict is inevitable.

That's not a bad thing.

In fact, the presence of conflict in your team isn't a sign that something's wrong—it's a sign that people are showing up. They have opinions. They have passion. They care.

The real challenge isn't avoiding conflict—it's knowing how to walk through it without losing your footing.

In this chapter, we'll explore what it means to lead through tension, mediate disagreements, and help your team move from friction to trust without taking sides or losing momentum.

Conflict Isn't the Enemy—Disconnection Is

Let's start by redefining what conflict actually is.

At its core, conflict isn't just two people disagreeing. It's when

two or more people want different outcomes or believe different truths—and those differences feel personal.

It becomes problematic when we forget we're fighting for ideas and start acting like we're fighting each other.

This is where you come in as a leader.

Your role isn't to fix everyone's problems or silence every disagreement. Your role is to create a safe enough space where people can disagree without disconnecting.

Where hard conversations can happen without breaking trust.

Where feedback isn't a threat—but a path forward.

Disagreeing Without Becoming Opponents

One of the most powerful leadership skills you can develop is the ability to challenge ideas without challenging people.

Here's a simple framework to help guide difficult conversations, whether you're involved directly or mediating between others:

Understand Their Reasoning Start by genuinely listening. What belief is driving their behaviour? What assumptions are shaping their view? You don't need to agree—but you do need to understand.

Acknowledge Their View Say something like, "I see why you'd feel that way," or "That makes sense given your experience." This lowers defences and builds a bridge.

Offer an Alternative Perspective Present your view as another possibility, not a correction. "Here's another way of looking at

it..." makes it safer for people to reflect.

Invite Reflection, Not Agreement Don't push for a 'win.' Ask questions that help the other person think. "What do you think would happen if we tried it this way?"

This approach creates space for dialogue instead of debate. It keeps the conversation constructive rather than confrontational.

And the more you model this, the more your team learns to do the same.

The Power of Narrative: Control the Frame, Not the Person

Every difficult conversation has three key parts:

The message: What you want to say.

The goal: What you want to achieve.

The narrative: The story the other person will walk away with.

Too often, leaders go into tough conversations only thinking about the first two—and forget the third.

But if someone walks away feeling attacked, misunderstood, or devalued, they won't hear your message. They'll focus on the story their brain has built to protect them.

That's why you must control the narrative.

Let's say a team member has been consistently late. You could frame the conversation as "You're always late and it's affecting everyone else." But that could trigger shame or defensiveness.

Instead, you might say:

“I’ve noticed a pattern of late starts and wanted to check in. For me, it’s not just about timing—it’s about how we show respect to the children, the team, and each other. Can we talk about what’s going on?”

Here, the message is the same: lateness is an issue.

The goal is the same: it needs to change.

But the narrative is different: it’s not about blame—it’s about shared values.

Framing is everything.

How People React: Fight, Flight, or Freeze

When emotions run high, people tend to default to one of three responses:

Freeze: They shut down or go silent.

Flight: They avoid the issue or become overly apologetic.

Fight: They get defensive, angry, or aggressive.

These are natural responses—not character flaws. They’re just the brain’s way of trying to stay safe.

Your job isn’t to stop these reactions. It’s to stay steady when they happen. To gently hold the line and bring the conversation back to the point.

Let’s say someone gets defensive when you raise a concern.

Instead of escalating or backing down, you might say:

“I can see this feels uncomfortable—and I get it. But I’d like us to stay with this, because it matters. I care about our relationship and the culture we’re creating here.”

That’s strength and compassion, side by side.

The Streisand Effect: Why Avoiding Conflict Makes It Worse

Back in 2003, Barbra Streisand tried to suppress an aerial photo of her house by suing the photographer. Before the lawsuit, the image had only been downloaded six times. After the lawsuit? Over 400,000 people saw it.

This became known as the Streisand Effect—when trying to suppress something only makes it more visible.

The same principle applies to unresolved workplace issues.

Avoiding a difficult conversation doesn’t make the problem go away—it just makes it grow louder in the background.

Team members start whispering. Resentment builds. Narratives form. And before you know it, a small tension has become a major rift.

So as uncomfortable as it may feel, addressing conflict early is one of the most important things you can do as a leader.

Even if it’s messy. Even if you don’t have the perfect words.

Silence is not neutrality—it’s often misread as approval.

The Conversation Formula: Keep It Human, Keep It Clear

Here's a simple script structure you can adapt for tough conversations:

Start with intent "I wanted to talk because I value our working relationship and want us to stay strong."

State the issue with clarity and care "I've noticed some tension in recent team meetings, especially around planning. It seems like there's a disconnect in expectations."

Acknowledge emotion "I know this might feel awkward or emotional—it does for me too."

Invite collaboration "Can we talk through this together and see what's going on beneath the surface?"

This approach makes it about us, not you. It invites the other person to step into problem-solving mode, not defence mode.

You're not the judge. You're the guide.

Fairness Isn't Sameness

One of the traps leaders fall into during conflict is trying to treat everyone exactly the same.

But fairness doesn't always mean sameness.

People have different communication styles, emotional triggers, and past experiences. What feels respectful to one person may

feel dismissive to another.

Your role is to stay consistent in your values, not your scripts.

Hold the same expectations for behaviour—but adjust your approach to help each person rise to meet them.

And when in doubt, ask:

“What would help you feel heard here?”

“How do you prefer I approach you when something’s not working?”

That kind of tailored leadership isn’t weakness—it’s wisdom.

What Happens After Matters Too

Don’t forget the follow-up.

Even after a tough conversation seems resolved, check in again. Ask how they’re feeling. Acknowledge their courage in showing up.

And if they took a positive step—even a small one—say so.

“I noticed you approached that meeting with more openness. That made a difference.”

This is how you rebuild trust brick by brick.

Conflict Can Strengthen a Team—If You Let It

Conflict doesn't have to tear a team apart.

When handled well, it can actually make a team stronger.

It can clear the air, surface hidden tensions, and deepen mutual understanding. It can help people grow—not just in skill, but in maturity, empathy, and self-awareness.

But that only happens if someone is willing to go first.

To sit in the discomfort.

To hold space for other people's emotions.

To walk the team through the fire—without fanning the flames.

That someone is you.

And if you lead with clarity, courage, and care—conflict won't be the thing that breaks your team. It'll be the thing that bonds it.

Chapter 13: Developing Future Leaders

There's a point in every leader's journey where the spotlight starts to shift.

At first, leadership is all about getting your footing—figuring out how to have the tricky conversations, how to build trust, how to not fall apart when everything feels urgent. But eventually, once you've found your rhythm, another thought creeps in: Who am I helping rise behind me?

And if that question hasn't arrived yet, it will.

Because leadership isn't just about what you can do today—it's about the kind of culture you leave behind when you're no longer in the room. And in early learning, where the work is emotional, demanding, and deeply relational, the way we grow future leaders can shape an entire centre's future.

So let's talk about it—how you spot them, how you support them, and how you grow them without losing who you are in the process.

It Doesn't Start With Titles

When we think of leadership, we often jump straight to titles—head teacher, team lead, centre manager. But real leadership doesn't start with a job description. It usually starts quietly.

It shows up in someone who notices a team member struggling and gently steps in to help. It's the kaiako who keeps calm when things get chaotic, the one who speaks up even when it's uncomfortable, or the one who's always thinking about the whole team, not just their classroom.

These people might not think of themselves as leaders. In fact, they'll often tell you they're "just doing their job." But that's exactly what makes them stand out—they lead through presence, not power.

Your role as a leader isn't to wait until someone is ready and hand them a formal title. It's to notice when someone is already leading, even if they don't realise it yet—and then help them see it, too.

Confidence Grows With Trust

Most people don't step into leadership roles because they feel 100% confident. In fact, many future leaders spend more time doubting themselves than dreaming big.

They're the ones who think, I couldn't do what you do.

Or, I'm not good with conflict.

Or even, I'm not sure people would take me seriously.

And let's be honest—we've all had those thoughts at some point.

What people need isn't a pep talk. They need someone who sees something in them that they can't yet see in themselves. They need someone to say, "I think you've got leadership in you," and mean it.

That kind of belief—genuine, not flattery—can be the thing that flips the switch. It doesn't erase the self-doubt overnight, but it plants a seed: Maybe I could.

Give Them a Taste, Not the Whole Plate

When you spot someone with potential, it's tempting to hand them responsibility and say, "Go for it!" But leadership is like any muscle—it needs gradual resistance, not a sudden overload.

Start small. Ask them to lead a short part of a staff meeting. Let them onboard a new team member. Include them in a decision-making conversation and then check in afterwards. "How did that feel for you?" "What was easy?" "What was awkward?"

That last question—what was awkward—is surprisingly powerful. It gives permission to talk about what didn't go perfectly without attaching shame to it.

That's the secret to developing future leaders. Don't focus on performance. Focus on experience and reflection. The performance will follow.

Talk About the Parts We Don't Usually Talk About

One of the biggest things that holds people back from leadership? The fear that it means giving something up.

They're afraid of being disliked.
They're afraid of getting it wrong.

They're afraid of losing the close peer relationships that make work feel safe and connected.

And those fears aren't irrational—they're real. Leadership does change things. You can't always please everyone. You'll have to make calls that someone disagrees with. You'll mess up and feel awful about it.

But you'll also grow in ways you didn't know were possible. You'll see people thrive because of something you said or did. You'll learn to hold boundaries and still lead with kindness. And if you're lucky, you'll get to be the leader you always wished you had.

When we talk honestly about all of that—the fear, the growth, the shift in relationships—we give future leaders a fuller, more human picture. And we show them they don't have to become someone else to lead. They just have to grow into more of who they already are.

Let Them See How You Think

One of the best ways to teach leadership isn't to give advice—it's to share your thought process.

Instead of saying, "Here's what I did," try, "Here's what I was thinking when I made that call."

Let them see the behind-the-scenes. Show them how you weighed the options, what risks you saw, what values guided you. Share your mistakes, too—and what they taught you.

When future leaders understand how you think, they start to

build their own internal compass. And that's far more valuable than a list of do's and don'ts.

Don't Wait Until You're Burnt Out

There's a myth that leadership development should only begin when a role becomes available. But if you wait until someone leaves, goes on parental leave, or burns out, it's already too late.

The goal is not just succession planning—it's succession thinking.

If someone left tomorrow, who could step in? Not just functionally—but emotionally. Who is already being watched by others? Who do people already turn to when things are tough?

Those are your future leaders. And if you support them now, your centre won't just survive transitions—it'll thrive through them.

You Don't Have to Be the Expert

Let's be honest—growing someone else can be intimidating. You might think, I'm still figuring things out myself. Who am I to mentor anyone?

But you don't need to be the expert. You just need to be honest.

Leadership isn't about having all the answers. It's about helping someone else find their answers, and knowing when to walk beside them while they do.

The best leaders aren't the ones who speak the most. They're the ones who listen well, ask good questions, and give people space to try—even if it's messy.

So if you're willing to do that, you're already the kind of mentor someone else needs.

Let Go of the Spotlight

Here's a tender truth. Sometimes, we avoid raising others up because we're afraid of being replaced.

What if they're better than me?

What if the team prefers them?

What if I've been doing it wrong all along?

These fears are natural. But here's the reframe that helped me:

The greatest compliment to your leadership is someone becoming even better than you.

That's not failure. That's legacy.

Because the strongest leaders don't build followers. They build leaders. And the more of those we have in early learning—the better our teams, our children, and our sector will be.

In the end, leadership is less about holding power and more about passing it on with care.

When you help someone grow into leadership, you're not just investing in them—you're shaping the culture of your centre for

years to come.

It might not be obvious in the moment. You might not get a thank-you or see their journey through to the end. But you'll know you made space. You saw something they couldn't see yet. You watered the soil. You believed.

And that? That might be your most important act of leadership yet.

Chapter 14: The Legacy of a Heart-Led Leader

Let's be honest—most of us don't get into leadership thinking, "I want to leave a legacy." We get into it because we care. We want to make a difference. We want to see our centres thrive, our teams grow, and our tamariki flourish.

But whether you planned it or not, your leadership leaves a mark. It already is.

Every time you respond to pressure with calm instead of panic...
Every time you stand up for someone who's learning instead of shaming their mistake...
Every time you choose to lead from courage, not fear...
That's your legacy being written.

Not in big moments, not in headlines. But in the little things that stack up over time.

You're Already Leaving a Legacy

Here's the thing: legacy isn't some grand, final act you do at the end of your career. It's built slowly, in how you lead when no one's watching.

It's in the teacher who finally believed she was good enough—because you told her so.
It's in the nervous parent who found reassurance in your quiet confidence.

It's in the colleague who decided they could step up too, because you made leadership feel human, not scary.

Legacy is personal. It's relational. It's emotional.

And in early learning? It's everywhere.

Because the work you do shapes lives. And that includes your team, not just the children.

So... Who Do You Want to Be?

Not what role do you want next.

Not what qualifications you want to tick off.

But really—what kind of leader do you want to be remembered as?

Someone who was kind, but clear?

Calm under pressure?

Brave enough to challenge things that didn't feel right, even when it ruffled feathers?

Maybe it's someone who made space for others to rise. Or who brought warmth into difficult conversations. Or who led with consistency and fairness, even when things got tough.

You don't have to have it all figured out. But having a picture in your mind—a North Star—helps guide your decisions when things feel messy.

Because leadership will feel messy sometimes. That's part of it.

But when you know who you want to be? You stop reacting and

start responding—with intention.

You Don't Have to Burn Out to Make a Difference

Let me say this clearly: sacrificing yourself is not a requirement of being a great leader.

You can care deeply and take care of yourself.

You can hold high standards and protect your wellbeing.

You can be present for others and draw boundaries that protect your energy.

In fact, you must.

Because when you're burnt out, your team feels it. When you're exhausted, your decisions suffer. When you run on fumes, the culture you're trying to build starts to wobble.

Sustainable leadership starts with you. With your routines, your mindset, your willingness to pause and say, "Hang on—am I okay?"

And if you're not, that's not weakness. That's a sign you care enough to ask for support.

Let's Talk About Coaching—for a Moment

I believe deeply in coaching. Not because I think leaders are broken and need fixing. But because I know how powerful it is to have space.

Space to reflect.
To think out loud.
To get challenged with kindness.
To be reminded of what you stand for—especially on the days it's hard to remember.

Coaching isn't about having all the answers. It's about getting clarity on the right questions.

And if you've resonated with this book—if you've seen bits of yourself in these chapters—then I'd love to offer you something.

A free 30-minute leadership strategy session. No sales pitch. No expectations. Just a proper kōrero.

You can use it to talk through something you're wrestling with. Or to map out what kind of leader you want to become. Or even just to check in with someone who understands the unique challenge of leading in ECE.

Sometimes, a conversation is all it takes to shift your thinking. To reconnect you with your purpose. To breathe a little life back into your leadership.

If that sounds like something you'd value, reach out. I'd love to support you.

Final Thoughts

You've made it to the end of the book—but really, you're just getting started.

Leadership isn't about a title. It's about the influence you have,

day in and day out. It's about the way people feel in your presence. It's about the courage to stay human in a role that sometimes asks you to be more than that.

And if you're leading with heart—even on the tough days—you're already doing something extraordinary.

You're shaping the future. You're nurturing tomorrow's leaders. You're building a centre where people feel safe, seen, and supported.

That's not just leadership. That's legacy.

So go forward with clarity. With compassion. With courage. And when it gets hard, remember—you're not alone.

I see you. I back you. And I'm here if you need me.