Swinging Between Lines of Fear and Blame

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Abstract

As a leader, getting team dynamics right has always been a difficult job. If you add in the mechanics of fear and blame, you have an increasingly difficult, almost impossible barrier to break through. In these environments making the child the problem can be easy for our staff members but what about asking staff and leaders to consider their contribution to incidents. Our children and young people are the central focus of everything we do. How can our children and young people thrive and experience love in environments where fear and blame are predominant? This paper explores the author's journey within their leadership role, explores how unconscious drivers like fear and blame can lead to toxic cultures, and reflects on some helpful tools which can help to develop better awareness both at an individual and an organisational level.

Keywords

Self-awareness, team culture, growth

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Working in Residential Childcare can be one of the most challenging and also rewarding careers. As a leader within this sector, the role can be isolating, alongside a great deal of pressure and expectation. The sector demands a level of self-awareness, however, in my experience not all of us are self-aware or willing to step into consciousness. At times, we take the route of swinging between the lines of fear and blame.

Burn-out is a very real problem that threatens our staffing levels and the service we provide to our children and young people. Many organisations pay careful attention to this for the staff teams, introducing tools such as balanced rotas and increased support from their manager. In my experience I have not always felt this level of understanding from staff teams. As a leader, my management style is embedded in the relational/parental style; however, when faced with expectations from my staff, which at times feel harsh and relentless, I admit that I found the state of empathy hard for me to access.

I have experienced burn-out numerous times in different roles in my career within Residential Childcare; experiencing it as a leader had the most impact on my emotional wellbeing. I have always been passionate about providing high quality care to vulnerable children and young people. When I stepped into leadership, I transferred this value onto the service my staff received from me. I have always seen management as a service role. I am a giver. Reflecting on this, I have realised that the problem with givers is that we need to be aware of the underlying reasons for this in order to set limits. When I stepped into the leadership role, I did not know this, and I had little self-awareness. Within three years I hit burnout, and I hit hard.

A leader in the state of burnout is disastrous for team dynamics. In my journey, I felt that I could not inspire my staff team to care for the children whose behaviour challenged the service. I had sat in numerous team meetings asking my team to love this child, but my feeling was that none wanted to. I ran numerous team building and development exercises, but I made no progress. As time went on, I

expressed my frustrations to my line manager, and I felt more isolated and frustrated. On reflection, I felt lost in the swamp of shame and blame.

Reaching burnout as leader forced me into a journey of self-discovery and consciousness. It forced me into the situation where I had to consider my ego and how my own trauma and abandonment history played out in my behaviour or expectations (Anderson, 2000). This never-ending journey of healing and consciousness started as the most difficult journey I have ever embarked upon. I have felt rage, disappointment and great sorrow as I faced my fears. I have had days where I have had to wrap myself up with a blanket as the waves of sorrow and shame washed over me while I considered that I am the problem. I had to open my heart to self-love and understanding. As a result of my journey, I made a lifelong commitment to unlearn behaviours that do not serve a helpful purpose for me. One tool that allows me to do this is the R.A.I.N meditation (Brach, 2019).

Brach evolved four steps in this meditation:

R – Recognise. Taking a moment to recognise how your feel.

Using this I noticed I was annoyed with my staff team at times, because I felt some of them did not care about the children in our service. I felt I poured myself into team development and now as I felt unheard, I had isolated myself. I believed my staff team were attending work because of the good pay and did not recognise the privilege they held. I recognised anger and despair in me and also saw how I tried to push these difficult feelings down.

A- Allow. Take a moment to allow yourself to feel your feeling.

When I first named these feelings and expressed my anger, guilt crept in. I tried to push it all down, resist the difficulty and carry on as normal. I believed that in feeling this way I was not being the compassionate leader I strived to be. I felt my self-worth was depleting. By allowing them the space to be, this also allowed the feelings and the energy attached to flow through me. I visualised that the negative energy attached to these feelings was no longer trapped in my body waiting to

come out in passive aggressive ways or physical illness. The concept of *Chakras* (Butler, 2016) or 'energy centres' within the body was helpful for me in this visualisation. When Chakras are open, life energy runs through them freely, and harmony exists between the physical body, mind, and spirit. This helped me to allow the feelings.

I-Investigate. Looking within to investigate your feeling further.

Stepping into consciousness and adapting this way of being to leadership opened wounds I thought I had healed. These wounds related to events in my childhood, particularly my sense of abandonment. In these moments I saw that I had been mirroring my experience as a child in relation to the adults around me. I had been acting out my trauma cycle, demanding the high standards that had been expected of me in childhood. By investigating these feelings, I saw that I had spent years pushing down these feelings, meaning that at any opportunity they sprung to life needing to free.

N-Nurture. Allow self-compassion.

Self-compassion can be very difficult for a continuous self-betrayer. I noticed that for me as recovering perfectionist it was extremely difficult. Taking that step into self-compassion is a brave one, especially in a culture where fear and blame are ever present. Stepping into consciousness and completing this meditation allowed me to recognise my tendency to be a 'people pleaser' as another tool of self-betrayal and another act in trapping myself between the lines of fear and blame.

I found wholeness in my journey to consciousness. I admit I will never be that perfect compassionate leader all the time. I am human, and that is fine.   In healing myself, I have noticed that a number of staff and leaders are also exhibiting behaviours that are caused by earlier psychological wounds, doing their own dance between the lines of fear and blame, unconscious of it all. This can have a negative impact on practice. At some point we all face trauma in our workplace. Our staff teams can often be involved in serious incidents. At times our children or young people can be required to be held safely. Holding another human safely while they

are in extreme distress or listening to disclosures of abuse or even helping a distressed child clean wounds caused by self-injury, is traumatic. These traumatic events can become normalised in time. Unless the trauma is truly addressed, I believe the residue of trauma remains with us, and we can simply become numb to the effects. Therefore as staff and leaders, we need to be open to self exploration and seek positive healing strategies that work for each individual.

In addition, as trauma shapes behaviour, I believe this can shape the culture of our organisations. Without attention paid to our behaviour and without stepping into consciousness, we create a breeding ground for fear and shame. This can be a major influence on any organisation from staff retention to service output. A safe culture is not just about how an organisation survives, but it is what is needed to thrive.

Through my journey of healing I noticed how many times during my career in I had been deep in a toxic culture. On reflection, it seemed like some of the organisations had almost developed a 'personality' that cried out for love and compassion in all the most self-destructive ways, just like the traumatised children we pledge to care for. Bion (1980) argued that in every organisation, two groups are actually present: the work group, and the basic assumption group. The work group is the primary task group; the residential child care team. The basic assumption group describes the unconscious drivers on which the behaviour of the group is based. The basic assumptions are fight/flight and dependency. I cannot count how many times meetings had become a game of 'you' and 'me'. Looking back, it seems like many of us had lost sight of our humanity as part of the group struggle to get the basic assumptions met. Unless we work to understand and deal with the basic assumptions as part of team development and care, our practice can never be as good as it might be.

Now I have committed to be a conscious leader, I strive to use my position as a positive influence. In the book, *Atomic Habits*, Clear (2018) describes, ' "the aggregation of marginal gains" '(p.1). This is the idea of breaking down a task,

looking at everything that is involved to complete the task and then improving each part by 1%.

To heal within the organisation, each task can be broken down into the following components.

- Support

It important to give the supervisee/ staff team the responsibility of defining support. Not only does it create accountability it allows connection. We can never know what someone really needs unless they communicate it to us. In a group setting I asked the staff team what they expected of their manager, and what their manager can expect of them, in terms of support.

- Accountability

Individual development plans introduce accountability. It is vital that the supervisee has overall responsibility of this. A manager can suggest areas of development, but the staff member must take ownership and agree or there will be no progress. With the team I asked them to agree a house ethos and then created an opportunity to discuss progress at each team meeting.

- Development

Tracking development is important. It has always been important to celebrate successes and sit together when things are hard, and progress is slow. It is vital that communication is always compassionate, that it you and me against the problem, not you against me.

The components all interlink, with similar points. They form an everlasting cycle that requires a conscious leader with compassionate communication to fuel it. Like the mind, body and soul, all three interlink and influence the other. On reflection, I think this is true for all journeys to healing and consciousness. In my own case, I experienced a resistance from ego, both mine and others. It is still difficult when faced with such challenges and restless resistance, yet with compassion and love I continue my work.

Like the human mind, Residential Childcare is a complex system; change is inevitable and with that comes chaos and crisis. Because of this we will continue to face many challenges. Our organisations will develop their personalities and cultures will be born. Even with a commitment from the leaders to live consciously, we are all human. This means at times we may once again take to swinging between the lines of fear and blame. One of the ways to make a difference is to develop conscious leadership which can, in turn, implement the correct support, accountability and development components within the group so that unconscious drivers like fear and blame will not lead to toxic cultures.

For those organisations ready to embrace healing and embark on this journey, I send my love. I wish you all the best as you step lightly into your fears and please never forget, we are all just doing our best. As Brown (2018) said 'dare greatly, rise strong and brave the wilderness' (p27).

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About the author

The author has built up a career within Residential Childcare now currently holds the post of Registered Manager, she is extremely passionate about providing quality care to our most vulnerable children and young people. The author is a certified NLP practitioner and also provides coaching to those whom have experienced discrimination within the workplace.