



## The road to leadership

*Rose Rees-Owens – New Zealand Tertiary College(NZTC) Communications Officer talks to Luis Hernandez the 2016 NZTC Symposium keynote speaker about his unexpected journey from an architecture student to an internationally recognised leader in early childhood education.*

Luis Hernandez encourages early childhood educators to hold true to their passion for early childhood education. A profession that he sees as valuing children and their families. Like any skill, leadership requires passion and practice in order to foster and master it. Using the analogy of sports, singing or learning an instrument to demonstrate the importance of practice alongside natural ability, Hernandez clarifies: “Not everyone can play the same instrument, or be a soprano or the best defence. Each of us have individual abilities and skills that apply to a variety of leadership situations and like polishing any skill, it takes thousands of hours of practicing meaningful work” (Hernandez, personal communication, 2016).

As an international frontrunner in early childhood education and management leadership; and co-author of *Learning from the Bumps in the Road*, Hernandez started his education journey studying architecture at San Francisco State University. In order to support his young family, he began to work in the early childhood education sector. At the time people’s perceptions of early childhood education, was it was a job and profession anybody could do. Hernandez soon found that he had a passion for the work and profession and guided and supported by a ‘master’ mentor Hernandez learnt that success, required enthusiasm and hard work.

Luis Hernandez’s love of people and his desire to discuss and challenge new ideas and trends naturally drew him towards a leadership role. His leadership journey began in earnest with a small local campaign advocating for better standards for professional development for early childhood educators. This lead to national discussions. Not long after the local campaign, Luis was invited to a meeting in Washington DC with decision makers to discuss professional development opportunities. The conversations he had with national leaders, added weight for more robust professional development opportunities for early childhood educators.

Hernandez acknowledges that the road to leadership was not a smooth journey and he had to work hard to achieve. Practice, determination and passion alongside his natural leadership abilities he now attends events internationally sharing his expertise with early childhood education educators motivating and educating them on best practices in leadership. In his keynote address at the NZTC 2016 Symposium Hernandez, drew inspiration from Adam Bryant’s book *The Corner Office* (2011) in sharing five key qualities that can be strengthened through practice.

Five key qualities to leadership:

- **Passionate curiosity** – a desire to keep learning and staying open to new ideas. Part of this is learning to ask the right questions to get to the bottom of a problem or to understand a complex situation
- **Battle-hardened confidence** – the ability to overcome adversity and maintain a positive attitude when facing challenges
- **Team** – create a supportive environment where team members feel bigger than their individual responsibilities. A sense of team can be created by organising a group of people around one simple word – we
- **Communication** – practice simple, brief and concise communication. A way to increase your skills is by actively listening to team members instead of waiting for a turn to speak



- **Fearlessness** – be bold, take risks and don't be afraid to shake things up even when things are running smoothly.

**Passionate curiosity** is one of the common qualities that sets good leaders apart. A lot of learning comes from asking the right questions to find the underlying cause of a problem, or to understand a complex situation. “It's this relentless questioning that leads entrepreneurs to spot new opportunities and helps managers understand the people who work for them, and how to get them to work together effectively” (Bryant, 2011, p.13). Applied to an early childhood setting educators are encouraged to keep learning on topics and issues that can impact on their work with children and their families such as best practices with technology.

The ability to overcome adversity and maintain a positive attitude when facing challenges is **battle-hardened confidence** (Bryant, 2011). Leadership comes to the fore when an organisation is facing hardship and employees look towards their leaders to make the tough decisions. Having the right attitude and the drive to overcome a set-back goes a long way to developing battle-hardened confidence. The first step is to have a healthy relationship failure. Obstacles on the road to leadership are seen by Hernandez as learning opportunities. Often those new to leadership, or those that are letting their abilities lag, are afraid of taking risks and trying new things. Hernandez explains “that lesson number one in leadership is that it is okay to make mistakes – accept mistakes and learn from them. It is unrealistic to be perfect and obstacles and bumps on the road are good because if the road is always smooth, we are never challenged to be better” (Hernandez, personal communication, 2016).

Leaders know how to foster a sense of **team** among their colleagues. Hernandez said it is important to create a supportive environment and for everyone to feel that they are part of something bigger than their individual responsibilities in early childhood centres. Simple gestures such as celebrating team members' birthdays can go a long way to achieving a sense of team. Leaders also need to encourage and support individual strengths that will benefit the entire team.

Teaching our youngest generation of learners requires simple, brief and concise **communication**. When talking to children under five, teachers need to be direct, clear and to the point. Moreover, leaders expect their employees to be clear and direct with them but this goes both ways. Staff also thrive on clear and direct communication from their leaders and to achieving this is through the practice of active listening. Active listening requires full concentration and attention.

**Fearlessness** is more than just risk-taking, it is about shaking things up even when things seem to be going smoothly (Bryant, 2011). Companies [and people] get into trouble when they get complacent, when they settle in and say, okay, we are [I am] doing okay now (Bryant, 2011). Hernandez adds that a common fear among leaders was feeling like an imposter and it is something that he experienced early in his career. “My biggest imposter fear was being in the presence of ‘leaders’ all with doctorate degrees, volumes of books, and speakers of great wisdom. The imposter fear was always ‘I'm not supposed to be here – this is for the heavy hitters of the field’. Fortunately, I mustered the confidence and the resilience to move forward.” Hernandez realised that he brought his own set of skills to the conversation such as a sharp sense of humour and the ability to keep an audience engaged and said the imposter faded away under its own weight (Hernandez, personal communication, 2016).

Luis Hernandez reiterates that practising the five principles of leadership – passionate curiosity, battle-hardened confidence, team, communication and fearlessness will help early childhood educators become better leaders and in doing so they will hold true to their passion for early childhood education. Those new to leadership should start locally – in a school, a neighbourhood, or even a household.