

Moving Toward a Shared Vision

London Bridge Child Care Services • London, Ontario, Canada

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London Bridge Child Care Services was formed in 1993 and today operates 14 child care centres in and around London Ontario, Canada. In 2000, a significant shift in the organization's approach to curriculum called for a courageous change in their approach to leadership and their organizational structure.

Have you ever considered what it must be like to move an elephant? As we reflect on the journey that we have been on for the past 20 years at London Bridge, the image of moving an elephant often comes to our minds. When an elephant is content on staying put, getting him to move can be a daunting task. But when he is eager and wanting

to move, it is next to impossible to keep him still.

From the beginning, London Bridge has always been an organization whose people cared deeply, worked hard, and strove to provide what we believed was high-quality care to the children in our community. On the surface, things

seemed to run smoothly, but behind the scenes we were experiencing some ongoing challenges. Staff turnover was high. Growth opportunity was minimal, centre directors were pulled in many different directions, and there was a strong 'us and them' mentality between the educators in the classrooms and the leadership of the organization. When we reflected, we realized that we were on a path that didn't serve the way we ultimately wanted to be with children, families, and each other. There was a disconnect between where we wanted to go and our day-to-day practice.

One of the biggest disconnects was in the role of leadership. While there was an expectation that our centre directors offer meaningful pedagogical support to the educators in their centres, their focus was primarily on administrative responsibilities and daily operations. They rarely found time to spend in classrooms and much of their energy went into guiding behavior and putting out fires. Our leaders felt pressure to have all of the answers and we found ourselves falling into a pattern of focus-



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ing more on barriers than possibilities. Classroom teachers told us that career advancement meant leaving the classroom to become a director, despite the stresses that this role could bring. The structures we had in place supported this thinking: Leaders received greater pay, more flexibility, access to higher levels of professional development, and opportunities to contribute to important decision making. We longed to figure out how we could live into a bigger vision for ourselves: one where reflection, critical thinking, collaboration, innovation, engagement, and joyfulness were what defined us. We needed to create an intentional culture where we could ensure that the way we lived day to day moved us along to where we wanted to go.

Today we have highly engaged educators, leaders, and support staff who inspire each other and work collaboratively. We have developed systems and structures that align with our vision and help us to be the kind of community that we want to be. While we know there is still much we have to learn, we have been able to identify key areas that have helped to transform our practice and shape our culture.

Establish a Shared Vision

Dreaming about what we want for ourselves can be harder than it sounds. We

had to practice dreaming. Ian Gibb, one of the founders of London Bridge, used to ask, "If you had all the resources you needed, what would you do with it?" What he did by posing that question was liberate us from our practice of focusing on barriers: there were abundant reasons we could come up with about why we couldn't do something. Instead he helped to ignite our imaginations and set us dreaming about *what we envisioned for ourselves* and more importantly why. This visioning created a culture where we gave more attention to *where we wanted to go* rather than *what was stopping us*. It helped us to work from our strengths and to notice that ultimately it is our daily practice that either moves us toward or away from the grander vision we have for ourselves.

Develop a Set of Core Values

While London Bridge was founded on a set of core values, most of our people didn't know what they were. It wasn't until we went through the process as an organization to reflect on what we stood for and took time to think together about how we wanted to be that we were able to articulate a set of core values that ultimately guide our daily practice. Decisions around who we hire, how we treat each other, use our time, spend our money, and set up our environments are

determined by what we value and the kind of learning community we want to be.

Pedagogical Approach to Leadership

One of the most significant changes we made at London Bridge was to transition from an administrative to a pedagogical approach to leadership. As administratively-focused leaders, our centre directors were pulled away from classrooms. This made it extraordinarily difficult for them to understand the complexities that existed there or to offer meaningful support to educators. We longed for a place where educators and leaders could work side by side in order to think and learn together and draw on each other's strengths. Defining the differences between an administrative role and a pedagogical role and then streamlining our administration enabled our centre directors to re-focus their energy on the classrooms and begin to develop their skills as pedagogical leaders.

The switch to pedagogical leadership has led us to:

- Rethink the way we work and learn together with other adults.
- Understand that growth and development take time and, like children, adults learn best when they are interested and engaged.
- Nurture dispositions that are useful for educators in their day-to-day practice such as curiosity, collaboration, reflective and critical thinking, questioning, delight, and joyfulness.
- Focus less on teaching and more on how learning takes place for both children and adults.
- Ensure that educators have time and methods to reflect on their own prac-



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tice, to study children, and to explore multiple perspectives.

- Ask questions that engage educators both intellectually and emotionally and require the consideration of how theory informs practice and practice informs theory.

Create a Collaborative Culture

Moving toward a shared vision meant moving out of silos and creating systems that supported our working together. We came to understand that although our daily responsibilities may be different, there is a connection between finance, facilities, human resources, program leadership, and the educational program. We continue to seek out ways to understand each other's roles and recognize how decisions that are made in a boardroom impact experiences in the classroom. The saying "We are better together" may sound cliché, but we have come to accept it as an important truth.

Creating a Space for Staff

We have an unwavering commitment to our people and treating them well. It is our experience that offering autonomy and flexibility for individuals in their work; opportunities for growth, collaboration, and recognition; and a sense of connectedness encourages strong engagement and an overall commitment to the organization. Although, we have established consistent standards, practices, and support systems across the organization, we recognize the importance of being flexible to ensure we meet the diverse and unique needs of our people. Participating on committees and working groups, writing articles, and presenting to peers are some examples that directly contribute to creating a place where we continuously learn from each other, share our ideas and thinking, strengthen relationships, and continue the ongoing development of the organization.

Professional Development

Lifelong learning and professional development have always been strong values at London Bridge. However, we have come to realize that not all professional development is created equal. Over the years we have transitioned from offering short, one-topic workshops and training sessions that are set on quick fixes, to a more sustainable approach that focuses on three guiding principles:

- **Principle One:** *Engage with educators in ways that parallel how we hope they will engage with children.*

The values that we have for children and families are the same ones we have for each other. If we want educators to hold children in high regard, to challenge their thinking, engage them both emotionally and intellectually, make their learning visible, pursue ideas over a long period of time, and be willing to be changed by what they learn, then we need to offer educators opportunities to feel and experience those same things.

- **Principle Two:** *Commit to the long haul.*

Like children, adults also need time to scaffold learning and build on

what they know. A pedagogical approach that is grounded in reflection, dialogue, collaboration, and critique needs plenty of time. Offering opportunities to revisit ideas, study articles, books, and practices over time have helped us to develop a deeper, more meaningful understanding of our own work and to make connections between theory and practice.

- **Principle Three:** *Professional Development is imbedded in everything we do.*

Rather than isolating professional development experiences to one- or two-hour sessions over lunch or after work, these have become an integrated practice that shapes how we live together as a community. By establishing systems, structures, and habits that help us to become more reflective in our daily work, we are able to learn from our own practice.

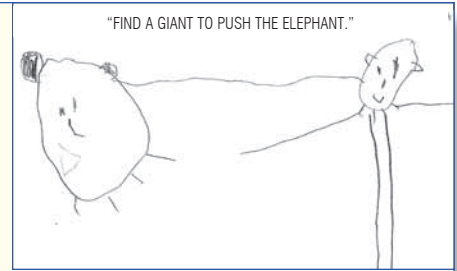
Summary

We live in a fluid environment; we look different day to day and year to year because we are continuously evolving. While we know that we have much to learn and much to do, it is in answering the question "What kind of community do we want to be?" that keeps us dreaming about possibilities.



So the elephant keeps moving. Sometimes so slowly it feels as though we are hardly moving at all. Other times, so fast we can barely keep up. When we get stuck, we ask the children (whose wisdom guides us towards our vision) what to do to get the elephant moving. The children tell us:

■ “Find a giant to push the elephant.” Giants are strong and powerful. We need strong and powerful leadership.



LILY: “YOU GET LOTS OF PEOPLE TO HELP YOU PULL IT.”



■ “Get lots of people to help you pull it.” If you want to move something, you need to work together.

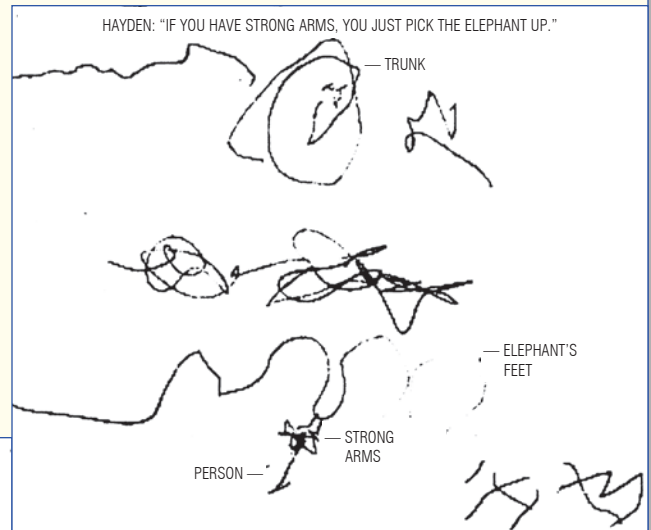
■ “He will move if he wants to move.” We know that sheer will does not move the elephant. When we find ways to inspire and support our educators to bring their best and to be innovative in their work, they want to move.



time or another we all need to feel strong arms carry us through turbulent times. We hold each other up knowing that we are all in this together and together we move towards a greater vision.

■ “Push his legs.” Movement happens one step at a time. Sometimes we just need someone or something to give us the push to keep moving.

■ “If you have strong arms you can pick up the elephant.” At one



■ “Elephants like peanuts, so we could leave a trail of peanuts and he might follow the way we want to go.”

Each one of us brings something to the team and by reflecting on what we each bring, we can inspire each other to move along.

