

## FRONTLINE LEADERSHIP

*Frontline is a charity, launched in 2013, with a mission to transform the lives of vulnerable children by recruiting and developing outstanding individuals to be leaders in social work and broader society.*

*The theme of leadership lies at the heart of Frontline's ethos. Leadership influences who we recruit onto our innovative programmes. It determines how we teach, coach and assess our participants. It influences their roles and how we expect them to perform. It shapes the outcomes we seek from the local authority teams they join. And beyond that we see leadership as a driving force in participants' lives wherever their journey takes them.*

*This document has something to say to more than just the Frontline participants themselves. Our beliefs about leadership are for all who come into contact with our programme. They infect the Frontline organisation itself and how it projects its own leadership contribution in society. It is in this broadest sense that we describe the work in which Frontline engages as **leadership intervention**.*

*We hope this claim is not too grand; the best leadership combines humility with determined purpose. Rather, it is a stiff test for Frontline to live up to and be judged by. While we are confident about the solid base that underpins this document, we welcome readers' reflections on what we are saying. We hope to promote dialogue and engage in discussion with those interested in our ideas about leadership in children's social work and society in general.*

**Josh MacAlister**, Chief Executive

1. Frontline develops outstanding individuals to be leaders in social work and broader society. This remains a high priority as in spite of many strong initiatives, examples of poor performance in children's social work remain. We aim to positively impact children and families' lives, by shifting society's perceptions of social work, selecting people through rigorous methods, promoting a model of social work that helps families change and building a network of skilled social workers and leaders.
2. The principles of great leadership are inherent in what we do and run like a thread through all Frontline activity. Leadership informs how our programmes are designed and delivered and how participants are selected, taught, coached and observed.
3. This document concentrates on our view of leadership and how this fits within social work. We also consider the impact that effective leadership has on relationships and organisational culture. We intend it to inform the work of those involved with Frontline, including participants, Consultant Social Workers, staff, applicants, coaches and partner organisations.

## DEFINING LEADERSHIP

4. There is much debate and little agreement on a single definition of leadership, the quotes below provide examples which align with Frontline's position:

*"I suppose leadership at one time meant muscles; but today it means getting along with people."*

**Mahatma Gandhi**

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*"I am fundamentally an optimist. Whether that comes from nature or nurture, I cannot say. Part of being an optimist is keeping one's head pointed toward the sun, one's feet moving forward."*

Nelson Mandela

*"We cannot change what we are not aware of, and once we are aware, we cannot help but change."*

Sheryl Sandberg

*"Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other."*

John F. Kennedy

5. Leadership activity is not the responsibility of individuals acting alone. Leadership is a social activity and is conducted through relationships, it is therefore dependent on the quality and connection of those relationships. Leadership is intrinsic in all interactions - between families, colleagues and peers from other agencies, and with organisational elements such as policies, protocols and culture. It is the tone of these interactions, which determine the leadership culture.
6. Leadership is not anyone's sole responsibility and acts of leadership invariably have their origins in the values, beliefs and aims of individuals.
7. It is our strong belief that leadership can exist anywhere. Leadership in social work is necessary when influencing and empowering and supporting families to change. In management, skilled leadership may take the shape of a supportive, yet challenging coaching conversation. Acts of leadership can be small or large, subtle or overt and understated or ambitious - in each case these acts have the power to effect lasting change.
8. Leadership is often perceived to be inextricably linked with senior managers, yet the notion of authority sitting with one commanding leader single-handedly taking charge, is now less common. In social work relational leadership is vital across an organisation. It is Frontline's view that effective leadership is best enabled when the organisational culture encourages people to challenge, initiate, improve and change. Such cultural cues are reinforced in management as well as by HR policies, processes and approaches to quality assurance.
9. By restricting 'ownership' of leadership to individuals, organisations miss the opportunity for shared accountability. Additionally situating so much responsibility with individuals increases instability, should an individual leave the organisation. Systemic approaches encourage leadership within all individuals working in an organisation from front line and support staff to senior managers, enabling the development of a widely understood and shared leadership culture: "that's the way we do things here".

## LEADERSHIP IN SOCIAL WORK

10. We are explicit throughout this statement, and in all our activity, about our aims for those working with Frontline to constructively "disrupt" and challenge within their systems, with the intent of improving those systems. Frontline supports those working in social work to achieve this.
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11. It is our view that improvement is always possible, whether this be fundamental change or a more subtle recalibration, in either instance by taking a position that is different, curious or courageous there is the scope to make tomorrow better than today.
12. The challenges within social work are well documented. Social workers are working to transform the lives of children and their families within a national landscape that is undergoing significant change and within organisations that can inadvertently add further challenge. All whilst working within a day-to-day context in which the stakes are frequently uncomfortably high - it is easy to see the need for fresh thinking.
13. The Frontline Organisation works to support the development of social work, and challenge unhelpful attitudes and assumptions, by exploring different approaches to careers in social work and how individuals are best developed. We work closely alongside local authorities (children's services) and at times act as the grit in the oyster by being disruptive and innovative to contribute to the stimulation of an improved social work system.
14. Those working with us are seen as innovators, working to improve the social work offer to vulnerable children and their families. Being perceived this way can feel exposing, risky and daunting. Conversely it is the cumulative effect of individual (and at times subtle) acts of leadership with families and in social work systems, which enable transformational change. The likelihood of positive change increases incrementally as the scale and impact of the Frontline Fellowship grows.
15. The concept of leadership as disruptive innovation is equally applicable within local systems, and wider reforms. Whether disruption takes the shape of radical change or minor local improvement, an element of disturbance to the status quo is inevitable. Leadership means accepting that this is likely to trigger resistance in peers or managers, and courageously going ahead despite this. Taking this position requires a range of capabilities including resilience, self-reflexivity, professional authority, analysis and decision-making and the ability to influence and inspire.

## ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

16. Participants from Frontline's programmes are encouraged to be confident in exercising their leadership skill to challenge families and their organisations (as appropriate) in their roles. We do not underestimate the varied and powerful ways in which the local authority culture and practices can inhibit people's ability (and impetus) to impact, though we know that even in the most challenging organisational context – great leadership happens. We also recognise the role (that those doing programmes with) The Frontline Organisation can play in influencing this context and are explicit in our expectation that our partner authorities, create and sustain an environment that encourages and supports this.
  17. Local authority (children's social care) systems vary widely in many ways: structure; culture of leadership; approach to supervision; communication style and practice framework to name a few. Personal leadership is enabled, or limited, by an organisational system. Whilst those in positions of power can encourage personal leadership, they can also inhibit it. The interplay between leadership and power is relevant. When an organisation privileges hierarchy, it can be difficult for those without hierarchical power to apply their leadership. Even within a less hierarchical organisation, it can take courage for those with less formal power to speak out.
  18. In children's social work very little is ultimately controllable. Even so, many social work systems currently reward those who use data and detail in an attempt to manage risk and
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uncertainty, which can result in social workers and managers trying to maintain control at all times, because they will be held accountable if anything goes wrong. In such an environment it can be difficult to trust others, particularly those with less experience.

19. Though front line staff may have less experience than managers, those at the front line in any organisation are closer to what is happening, have more information about families and are potentially better placed to understand what is needed. When making these judgements we encourage people to assume good intent and draw on their patience and diplomacy. The challenge for participants (starting a career in social work) is to judge how they apply their leadership skill and personal power appropriately with families and in their organisational context, to effect positive change. The challenge for managers is to enable and empower others, rather than striving to maintain personal control. The challenge for organisations is to trust people at all levels and embed this approach within the fabric of the organisation.
20. Social systems are invariably complex and messy, with more 'wicked' than 'tame' (Keith Grint, Professor of Public Leadership, Warwick University) problems for which solutions are far from simple. System forces are powerful and can result in a temptation to blame the system when things don't work well. Though the system can play a significant part, people – individually and collectively, have the ultimate power, to radically improve systems.
21. Organisations have their own unique systems and the clearer the understanding of these (and their foibles) the easier it becomes for an organisation to develop and grow. System sight is crucial to leadership development and understanding complex relationships and their interdependencies is key to growing leadership skill and improving organisational culture.

## CONCLUSION

22. Inherent in effective leadership is the aim and willingness to continue learning and developing, individually and organisationally. We believe strongly that striving to develop by constantly learning, adapting and improving, is everyone's business.
23. We understand the benefits of providing further clarity on our perceptions of the application of leadership. As such we have produced a series of detailed practical guides to accompany this statement. These will outline our ideas and expectations on the ways that Participants, Consultant Social Workers and Frontline staff might apply their leadership skill within their role and remit.
24. Frontline takes a long view on leadership. Our aim is to prepare participants to be effective and influential within social work and in wider society for the benefit of children. Some will seek to apply their leadership in fields beyond social work practice, for example in policy design or in setting up transformative ventures (such as programmes like Pause). When doing so, they will be working as part of a network of thousands of Fellows committed to improving key life outcomes for children at risk of abuse or neglect.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## Frontline Leadership Guide

### How Frontline participants exercise practice leadership

Few social workers join the profession planning to become leaders; most aim to be skilled practitioners, effectively supporting children and families, however practice leadership is the foundation of good social work. Whether working directly with families, taking part in a unit meeting or attending a service-wide conference, social workers consistently use leadership skills. This practical guide concentrates on how leadership fits within social work and how you, as participants, can use leadership. The examples have been grouped in a series of leadership capabilities, designed specifically for social work.



Each of your leadership journeys are exceptionally personal. People start at different points and have different experiences at different times. People also bring different values, experiences and ethical positions to their work. It is from these core experiences and values that practice leadership grows.

We know (from feedback from previous cohorts) that people develop practice leadership skills throughout the programme and beyond. The examples are intended to show different ways that you might use leadership in different situations. There is no 'right way'. Some examples may be more suited to the early stages of the programme, others might sit more comfortably once you have been in a local authority for some time. Feedback suggests that leadership is a process that evolves over time and that people's responses to leadership opportunities are highly individual.

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**Resilience and Self Reflexivity** - enables focus and tenacity when faced with increasingly challenging circumstances. Aware of personal strengths, potential and areas for future growth and understand how their behaviour impacts on others.

- You have had a tough phone call with a teenager who is angry with you as she wanted to go home for the weekend and this isn't possible. You feel really frustrated and down. You seek out a supportive colleague who will help you work through the feelings in a way that makes you feel like you can approach the rest of the day. When the dust has settled, you also reflect on how the conversation went, and what you might do differently next time.
- You keep clashing with a colleague in your team. Rather than attributing this to their behaviour, you recognise the feedback loop and the role you play. You invite your CSW to help you think about how to shift the way you communicate with this colleague.
- You realise you find it difficult when you are allocated a case and don't get a chance to speak with your CSW straight away. This has happened a few times and has resulted in you feeling that you don't have a good handle on the case, which leads to frustration. You decide to talk to your CSW with a view to better understanding why this particularly bothers you and how you can manage this going forward.

**Analysis and Decision Making** - spot patterns between potentially unrelated concepts and use this information to make informed decisions. Take a systems view, using curiosity, empathy and imagination, to see the whole rather than the part.

- You need to raise a particular topic you know will be difficult for a parent to hear, so you think about how to do so. By weighing up the different approaches you might consider all you know about the parent, what colleagues including from other agencies think about the situation, the parent's views, your relationship with the parent and what your intended outcome is from the conversation, to arrive at the best approach for the situation.
- You want to take a course of action with a family and are not sure your CSW will agree with you. Before raising this, you carefully consider your patterns of interaction and think through the various factors at play so that you are confident in your position. When discussing it with your CSW, you co-create the problem so that you both reach a creative solution.
- You keep your strongly held beliefs open to change, and contribute towards a learning environment in which hypotheses can be experimented with. In a unit meeting, you agree to reposition yourself and see a case through fresh eyes and this helps the unit to come to a collective decision on the next steps with the family.

**Professional Authority** - build stable relationships and engender trust in others by drawing on your confidence in your ability and using excellent interpersonal skills.

- You volunteer to do a presentation on systemic approaches at a service away day, to help social workers without prior systemic training understand how to apply the ideas when working with families. You carefully consider how to present the ideas to ensure they are meaningful and memorable to colleagues.
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- You are nearing the end of your year in the unit and your CSW asks that you attend court with him to speak to certain elements of a case you have worked on. You are nervous but speak coherently and confidently about your knowledge of the family and your commitment to ensuring the best interests of the child are the paramount consideration.
- You have been asked to meet with an experienced social worker from another team, who has some questions about a family with whom you are working. She has previously worked with the family and disagrees with the approach you are advocating. She has limited understanding of the Frontline programme. You explain your position and work to convince her of your approach and knowledge of the case, and you ask whether she might be willing to discuss the case again so you can benefit from her experience with the family.

**Impact and Influence** – willing to use influence and persuasion when the context calls for it. Equally able to understand and appreciate others' positions and priorities, and tailor communication to suit the context.

- A very vocal teacher thinks a child should be removed, and is steering the professional network towards this view. In a professional meeting you are able to put forward a convincing and compelling case that the child should remain living with his parents, whilst tuning into the professional concerns and dynamics.
- In your opinion unit meetings have been straying slightly off task. Your sense is that the unit have got very used to hypothesising but at times you can collectively be weaker on agreeing and assigning actions. You want to raise this with your CSW and convince him to see it from your perspective.
- Your legal department insists you change your initial court statement, by removing the strengths of parenting capacity that you have included. You make a case for keeping it equivocal, emphasising that it is important evidence and is your professional opinion. You convince the lawyer that the courts will appreciate the thoroughness and critical analysis.

**Learning and Development** – curious, and willing to develop and acquire knowledge, skills or experience and to share learning. Understands that having defensive feelings (a natural tendency) does not mean failure, rather an opportunity to learn from mistakes and consciously overcome the urge to apportion blame.

- Your CSW joins you on a visit to a family to observe your practice. She gives you some feedback on how she thought the visit went. You notice feelings of defensiveness rise to the surface and register an inclination to make excuses. You acknowledge these feelings whilst welcoming her comments and ideas for improvement, and spend some time considering how to develop these so you can try a different approach at the next opportunity.
  - You realise that one of the other participants in the unit writes great reports, so you ask him whether he would be willing to make some time to read through one of your reports and give you feedback.
  - Something happens with one of the families you are working with, which makes you feel like you have let a child down. You see this as a learning opportunity and actively seek feedback
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from the family and colleagues from other agencies. Once you have some clear feedback you initiate a conversation with your manager to discuss this further and consider together how you might approach similar situations in future.

**Inspiring Others** - inspire families, peers and partners, through motivating and uniting them around shared goals or objectives.

- You are working with a father who wants to stop using drugs so he can see his children. You build a relationship and help him to amplify the discrepancy between how he wants his life to be and his current behaviour. Without just “cheerleading” him, you provide a sense of hope and a vision of change, harnessing his internal motivation.
- The professional network are frustrated by the slow pace of change with a particular family. You help them maintain hope by focusing on small gains and successes and keeping the focus on the wider goal while holding in mind the best and worst outcome and avoiding the “rule of optimism” whilst creating a vision for change.
- A girl you are working with decides she wants to quit the football team she has been playing with for the last few months as she recently got into a fight with one of her team-mates. Until that point she had really been enjoying playing, and you had noticed a positive shift in her mood. You convince her to give it another try by describing how you have noticed her skill improving and by helping her to recognise how much she enjoys being part of the team.

**Holding to Account** – willing to have challenging conversations, which are needed to clarify expectations, set appropriate standards and ensure goals or objectives are achieved. Work with others to support them to achieve what is asked of them.

- You recently had some positive feedback from the mother of a family you are working with. At the same time you have noticed that the family are starting to slip into unhelpful patterns of behaviour. You know you need to have a firm yet supportive conversation with the mother to make sure the implications of this are clear.
- You are meeting with a group of social workers from your local authority and two of them are talking about a family in a way that makes you uncomfortable. You decide that you want to say something about this, so you do so respectfully.
- One of your unit members has developed a particularly strong attachment to a father he is working with. You have reservations about whether he has become so supportive of the father that he is not seeing the potential risks to the child clearly. You raise the question with him in a sensitive and considered way so that he is able to think about what you have said.

We know that applying your leadership can be challenging, it is, however, vitally important. It is through acts of leadership (like the examples above) that change is affected. We at The Frontline Organisation, are wholly committed to working alongside you to support you to exercise your leadership confidently and with consideration, in order to enable fantastic work with families.

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