



# BEHAVIOURS THAT MATTER

A BEHAVIOURAL COMPETENCY MODEL  
FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRE LEADERSHIP

Developed by



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Teachers, curriculum, environment,  
and the community shape our children's  
development in the pre-school.  
But who shapes these elements?  
The Principal.

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The importance of the early years on a child's long-term development is paramount, especially in a resource-scarce country like Singapore. Investment in a quality early childhood education sector reaps dividends at the national level through increased productivity and savings in averted social spending, beyond an enduring impact on children and their families.

Getting early childhood right is hence a task with wide and deep ramifications. Yet, because a major proportion of the early years is spent in a single place – the pre-school – the weight of this task often falls disproportionately on the shoulders of a single individual – the principal.

In Singapore, many principals (or centre leaders, as they are commonly called in the industry) take the helm fairly early in their teaching careers, as a result of the acute manpower shortage and talent attrition that plagues the sector. In a few short years, these centre leaders go from managing children in a class to effectively managing a business. Often still in their 20s, they need to lead teachers and support staff with diverse age groups and cultural backgrounds. They have to learn how to hold their own and engage increasingly well-educated families of widening demographic diversities. They have to keep pace with shifting societal norms, a slew of new policies, and new technologies that both aid and hinder their people-centred work. All this rests atop their business responsibilities of balancing revenue and costs, and keeping the strategic vision of the centre in sight. Suddenly alone at the top, and pulled away from the children they first came to work with, many burn out.

To do right by our children, we need to do better for centre leaders.

That was the motivation behind the 2016 launch of the Principal Matters leadership development programme, led by the Lien Foundation in partnership with SEED Institute, Wheelock College, UniSIM and Korn Ferry Hay Group.

Within this coalition, people and organisational advisory firm Korn Ferry Hay Group was responsible for the development of a new competency model that focuses less on the technical aspects of leadership, and more on its behavioural aspects. It interviewed close to 50 leaders from the sector comprising ECDA Fellows, business owners, veteran principals, heads of human resource departments, and promising young principals, across private, non-profit and anchor operators. Through these interviews, leadership traits of outstanding principals of the future were surfaced, coded and benchmarked against Korn Ferry Hay Group's global database of competencies, to paint a portrait of outstanding centre leaders of the future.

## Why Behavioural Competencies?

Competencies are the characteristics of a person that enable him or her to deliver superior performance in a job.

Like the top of an iceberg, skills and knowledge are the visible competencies, such as those relating to curriculum, pedagogy and policies. They are relatively easier to distil, impart and measure, and form the key thrust of most professional development programmes in the sector today.



## How the Behavioural Competencies were Identified

The approach deployed by Korn Ferry Hay Group was based on a methodology pioneered by Dr David C. McClelland, an early pioneer in the field of competency modelling. A professor of psychology at Harvard University and author of “Testing for Competence Rather Than Intelligence” in 1973, Dr McClelland showed that tests of an applicant’s skills and knowledge during a job interview seldom predicted on-the-job performance. He argued that the best predictors of outstanding on-the-job performance were actually the behavioural competencies that, when combined with skills and knowledge, enable a person to succeed.

Since then, Dr McClelland’s findings have been replicated, validated cross-culturally, and further developed through more than 30 years of global research by McBer and, later, by the Korn Ferry Hay Group.

In the Principal Matters engagement sessions, 19 veteran leaders were first engaged to identify the most significant changes impacting the sector today. Their collective perspective centred around 5 trends.

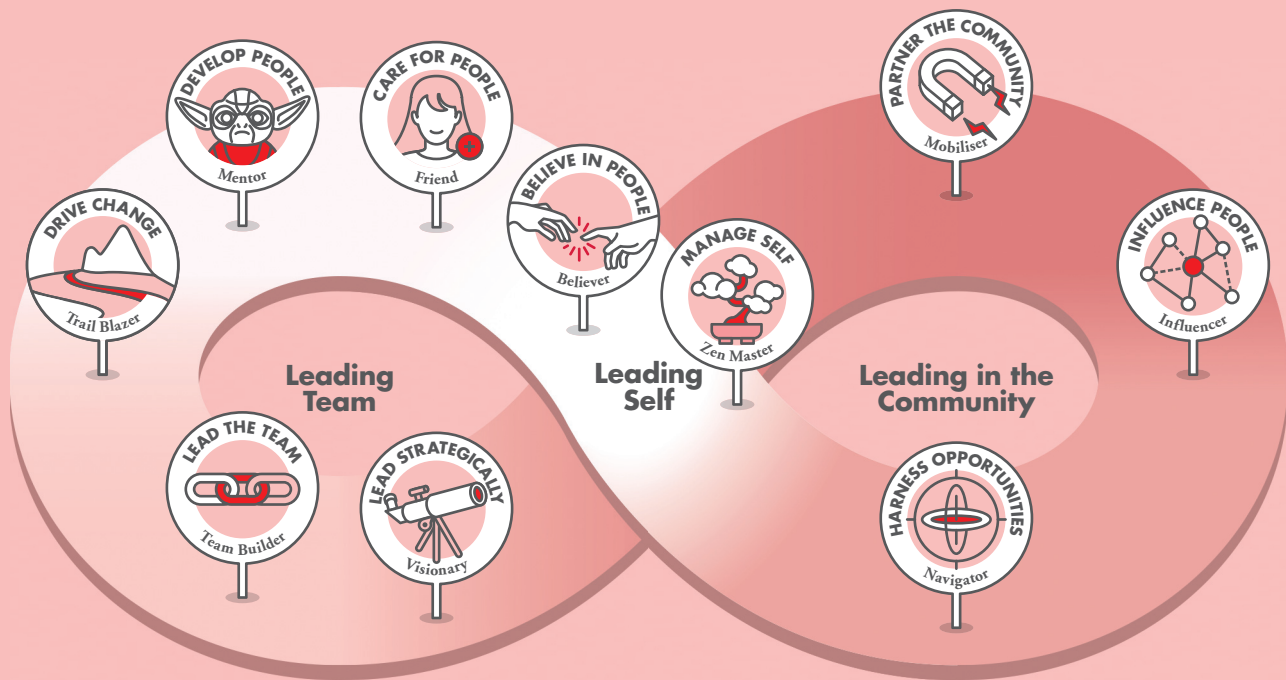
- Increasing complexity in family dynamics, structures and lifestyles
- Increasing demographic diversity of leaders, teachers and parents
- Growth of sector and increased regulatory requirements
- Increasing need to cater to children with special needs
- New technologies that present both opportunities and pitfalls

These 5 trends were distilled into 4 sets of expectations that centre leaders would need to focus on, in order to be future-ready.

- Understand the changing needs of children, parents, and the larger community in order to engage them effectively
- Manage diversity of teachers, and nurture their aspirations
- Stay focused and adapt quickly to the fast-paced growth, changes and disruptions in the sector
- Leverage technology and best practices to improve quality in the face of resource constraints

The 5 trends and 4 expectations served as the over-arching narrative for the collection and analysis of data, extracted through Behavioural Event Interviews and Expert Panel Sessions with other leaders from the sector. Behavioural data was extracted and coded. They were analysed against Korn Ferry Hay Group’s global database of leadership competencies, then conceptualised into a model. The model was tested and refined with input from the group of veteran leaders consulted at the first stage of the process.

## The Portrait of a Future-Ready Principal



### Behavioural Competency Model for Early Childhood Centre Leadership

Like an infinity loop, the family of 10 competencies build on one another in a virtuous cycle.

As with most things, leadership begins with the Self, at the centre of the loop. From there, leadership is exercised outwards, into the immediate Team, then the Community. Step after step, success breeds success. The work of a leader never stops, but neither does the reward.



## Manage Self

Manages emotions under challenging conditions and recalibrates self towards the best interest of the child and organisation.

### Why it is Important:

Emotional resilience enables Centre Leaders to handle stressful situations respectfully and professionally, minimising the escalation of problems. When they manage themselves well, they can help their staff to do the same.

### Centre Leaders:

•  
**Are aware of your feelings and thoughts,  
and able to control them under stressful conditions.**

•  
**Reflect on difficult situations for learning points.**

•  
**Let go of negative emotions to move on.**

•  
**Use coping strategies to manage stress in the long term,  
able to refocus on your purpose and direction.**

### As one centre leader recalled:

“I admitted to myself and my boss that I was burning out. I needed a break to re-find my purpose. I remember telling myself I can’t go on like this and I wrote a resolution for myself. I said, I’m going to help myself build up physically, psychologically and spiritually. I constantly reminded myself: Body, Mind, Soul. So I started to swim 3 times a week, had 1 to 2 fruit smoothies a day, and told myself to sleep by 10.30pm every day. I maintained positive thoughts, and started committing again to church activities. I read things that linked back to mind and heart, and took inspiration ‘to take care of my relationships, transforming faith into life, and words into good, especially for the needy.’ Before I take care of others, I needed to take care of myself.”





## **Believe in People**

Values diversity, has empathy and possesses a deep belief in every individual's ability.

### **Why it is Important:**

A belief in people enables Centre Leaders to see things positively and in perspective, allowing them to help others do the same.

It creates an environment where individuals are valued and where diversity is seen as strength.

### **Centre Leaders:**

•  
**Believe and value the human potential that lives in everyone – children, staff and parents.**

•  
**Treat people with different personalities and from different backgrounds equally.**

•  
**Focus on people's strengths and accept their shortcomings.**

•  
**Understand different perspectives in a positive manner, and guide others to do the same.**

•  
**Support your staff in managing their emotions.**

### As one centre leader recalled:

“I make rounds to understand needs, to know all the children first, and then engage parents. I know their family backgrounds and challenges, including parental issues. Then, at least I know how to help them. Sometimes, teachers will come to me to complain about parents, but I tell them you must understand the context and you must be fair to everyone. Many issues that arrive at the centre originate from the family. One of our children had anger management issues, and would take anything in the classroom to hit everybody. The parent was incredibly unhappy with us. Over time, I tried to understand her problems at home... marital issues and the difficulties of bringing up 7 children. You have to try to understand the position of the mother. Now, after 3 years, the boy is calmer and able to articulate his needs.”



## Care for People

Deeply interested in the well-being of others.  
Seeks to understand others' thoughts and feelings  
in order to help them.

### Why it is Important:

The primary focus of Centre Leaders is the well-being of the children and staff. Creating a caring team and culture ultimately makes their centre a conducive environment for children.

### Centre Leaders:

- 
- Initiate open communication channels.**
- 
- Understand others' feelings, concerns, and reasons for their behaviour.**
- 
- Are sensitive to body language.**
- 
- Create personal bonds among your staff.**
- 
- Proactively help those who are facing difficulties.**

### As one centre leader recalled:

“You have to work with the heart to feel for them and look for solutions. I have a colleague whose children are taken care of by her mother in law. But because of the father-in-law's surgery, the 2 children had to come over to the centre after primary school, and we let them stay at our premise for an hour. It's about understanding her situation, then making the adjustments, such as letting her children stay at our centre while she's working.”



## Develop People

Provides opportunities for staff to explore their potential.

### Why it is important:

Centre leaders play a crucial role in cultivating a learning mindset among their staff. Doing so allows them to enhance the performance standards of the centre, and groom future leaders for the sector.

### Centre Leaders:

•  
**Take personal ownership for developing people.**

•  
**Customise development plans for your staff,  
and coach them to achieve their goals.**

•  
**Create a learning culture among your staff.**

•  
**Create opportunities for new assignments and  
experiences beyond the centre for your staff.**

### As one centre leader recalled:

“Teacher X was a very task-oriented person and definitely had a way of how she wants things to be done. She was loud to children, and disrespectful to staff and parents. But I believed she had the potential to become a Senior Teacher. She was organised and independent, and was an effective teacher. I wanted her to take on a younger class, hoping it would give her the opportunity to learn a different approach. And I was amazed.

She really has a system and a way to teach the children.

I saw that she could be a role model. So I told her

I will submit her promotion, but she must change.

She appreciated the opportunity. Being a Senior Teacher

isn't easy, but she managed. She came up with a routine

and got the teachers to play their respective roles and

plan the day effectively.”



## Drive Change

Energises others to innovate and change.

### Why it is Important:

Centre Leaders often have to drive change at their centres, in order to adapt to changes in the larger environment. To do this, they need to know how to win the hearts and minds of their stakeholders.

### Centre Leaders:

•  
**Set high standards in curriculum,  
centre processes and relationships.**

•  
**Constantly improve the professionalism,  
system and curriculum of your centre.**

•  
**Help people understand the need for change, communicating  
the reasons clearly and anchoring it on shared principles.**

•  
**Adopt a positive attitude in the face of change.**

•  
**Act consistently with the desired change.**

### As one centre leader recalled:

“I initiated a new Staff Development Day to provide a better channel for teachers to gather and evaluate curriculum. Our teachers work full days, and having only half an hour to do evaluation affects the overall quality of the curriculum. So we set out to shift classroom schedules, and sought understanding from parents by telling them that this is ultimately for the benefit of the children. For teachers, what we needed was the commitment of their time. We had to practice flexibility, and ensure smooth transitions and productive sessions. I came up with a template and appointed level coordinators so it could be a group evaluation. I also shared it with other centres. We even got teachers to share their good practices. All the sharing built team spirit and generated even more ideas.”



## Lead the Team

Creates a positive culture that harnesses the strengths of staff, empowering them to achieve individual and centre outcomes.

### Why it is Important:

To work together effectively, staff need their Centre Leader to cultivate a climate of shared accountability, positivity and respect.

### Centre Leaders:

•  
**Secure resources to support centre programmes and outcomes.**

•  
**Create a climate that embraces diversity in the team.**

•  
**Empower your staff to participate in decision-making.**

•  
**Role-model the behaviours that you desire from your staff.**

•  
**Celebrate the successes of your staff and give credit.**

•  
**Set limits for inappropriate behaviour.**

### As one centre leader recalled:

“I wanted the learning corner to be child-friendly, so I laid my hands first to set it up. The first day, I wrapped up the pillar with paper, put up children’s photos, which invites children to talk about their experiences. It makes the teachers feel good, and then I got parents to contribute their compliments about every teacher. The pillar was covered up with all the Appreciations... I didn’t delegate for the first 6 months, but because I did it, the teachers started to get involved. So eventually after my physical involvement, I started allocating boards to teachers... ok, since you’re in charge of the language, why don’t do something fun related to that? But I initiate everything first. I even set up a resource room where teachers access their materials more easily, rather than going up to the storeroom at level 3...”



## Lead Strategically

Aligns the centre direction to the organisation's mission, vision, values and strategy. Builds shared commitment among staff.

### Why it is Important:

Beyond learning outcomes and care, Centre Leaders need to fulfil the organisation's business objectives and build a collective identity among staff.

### Centre Leaders:

•  
**Appreciate the organisation's vision and business objectives, and aligns the centre's management, policies and processes to them.**

•  
**Generate excitement among your team towards the shared vision.**

•  
**Empower your staff to participate in decision-making.**

•  
**Prioritise resources towards meeting centre goals.**

### As one centre leader recalled:

“When I was identified to set up a centre from scratch, I trusted my Director's leadership and that gave me hope that I wouldn't fail myself and her. I told the design firm who we are in terms of EC values and how we envision the environment. I wanted something communal, cosy, and that invites children to be themselves. I imagined myself walking through a particular floor plan asking what are the needs of my children and how would a child behave in this particular environment. All of us left that meeting being clear that this was something that we want to try. After deciding on our designers, we worked closely with them, and I started laying out the framework and non-negotiables such as storage, multi-purpose furniture, integration of infant care. Then I brought in people who can create culture, held discussions with them prior to set-up, and discussed what's our philosophy. We even went shopping to Ikea together.”



## Partner the Community

Cultivates strong partnerships with organisations in the community to support holistic development of the child.

### Why it is Important:

The community possesses precious and unique resources that Centre Leaders can spot and tap on for the benefit of children. Community partnership also shapes a culture of joint responsibility towards the care of children.

### Centre Leaders:

•  
**Build rapport with both children and their families to understand their backgrounds and needs.**

•  
**Establish a shared understanding of a child's development needs with their parents.**

•  
**Involve the community in the centre's activities.**

•  
**Harness insights and resources from the community by partnering with them.**

•  
**Act firmly in the interest of the child in your engagement with parents and community partners.**

### As one centre leader recalled:

“Sometimes, we're short of manpower, and parents willingly help me. I wanted to make a large dramatic corner, and I got parents to give me ideas of what children love. We started collecting things and setting it up together. Because of our relationship, I can identify the parents who love to give constructive feedback.

Whenever I have crazy ideas, I sit with them and ask them: Is this crazy? They give their input, and I make the decision. I ask them to help, and give them the space to set things up. After all, their children are in the centre and parents always want to give them the best, with their ideas.”



## Influence People

Engages others to get buy-in and support.

### Why it is Important:

Centre leadership is a collective effort and Centre Leaders need to garner trust and buy-in from stakeholders. They need to address a diverse set of interests while focusing on their goal.

### Centre Leaders:

•  
**Persuade by providing a clear and compelling rationale for your views.**

•  
**Craft your message according to the audience to appeal to their interest.**

•  
**Have a keen understanding of people dynamics, and are able to tap on them to generate buy-in.**

### As one centre leader recalled:

“Teacher A’s academic background was not there and her style was different, so I felt she would benefit from this course, and also protect her from others discrediting her paper qualifications. However, she’s not the easiest to manage or speak to. But I know she listens to Teacher B. Whatever Teacher B does, she will follow. And often, Teacher B will tell her, this is good, go do it. So I tapped on Teacher B to help. On a few occasions, I called Teacher B to discuss Teacher A’s potential, and agree we need to make her go through the course at least. It worked. Teacher A went for the fundamental course, and thereafter she went for the WPL, and finally the diploma. I’m very happy for her.”





## **Harness Opportunities**

Gathers insights from the environment.  
Seizes opportunities to make things better for the centre.

### **Why it is Important:**

With the rapid changes in the sector, Centre Leaders need to adapt quickly and effectively. To do this, they need to appreciate the current and future landscape, while staying focused on their mission.

### **Centre Leaders:**

•  
**Keep updated with the developments and innovation in the sector.**

•  
**Anticipate the impact of changes in society and government policies on your centre and sector.**

•  
**Adapt your centre's strategy and systems to harness opportunities that emerge.**

### As one centre leader recalled:

“The enrolment for Term 3 and Term 4 dropped due to the fact that some children said it's boring, and parents felt it's not necessary to spend the additional \$100 every term because they have computers at home too. Seeing the drop in numbers, I brought 2 vendors to evaluate the programme. I wanted to see how to structure the programme differently to meet the needs of our curriculum. I wanted the best for our children and not just another computer session. During this process, I realised that the programme contained a lot of resources that my teachers can use for their class preparation. So I asked if I could access these resources for my teachers. It's great when I see teachers now using technology to enhance their teaching and planning.”

## Putting the Model to Use

Far from an academic exercise or an incomprehensive technical exercise, the behavioural competency model was formulated with end users in mind: centre leaders, business owners, training institutions and policy-makers.

Some of the ways that the model can be used include:

### Appointment of Centre Leaders

Like the iceberg, the model suggests that operators must focus as much on the underlying attributes of prospective centre leaders as they do on their qualifications and experience. As such, operators can consider incorporating this set of 10 competencies into their evaluation criteria. Prospective centre leaders can be asked to describe specific challenges they faced and their responses, in order to probe their behavioural competencies.

### Continuing Professional Development

Managers and mentors may use the model to guide conversations about growth and development with their centre leaders. A focus on behaviours highlights strengths and areas of improvement that are not as apparent from a perspective centred on qualifications and experience. It helps centre managers and mentors in their assessment, goal-setting and allocation of resources for the professional development of their centre leaders.

### Reflection and Self-Development

Leaders can use the model to evaluate their own leadership behaviours, on their own or with the help of trusted peers and advisors. Having on hand a framework through which they can identify the areas they excel in forges a stronger sense of self-awareness, a key pre-requisite for growth. When that happens, centre leaders go on to build strong teams at their centres and strong relationships with their communities.

## Where it Begins and Ends

This exploration into the behavioural competencies of centre leader demonstrates that effective centre leadership requires a high level of professionalism and leadership competencies similar to other management functions. And yet, on top of that, it has highlighted that the role of the centre leader requires something special: An unwavering belief in people.

This exercise reinforced that the ethos of early childhood educators – and especially centre leaders – is a belief in the goodness of people, be they children, parents, teachers or community stakeholders.

It is the belief that everyone, regardless of background, is capable and possesses unique strengths that can be drawn out and built upon. This belief anchors the interaction that outstanding centre leaders have with their children, teachers, parents and the community, in good times and bad.

It anchors them individually too, in the self-belief and ability of outstanding centre leaders to manage themselves emotionally in trying circumstances, converting despair into resilience. A belief in others in turn leads to a belief in oneself.

Behaviour, in effect, begins with belief.

## Methodology

### Focus Groups

Structured discussions with experts and thought leaders provided deep perspectives into the evolution of the sector, challenges of centre leadership roles and the key areas of focus.

### Behavioural Event Interviews (BEI)

The core of the competency modelling, the BEI is a two-to three-hour, in-depth interview during which the participants provide detailed stories about their recent successes and failures, and what they did, said, thought and felt. 8 BEIs were conducted with outstanding centre leaders.

### Expert Panel Sessions

Brainstorming sessions with centre leaders who understand their roles from a broader perspective, these discussions were designed to uncover what effective performance as a centre leader looks like, and its underlying behaviours. Behavioural examples of what makes a good centre leader were also collected.

### Coding

The BEIs and Expert Panel Sessions were transcribed and coded to extract behavioural competencies. The coded samples were then analysed across all collected data and sorted according to Korn Ferry Hay Group's global competency database.

### Concept Formation

During this phase, the behavioural competencies collated and coded were analysed and themed. Competencies that correlated most to the attainment of outstanding outcomes in the 4 key focus areas were identified, then scaled based on levels of behavioural complexity to form a draft competency model. A target level for each competency expected of centre leaders was then agreed upon. In this model, competencies were pegged to a 'stretched' level – a notch above the behaviours of outstanding centre leaders today.

### Validation

The competency model was refined in an iterative process as feedback was collected from leaders in the fields of early childhood education, human resource, and leadership development.

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She works across the expertise areas of leadership and talent, job evaluation, and rewards, and has led numerous large-scale transformative human capital projects for government and education institutions.

Her work in the education sector spans pre-schools, the Ministry of Education, independent and international schools and Institutes of Higher Learning, covering areas such as developing competency models, competency-

based assessments, talent management frameworks, performance management systems, analysing and evaluating jobs, developing specialist career tracks, advising on reward philosophies and strategies, and the design and implementation of compensation frameworks. She has also worked closely with the Early Childhood Development Agency, the Ministry of Education and large pre-school operators to build a compelling career proposition for the sector.

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