

A CLEAR Lead

A charity's leaders must personally model the behaviours that are needed to create a safe culture or everyone will notice, says **MARCUS EROOGA**

Over the last five years, there has been a startling cascade of organisations under scrutiny for shortcomings in their approach to safeguarding. Some of these relate to specific settings – the horrific abuse of pupils by teacher William Vahey at Southbank International School for example, or events at Ampleforth College which, in 2018, led the Charity Commission to intervene and appoint an interim manager for the relevant charitable trusts as a result of continued concerns about their approach to safeguarding.

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Others relate to the way individuals were able to exploit weaknesses or shortcomings in organisational systems to give them free rein – most notoriously Jimmy Savile and the catalogue of abuse he was able to perpetrate. Finally, there are the systemic failures that span numerous institutions and organisations – the subject of the wide-ranging Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and the ongoing Independent Inquiry

into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) in England and Wales.

A common theme in all of these is how central are the responsibilities of those in leadership positions. As leaders are in positions of power in their organisations, they have a fundamental responsibility to demonstrate leadership and commitment for establishing and maintaining an organisational culture that is conducive to safeguarding best practice. Leaders play a key role in communicating the assumptions, values,

beliefs and norms they expect those in the organisation to exhibit.

Key questions for those in governance and leadership roles are not just what they can do to minimise the possibility that their organisation will be found wanting in relation to safeguarding, but also what can they do to maximise the safeguarding and wellbeing of all those their organisation comes into contact with – beneficiaries and employees alike.

As might be anticipated, there is no single

silver bullet, but inquiries and research reveal consistent themes and do suggest some key elements, as discussed below. Space does not allow for all those identified to be examined but, collectively, they indicate the important components of a safeguarding culture. While they may seem to be the same as those found in any good book about leadership and governance, their significance here is that the sources they are drawn from relate specifically to organisational safeguarding.

The significance of organisational culture

Whether the organisation's intention with its safeguarding commitment is what actually happens in practice is partly dependent on that organisation's culture. Culture is a term which is ubiquitous in discussions of management and leadership generally, but possibly less appreciated is its importance regarding safeguarding. In the context, organisational culture can helpfully be described as representing “the collective values, beliefs and principles of organisational members. It includes the organisation's vision, values, norms, systems, symbols, language, assumptions, beliefs and habits” – in short it is “the way we do things around here”.

Consciously or otherwise the organisation defines its culture, and that culture forms the context within which the organisation's people judge the appropriateness of their behaviour.

Clearly stated values and commitments

A research study by Australia's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse states that a key element of a child safe organisation is that “the institution publicly commits to child safety and leaders champion a child safe culture”. Self-evident though it may seem, it is crucial for an organisation to clearly express its values and commitment to safeguarding. So, for example, something as simple as a commitment that “anyone working on our behalf, and anyone benefiting from the work we are doing, does not come to any harm, either intended or unintended, as a result of this work taking place”, as suggested by Unicef's new *Child safeguarding toolkit for business*, which clearly and unequivocally sets out the organisation's position and intention. It also communicates to all – potential members of the organisation, existing members and beneficiaries – what the organisation stands for in relation to safeguarding.

Putting commitments into practice

In its research paper on *Key elements of child safe organisations*, the Australian Royal Commission describes the need for “governance arrangements that facilitate the implementation of the child safe elements and accountabilities that are set by institutional leaders, at all levels of the institution's governance structures”.

Those commitments need to be expressed as a clear code of conduct. This is more than simply a list of rules – it is a set of guiding principles that help staff and children understand acceptable behaviours and sets clear boundaries. That needs to be supported by “clear policies and procedures so staff know what is expected of them and facilitate raising of concerns”, as expressed in the Southbank International School serious case review.

Leadership modelling desired culture

If it is to consistently achieve its safeguarding aspirations, the organisation's clearly stated values and commitments need to be seen to

apply to the whole organisation, seen to be applicable and acted out by senior managers, and experienced as “lived” by the whole organisation from the chair of trustees to the newest intern. That process is eloquently described in the recent *Independent review of workplace culture* at Save the Children UK following the concerns about the behaviour of senior managers:

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“Trustees, along with senior leaders, set and convey normative expectations about a charity's culture and how people associated with it should behave. Charity leaders do this in part by what they are seen to represent, and also in part by the standards of behaviour they model through their own behaviour towards others. But perhaps the most important way in which leaders set normative expectations is through the value choices they make in difficult situations. This is when leadership has its most potent effect on the culture of an organisation, signalling to staff the fundamental principles the charity will uphold.”

If behaviour is not consistent and authentic, all too soon disparity between words and deeds will become apparent, and will be noted by all. The message received will be that “we say one thing but do another” or “the rules only apply to some” and the organisational culture adjusts accordingly, with ensuing negative effects.

Transparency of systems and processes

If that modelling is to be achieved then a key element of achieving it will be transparency of organisational systems and processes. Where safeguarding is concerned, that is frequently likely to be challenging, with issues at least sensitive if not confidential and detail not appropriate to be shared. However, this can be ameliorated to some extent by an explicit commitment to being as transparent as


possible. If information is shared when possible, and when not then the message that it can't be shared is worded in such a way that indicates a respect for the rights and needs of those concerned, it is more likely that it will be perceived as appropriate rather than the organisation being opaque in order to mask inconsistent or expedient actions.

Processes to understand the experience of those involved

It is challenging to analyse and critique a culture that one is a part of, yet it is crucial for leaders to be informed and reflect on the culture of their own organisations and use information from that ongoing process to inform positive change. To achieve that it may be helpful to directly seek feedback that identifies current perceptions of stakeholders, for example anonymous staff surveys, pulse surveys, user feedback. Crucial will be how feedback is seen to be responded to – not that all suggestions or views have to be acted on, but that they are seen to have been heard and acknowledged.

Conclusion

Without wanting to sound unduly “Pollyannaish”, every leader would want their organisation to be one where everyone, beneficiaries and employees alike, feel safeguarded, respected and able to be heard. The issues identified above should make some contribution to achieving that.

In practice, what that might look like is an organisation that is confident enough to have what was described in one of the reviews relating to Jimmy Savile as “a culture of curiosity, scrutiny and constructive challenge, with processes to underpin these behaviours”. 

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