

Putting the focus on deputy managers

Developing your own in-house talent has never been more important in the nursery industry and it is because of this, Family First are giving their deputy managers the opportunity to thrive and progress as part of a new leadership initiative, which they hope will help them retain their best talent.



Although it may not be obvious at first, there is a lot that nursery teams can learn from a flock of geese.

The birds fly in a V formation and, when the leader gets tired, they retreat into the flock allowing someone else to take the lead.

That feeling of camaraderie and support was why deputy managers at Family First Nursery Group were asked to 'Be More Geese' at the company's inaugural Future Leaders' Conference event held in Milton Keynes.

The initiative is aimed at those currently a rung below nursery manager level but with the ambition to progress their careers.

And the message to the 75 deputy managers who attended was that they will be backed all the way if they wish to move to the front, but they will also be supported if they want to stay in their current role.

Laura Hodges, Childcare Specialist at Family First, is helping to organise the programme which aims to develop people in personal and professional capacities.

She said: "We really want to take a holistic approach to staff progress, and not just focus on how they are when they are in the nursery setting but look at the individual as a whole.

"We asked people to come to the conference with an open mind, and to

make sure they brought their whole selves, not just wearing their professional hats.

"I am pleased we are not just focussing on managers – they can get a lot of attention and have a natural support network.

"But the role of the deputy is bittersweet as you have some responsibility, but you're not in overall charge and you still have to be in tune with the team and the children.

"Then again, you still have to be able to do everything a manager can do, and that can be something serious, like a safeguarding issue or a more administrative role.

"We asked people to come to the conference with an open mind, and to make sure they brought their whole selves, not just wearing their professional hats.

"Also, a lot of the time you need complementary skills to them to work well as a team.

"People really related to the geese analogy, and I think it genuinely resonates with people in that middle management position."





Key areas in focus include Ofsted-related issues like behaviours and attitudes to mental health and wellbeing.

Although they aren't averse to hiring from outside – a fresh pair of eyes can often bring a different perspective or opinion – it is a long-held ambition for Family First to develop their own leaders.

Michele Falconer, who is also heading up the Future Leaders Programme, said they hoped it would help Family First stand out from the crowd.

"We want people to know that we are committed to their development," she said.

"There are recruitment challenges which exist industry-wide but we want people to know that if they do join us, we are committed to them."

Family First now has more than 85 nurseries across the country which means they offer more than 6,000 full-time nursery places and north of 1,900 staff.

Consistent growth means there will be chances for people to progress and

find their ideal job without leaving the company.

Michele added: "With our ongoing expansion, there are more and more opportunities for people to move into specialist roles they may have not thought about before."

Their advice to people in the industry was to make sure their teams know support is available to them when they need it -and how a little bit of help can really help someone to spread their wings.

Laura continued: "It is very easy to be part of a celebration, but what is more difficult is to have the courage to speak up and let people know you are

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struggling.

"That is one of the biggest things we see in a lot of nurseries, people not thinking they can ask for help.

"A lot of the time, if you can offer some support in a certain area, they will feel like there has been a weight taken off them."

Family First's Head of Childcare & Training Nicola Reed said it was important everyone had the opportunity to be the best they can be.

She said: "We pride ourselves in being able to invest in our team's personal growth and development to create a company environment where everyone matters, and everyone makes a difference.

"Our new leadership programme will help improve decision-making and cross-functional skills by expanding our team's understanding of business operations and leadership skills within our nurseries.

"With a broader business knowledge, including an underpinning of Early Years Foundation Stage, Ofsted and strong leadership insights, we hope to create an outstanding environment and strategies to develop our teams.

"Our people deserve to receive the best training and we are committed to the ongoing development of our staff to enable every person to reach their full potential.

"This programme will give them the tools to be successful." ■

If you are interested in finding out more about Family First group, please visit: www.familyfirstnurseries.com