bild

Practice Leadership:

The evidence base

A review of current research and key publications



What is Practice Leadership?

Practice Leadership is a model of frontline leadership developed from research into what helps people with intellectual and developmental disabilities experience better quality of life and more effective support.

Practice Leadership emerged from the work of Mansell and colleagues and has since been developed through research in the UK, Australia and Ireland (Mansell et al., 2004; Beadle-Brown et al., 2015). Rather than focusing primarily on administration, compliance or performance management, Practice Leadership focuses on the quality of support people experience every day.

Beadle-Brown and colleagues describe Practice Leadership as the direct, day-to-day leadership of staff practice. Practice leaders work alongside staff to ensure that organisational values are translated into high-quality support and positive outcomes for the people being supported.

Although Practice Leadership is usually provided by frontline managers and team leaders, it is different from traditional management approaches. Its primary purpose is not simply to manage services, but to develop staff practice and create the conditions in which people can live good lives.

The five components of Practice Leadership

Research has identified five core components of Practice Leadership (Beadle-Brown et al., 2015).

1. **Focusing staff attention on quality of life** – ensuring that support is centred on what matters to the person and the outcomes they want to achieve.
2. **Organising and allocating support effectively** – making sure staff time, routines and responsibilities are arranged in ways that enable people to participate in meaningful activities and relationships.
3. **Coaching, observing and providing feedback** – working alongside staff, modelling good support and helping teams develop their skills and confidence.
4. **Providing supervision and support** – creating opportunities for reflection, problem-solving and continuous learning.
5. **Using team meetings to promote good practice** – helping teams develop shared expectations, consistency and a common understanding of what good support looks like.

More recent work identified three defining attributes of Practice Leadership: embedding service values, being person-oriented and delivering Active Support (Ryan et al., 2024).

These features distinguish Practice Leadership from more traditional management approaches and reinforce its focus on quality of life rather than simply service delivery.

Practice Leadership as a bridge

Practice Leadership can be understood as the mechanism through which organisational values become everyday experiences for the people being supported.

Values → Staff Practice → People's Experiences → Quality of Life

Key references for this section

- Mansell et al., (2004)
- Beadle-Brown et al., (2014)
- Beadle-Brown et al., (2015)
- Ryan et al., (2024)

In this way, Practice Leadership provides the link between what organisations say they believe and what people actually experience.

Practice Leadership beyond formal roles

Although much of the research has focused on frontline managers, good Practice Leadership should not happen in isolation. Family carers, people with lived experience and others who influence support bring expertise and knowledge that can shape how practice is led and help teams provide more effective and consistent support.

This wider understanding of Practice Leadership reflects the increasing emphasis on coproduction, lived experience leadership and partnership working across adult social care.

Does Practice Leadership improve outcomes for people?

The primary purpose of Practice Leadership is to improve the quality of support people experience and, ultimately, their quality of life. Research over more than two decades consistently suggests that strong Practice Leadership is associated with better outcomes for people with learning disabilities and other developmental differences (Beadle-Brown et al., 2014; Beadle-Brown et al., 2015; Humphreys and Bigby, 2026).

Practice Leadership focuses staff attention on what matters most to people, helping organisations move beyond simply providing care towards supporting people to live meaningful and self-directed lives.

Quality of life and meaningful participation

Research has consistently found that when Practice Leadership is present, people are more likely to be actively engaged in meaningful activities and relationships (Beadle-Brown et al., 2014; Bould et al., 2018).

Practice leaders help staff to organise support in ways that maximise opportunities for participation, choice and independence. This is particularly important for people with more complex support needs, who may otherwise experience passive support or limited opportunities to take part in everyday life.

Greater engagement and participation are associated with improvements across many aspects of quality of life, including:

- relationships and social inclusion;
- autonomy and choice;
- personal development and independence;
- emotional wellbeing; and
- meaningful use of time.

Better quality of support

Research has identified Practice Leadership as an important predictor of skilled support and successful implementation of Person-Centred Active Support (Beadle-Brown et al., 2014; Beadle-Brown et al., 2015).

Services with stronger Practice Leadership are more likely to:

- provide consistent support;
- focus on quality of life outcomes;

- adapt support to individual needs;
- promote participation and choice; and
- maintain improvements over time.

Importantly, Practice Leadership helps ensure that good support becomes embedded within teams rather than depending on individual staff members.

Reduced distress and behaviours of concern

Recent reviews suggest that strong Practice Leadership is associated with lower levels of behaviours of concern and improved wellbeing (Humphreys and Bigby, 2026).

While behaviours of concern are influenced by many factors, Practice Leadership contributes to creating environments where staff are more skilled, support is more consistent and people's needs are better understood.

This can reduce distress and increase opportunities for people to experience positive relationships and meaningful lives.

Fewer restrictive practices

Although restrictive practices are influenced by organisational culture, workforce capability and wider systems, Practice Leadership plays an important role in helping staff develop proactive and person-centred approaches.

By promoting reflection, coaching and a focus on quality of life, Practice Leadership supports approaches that seek to understand behaviour, increase participation and reduce reliance on restrictive interventions.

What does the evidence tell us?

Research consistently suggests that strong Practice Leadership is associated with:

- improved quality of life;
- increased participation and engagement;
- more meaningful activities and relationships;
- greater choice and control;
- improved quality of support;
- reduced behaviours of concern; and
- fewer restrictive practices.

Key references for this section

- Beadle-Brown et al., (2014)
- Beadle-Brown et al., (2015)
- Bigby et al., (2020a)
- Bigby and Beadle-Brown (2018)

Taken together, the evidence suggests that Practice Leadership is one of the most important organisational influences on the experiences and outcomes of the people services exist to support.

Does Practice Leadership improve staff experiences?

Although the primary purpose of Practice Leadership is to improve outcomes for the people being supported, research consistently shows that it also has important benefits for staff and teams (Deveau and McGill, 2013; 2016a; 2016b; Humphreys and Bigby, 2026).

Staff who feel supported, valued and confident are more likely to provide high-quality support and to remain committed to their roles. Practice Leadership helps create the conditions in which staff can develop their skills, reflect on their practice and work consistently with colleagues.

Increased confidence and competence

Practice leaders support staff through coaching, observation, modelling and feedback. Rather than relying solely on formal training, they help staff apply learning in everyday situations.

Research suggests that staff working in services with stronger Practice Leadership report greater confidence and are more likely to develop the skills needed to provide person-centred support (Deveau and McGill, 2016a; Ryan et al., 2024).

By creating opportunities for reflection and learning, Practice Leadership helps staff feel more capable and better equipped to respond to people's individual needs.

Greater job satisfaction

Several studies have identified associations between Practice Leadership and increased staff satisfaction (Deveau and McGill, 2013; 2016b).

Staff are more likely to experience positive working environments when they:

- understand what is expected of them;
- receive regular support and feedback;
- feel valued by their managers;
- have opportunities to learn and develop; and
- experience positive relationships within teams.

These factors contribute to a stronger sense of purpose and professional identity.

Stronger teamwork and role clarity

Practice Leadership helps teams develop shared expectations and a common understanding of what good support looks like.

Recent research by Humphreys and Bigby (2026) highlighted the importance of role clarity, collaboration and supportive management in shaping staff experiences.

When staff understand their roles and work together effectively, support is more consistent and teams are better able to respond to challenges.

Reduced stress and improved wellbeing

Supporting people with complex needs can be rewarding, but it can also be demanding.

Research suggests that staff experience lower levels of stress and more positive work experiences when managers are visible, supportive and actively involved in practice (Deveau and McGill, 2013; Deveau and McGill, 2019).

Practice Leadership creates opportunities for staff to discuss challenges, reflect on their experiences and receive support when difficulties arise.

Supporting recruitment and retention

Although workforce pressures are influenced by many factors, positive workplace cultures and supportive leadership are known to contribute to staff retention.

By improving job satisfaction, strengthening teamwork and creating opportunities for development, Practice Leadership helps organisations create environments where staff are more likely to remain and thrive.

What does the evidence tell us?

Research consistently suggests that strong Practice Leadership is associated with:

- increased confidence and competence;
- higher job satisfaction;
- stronger teamwork and collaboration;
- clearer roles and expectations;
- reduced stress;
- improved staff wellbeing; and
- greater workforce stability.

Key references

- Deveau and McGill (2013)
- Deveau and McGill (2016)
- Deveau and McGill (2019)
- Humphreys and Bigby (2026)

The evidence suggests that Practice Leadership benefits not only the people being supported, but also the staff who support them. In doing so, it helps create the stable and skilled workforce needed to deliver consistently good support.

Does Practice Leadership influence organisational culture?

Research consistently suggests that Practice Leadership plays an important role in shaping organisational culture and sustaining good support over time. (Beadle-Brown et al., 2015; Deveau and McGill, 2016a; Humphreys and Bigby, 2026). Recent Australian research has also shown that Practice Leadership can deteriorate when frontline managers are overwhelmed by administrative demands and are not adequately supported by organisational structures (Bigby and Humphreys, 2024).

While policies, procedures and training are important, they do not by themselves create high-quality services. Organisational culture is shaped by what leaders pay attention to, how staff are supported and what behaviours are recognised and reinforced.

Practice Leadership helps create cultures in which good support becomes everyone's responsibility rather than depending on individual staff members.

Turning values into everyday practice

Most organisations have clear values and aspirations. However, translating these values into everyday support can be challenging.

Practice Leadership provides the bridge between organisational values and the experiences of the people being supported.

By modelling good practice, coaching staff and maintaining a focus on quality of life, practice leaders help teams understand what organisational values mean in practice.

This helps ensure that values are not simply written in policies or displayed on walls but are reflected in the support people receive every day.

Supporting consistent and sustainable practice

Research has shown that training alone rarely leads to lasting improvements.

Without ongoing leadership and support, staff may revert to previous ways of working and improvements may be difficult to sustain.

Practice Leadership provides the ongoing coaching, reflection and feedback needed to maintain standards and support continuous improvement (Bould et al., 2018).

As a result, good support becomes embedded within teams and services rather than relying on individual champions.

Strengthening the implementation of evidence-based approaches

Practice Leadership does not represent a separate approach or initiative. Instead, it provides the leadership and support needed to implement and sustain many of the approaches that underpin high-quality social care.

Research has identified strong links between Practice Leadership and the successful implementation of Person-Centred Active Support (Beadle-Brown et al., 2014; Beadle-Brown et al., 2015).

The same principles are increasingly recognised as important for:

- Positive Behaviour Support (PBS);
- trauma-informed practice;
- reducing restrictive practices;
- human rights-based approaches;
- Capable and Supportive Environments; and
- Mental Health Act reform.

Practice Leadership provides the mechanisms through which these approaches become part of everyday support.

Creating positive workplace cultures

Research suggests that staff are more likely to thrive in organisations where leaders are visible, supportive and actively engaged in practice (Deveau and McGill, 2013; Humphreys and Bigby, 2026).

Practice Leadership contributes to cultures characterised by:

- shared values and expectations;
- openness and reflection;
- continuous learning;
- collaboration and teamwork;
- accountability and support; and
- a focus on quality of life.

These characteristics help organisations respond to change, manage challenges and sustain improvement over time.

What does the evidence tell us?

Research consistently suggests that Practice Leadership contributes to:

- stronger organisational cultures;
- more consistent support across teams;
- successful implementation of evidence-based approaches;
- greater sustainability of improvements;
- continuous learning and reflection; and
- cultures that promote quality of life and good support.

The evidence suggests that Practice Leadership is not simply something that individual leaders do. It is a key organisational capability that helps create and sustain the cultures in which people, staff and services can thrive.

Key references

- Beadle-Brown et al., (2015)
- Bigby and Beadle-Brown (2016)
- Bigby et al., (2020a)
- Bigby and Humphreys (2024)
- Ryan et al., (2024)

Why does Practice Leadership matter now?

Although Practice Leadership has been discussed within learning disability services for more than two decades, its importance is becoming increasingly recognised across adult social care.

Services are operating within a challenging environment characterised by workforce shortages, increasing complexity of need, financial pressures and growing expectations regarding quality, rights and personalised support.

At the same time, there is increasing recognition that training alone is not enough to improve practice or sustain change.

Workforce challenges and quality improvement

Adult social care providers face significant challenges in recruiting, developing and retaining skilled staff.

Improving quality requires more than introducing new policies or delivering training courses. Staff need ongoing support, coaching and opportunities to reflect on their practice.

Practice Leadership provides the mechanisms that help organisations translate learning into everyday support and sustain improvements over time.

As a result, Practice Leadership is increasingly viewed as a workforce development issue as well as a quality improvement issue.

Increasing national recognition

The importance of Practice Leadership is increasingly reflected in national guidance and workforce strategies.

The Department of Health and Social Care's **Care Workforce Pathway for Adult Social Care** identifies Practice Leader as one of the recognised career roles within the sector, recognising the importance of leaders who support and sustain good practice.

Similarly, recent Skills for Care guidance highlights the importance of Practice Leadership in developing skilled and capable workforces and states that:

"Training alone rarely improves practice. The best way to improve practice is through Practice Leadership."

These developments reflect a growing understanding that good support depends not only on what staff know, but also on how they are supported to apply that knowledge in everyday practice.

Supporting current priorities across adult social care

Many of the priorities currently shaping adult social care depend on organisations having leaders who can coach, support and sustain change.

Practice Leadership provides the foundation for implementing and embedding approaches such as:

- Positive Behaviour Support (PBS);

- Person-Centred Active Support;
- trauma-informed practice;
- reducing restrictive practices;
- human rights-based approaches;
- Capable and Supportive Environments; and
- Mental Health Act reform.

Rather than representing another initiative, Practice Leadership provides the leadership capability that helps these approaches become part of everyday support.

A growing international evidence base

Research into Practice Leadership continues to develop.

While much of the original evidence emerged from the UK and Australia, more recent studies from Ireland and systematic reviews of the international literature continue to strengthen the evidence base.

This growing body of evidence consistently highlights the links between Practice Leadership, quality of life outcomes, staff experiences and organisational culture.

As understanding develops, Practice Leadership is increasingly being recognised as one of the most important organisational influences on the quality of support people experience.

Key references

- Skills for Care (2025)
- Adult Social Care Workforce Development Framework
- Bigby and Humphreys (2024)
- Ryan et al., (2024)
- Humphreys and Bigby (2026)

Conclusion

Research over more than twenty years consistently suggests that Practice Leadership is associated with better outcomes for people, more positive experiences for staff and stronger organisational cultures.

Good support does not happen by chance. It develops when organisations create the conditions in which people, staff and services can thrive.

Practice Leadership provides the bridge between organisational values and everyday experiences and is consistently associated with better quality support.

Practice Leadership is not an optional extra. It is a key organisational capability for delivering good support.

Bild and Practice Leadership

For more than two decades, BILD has worked alongside providers, researchers and people with lived experience to promote Practice Leadership as a key component of high-quality support. BILD's work includes:

- promoting evidence-informed approaches;
- developing leadership resources and guidance;
- supporting workforce development;
- delivering learning and development opportunities; and
- helping organisations embed Practice Leadership in everyday support.

Find out more about BILD's Practice Leadership work:
www.bild.org.uk/what-we-do/about-practice-leadership/

Further reading and references

Foundational Practice Leadership research

These publications established the concept of Practice Leadership and described its key components.

Mansell, J, Beadle-Brown, J, Ashman, B, Ockenden, J and Whelton, B (2004) *Person-Centred Active Support: a multi-media training resource for staff to enable participation, inclusion and choice for people with learning disabilities.* Brighton: Pavilion Publishing.

Beadle-Brown, J, Mansell, J, Ashman, B, Ockenden, J, Iles, R and Whelton, B (2014) Practice leadership and active support in residential services for people with intellectual disabilities: an exploratory study. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 58(9), 838-850.

Beadle-Brown, J, Bigby, C and Bould, E (2015) Observing practice leadership in intellectual and developmental disability services. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 59(12), 1081-1093.

Practice Leadership and quality of life

These studies explored the relationship between Practice Leadership, Active Support and outcomes for people.

Mansell, J, Elliott, T, Beadle-Brown, J, Ashman, B and Macdonald, S (2002) Engagement in meaningful activity and active support of people with intellectual disabilities in residential care. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 23(5), 342–352.

Bigby, C and Beadle-Brown, J (2018) Improving quality of life outcomes in supported accommodation for people with intellectual disability: what makes the difference? *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 31(2), e182–e200.

Bigby, C., Bould, E, Iacono, T and Beadle-Brown, J (2020a) Factors associated with good active support in supported accommodation services. *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability*.

Practice Leadership, staff experiences and organisational culture

These studies explored the relationship between Practice Leadership, management support and staff experiences.

Deveau, R and McGill, P (2013) Leadership at the front line: impact of practice leadership management style on staff experience in services for people with intellectual disability and challenging behaviour. *Journal of Intellectual and Developmental Disability*, 39(1), 65–72.

Deveau, R and McGill, P (2016a) Practice leadership at the front line in supporting people with intellectual disabilities and challenging behaviour. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 29(3), 266-277.

Deveau, R and McGill, P (2016b) Impact of practice leadership management style on staff experience in services for people with intellectual disability and challenging behaviour: a further examination and partial replication. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 56, 160-164.

Deveau, R and McGill, P (2019) Staff experiences working in community-based services for people with learning disabilities who show behaviour described as challenging: the role of management support. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 47(3), 201–207.

Contemporary challenges and emerging evidence

These more recent publications highlight the importance of organisational support, implementation and workforce issues.

Bigby, C and Humphreys, L (2024) The strength of frontline practice leadership in Australian supported accommodation services: challenges confronting service providers. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 37(3), e13227.

Ryan, R, Doody, O, Carey, E, Gilmartin, A, Kilduff, M and O'Halloran, M (2024) Exploring practice leadership in intellectual disability services: a concept analysis. *Learning Disability Practice*. https://doi.org/10.7748/ldp.2024.e2252

Doody, O, O'Halloran, M, Carey, E, Ryan, R, Gilmartin, A and Kilduff, M (2024) Leadership in intellectual disability practice: design, development and evaluation of a programme to support practice. *BMC Health Services Research*, 24, 674.

Humphreys, L and Bigby, C (2026) Predictors of job satisfaction of frontline staff working in supported accommodation services for people with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 39(1). DOI: 10.1111/jar.70179.

National policy and workforce developments

Department of Health and Social Care (2024). *Care Workforce Pathway for Adult Social Care: Overview.* Available at: gov.uk/government/publications/care-workforce-pathway-for-adult-social-care/care-workforce-pathway-for-adult-social-care-overview
[Accessed: 16/6/26].

Skills for Care (2025). *Getting the Adult Social Care Workforce Ready for Mental Health Act Reform.* Leeds: Skills for Care. Available at: skillsforcare.org.uk/resources/documents/Developing-your-workforce/Care-topics/mental-health-act/Getting-the-Adult-Social-Care-Workforce-ready-for-Mental-Health-Act-Reform.pdf
[Accessed: 16/6/26].

Additional reading

Bould, E, Beadle-Brown, J, Bigby, C and Iacono, T (2018) The role of practice leadership in active support: impact of practice leaders' presence in supported accommodation services. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 64(2), 75-80.

Baker, P and Shephard, J (2010) Reflections on the periodic service review as a practice leadership tool in services for people with intellectual disabilities and challenging behaviour. *Tizard Learning Disability Review*, 15(3), 29-32.

Bradshaw, J, Beadle-Brown, J, Richardson, L, Whelton, B, Leigh, J and Hutchinson, A (2018) Managers' views of skilled support. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 31(5), 873-884.