What qualities set effective leaders apart from those who simply manage early childhood programs? The skills identified here can lead to program excellence!

Principle-Centered Leadership in Early Childhood Education

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One of the most important aspects of any early childhood setting is the quality of its leadership. Leaders set the tone and are critical to the development of a nurturing environment that supports families and staff, who then encourage children to flourish. A principle-centered leadership approach is an effective model for early childhood education (Carr, Johnson, & Corkwell, 2004).

There are profound differences between being a manager and a leader (Covey, 1991). Managers administer for stability, have subordinates, adopt clear short-term objectives, focus on details, and are oriented toward completing tasks. Leaders administer for change, have followers, focus on long-term vision, set direction, and are oriented toward inspiring people to achieve results.

Although leadership skills are far more important to the success of an early childhood center than are managerial skills, effective centers have individuals with both sets of skills. A leader without management skills can have a dynamic vision with no idea about how to achieve that vision. A center can be in serious trouble if paperwork and finances are not appropriately addressed. On the other hand, a manager without leadership skills will accept the status quo, create hierarchies, and be reactive to issues without a clear understanding of where the center needs to go or how individual efforts fit into the big picture. As a result, with only a manager, the bottom line can become more important than the quality of services and the success of staff, children, and families.

Building on the premise that leadership skills are of utmost importance with a blend of skills clearly needed, principle-centered leadership provides a framework for achieving that blend. As Covey (2004) asserted, leaders inspire those they supervise to find their own voices. These voices are critical in early childhood for several reasons. For example, teachers are leaders within the classroom. Teachers have the capacity to help children reach their individual potentials and work with families to promote...
positive outcomes. Skillful administrators support teachers in finding their voices to create harmonious learning communities. Stakeholders at all levels of leadership are also called upon to serve as advocates for the early childhood profession (Goffin & Washington, 2007).

Principle-centered leadership is grounded in a humanistic, transformational, and values-based perspective (Bennis, 1993) and it embraces Covey’s (2004) eighth ability of highly effective people to move programs from good to great. The important dimensions of principle-centered leadership upon which leaders should focus are:

- responsibility and initiative
- vision and values
- integrity and execution
- mutual respect and benefit
- mutual understanding
- creative cooperation
- renewal (Carr, Johnson, & Corkwell, 2004).

These aspects of leadership are the organizing structure for this article and serve as a powerful paradigm for leaders and administrators in early childhood care and education who are on the path toward excellence and, perhaps, greatness.

**Responsibility and Initiative**

In this dimension, leadership is focused on fostering knowledge, attitudes, and skills of the teachers and support staff in a center. Effective leaders are clear about what they are trying to do and make sure people understand the program’s vision and goals. Clear and straightforward communication is an absolute requirement, and leaders model and reinforce this kind of communication with adults and children. All stakeholders are encouraged to discuss differences directly with each other and to be clear and honest about agreements and disagreements. Leaders strive to create an environment where individuals are respected and treated with dignity. They also value creativity and encourage multiple ways to view a problem or opportunity.

A principle-centered leader works from a facilitative perspective—rather than a hierarchical perspective that has clear, inflexible, lines of authority. A team-oriented approach is embraced, where each person has something important to contribute. The leader’s orientation is to build on each person’s strengths and interests and to create a structure that enables staff, volunteers, and children to contribute in ways that match their creativity, skills, and capabilities. Rather than focusing on remediating weaknesses, leaders find ways to maximize people’s strengths. Leaders recognize and celebrate the small and large achievements of individuals and programs.

Leaders understand that leadership is about influence, not control. They emphasize mutual ownership and responsibility for decisions and the center’s successes. They strive to reach consensus to make decisions that are owned and supported by everyone involved. Communication and trust are critical, so a leader listens and understands people’s views and
mediates between competing views to create a unified commitment to success. When things go wrong, a leader assumes responsibility for the setback, learns from the mistake, and helps the group move forward. Everyone associated with the center shares in its successes.

Vision and Values

Leaders enable families, staff, and other stakeholders to create a unified vision and then use management skills to stay focused on this vision. Principle-centered leaders seek dialogue to better understand everyone’s views. Competing opinions are accepted because leaders trust and rely on the stakeholders’ accumulated experience and wisdom. Leaders shape and articulate strategic directions by being empowered to express new perspectives, find solutions, and take action without being micro-managed.

Without question, principle-centered leaders have personal characteristics that encourage trust and respect. Promises are kept and confidences maintained.

Leaders have the courage to do the right thing.

Leaders look for opportunities and recognize that some have a limited shelf life. While reaching consensus is important, leaders understand the importance of making timely decisions. They help teachers see challenges as opportunities to create new strategic directions.

Excellence is not attained by just following rules and trying to make decisions that make people happy. At times, leaders must take stands on unpopular issues. Leaders choose what is best for children and families and ensure that this value is always held dear. Leaders have the courage to do the right thing as opposed to doing things right.

Integrity and Execution

Leaders understand that a lack of integrity undermines almost everything they are trying to accomplish. Leaders maintain their integrity when they make decisions and create policies from a position that is grounded in doing what is ethical for children and families and being fair to staff.

Overtly expressing this position—by communicating philosophical points and demonstrating just behavior—is key for staff to understand that leaders will not make decisions or promises that compromise their integrity or the integrity of the program. A clear focus on the organization’s mission is the foundation for all leadership decisions. Strategies—for larger issues as well as the daily problems—are grounded on the organization’s mission, balanced by its capacity.

For example, finding ways to make a job more pleasant or more streamlined within the scope of organizational goals demonstrates a leader’s commitment to supporting staff within an organization that involves a variety of stakeholders. This may be a difficult task given the mandates and financial responsibilities required by stakeholders, but efforts toward this end are well worth the work because they help staff and do not compromise children’s well-being.

All early childhood staff must be passionate about educating and caring for young children. This passion helps maintain program integrity. When this is not the case, individuals can be counseled into a profession that is a better personal fit.

During the course of a day, leaders make multiple decisions. Most are minor, but these small decisions represent the fundamental nature of a program. While major decisions may frame the program, daily decisions make up the habits and, thus, the essence of the integrity of programmatic functions and leadership.
Leaders make decisions with thoughtful consideration about the impact of each and every choice. Individual propensities and attributes widely vary with regard to impulsivity and cognitive processing. However, taking time, even briefly, to think about possible choices and staying on the path toward excellence with regard to daily decisions will create a pervasive sense of leadership integrity that generates trust and commitment to program initiatives. Leaders learn to listen to their own consciences to effectively maintain a clear, mission-focused strategy.

Carrying out the mission of the program is central to every leadership position. Daily decisions and problems can often be overwhelming, so leaders prioritize what is critical and put first things first. Leadership is about principles, empowerment, doing the right thing, and direction. If leaders empower others to make decisions about what procedures are necessary to do things right, fewer daily decisions about programmatic functions need to be made. Then, leaders can focus on issues that are critical to the program’s mission. Urgent issues—such as crises, accidents, or deadlines—must be dealt with immediately. Important issues—long-term planning, teacher assessment, or celebrations—must be addressed for the program to be successful, but are not urgent.

What issues are urgent, but not important? These are often related to minor interpersonal problems. Leaders should not waste precious time interfering. Prudent leaders refrain from micromanaging for two reasons: tiny details that are continually handled by leaders can disenfranchise staff

- micromanaging is a waste of time that takes away from attending to more important issues

Leaders prioritize their time and attention (Carr, Johnson, & Corkwell, 2004). Focusing on program requirements can often frame how to execute strategies. Given the numerous licensing, accrediting, and funding organizations connected to early childhood care and education, maintaining required files and documentation can easily become overwhelming. Empowering staff to develop strategies to meet these requirements can increase the efficiency with which paperwork is accomplished. Leaders focus on the greater priorities and remain conscientious about program requirements, while managers ensure accountability. Maintaining compliance becomes a priority, but the details are left to the staff responsible for data collection and reporting procedures.

**Mutual Respect and Benefit**

Effective leaders build trust among co-workers from the moment they are hired. When high trust exists in an organization, communication is instantaneous and mistakes hardly matter. This is because employees know one another and because high trust creates an enjoyable work culture (Covey, 2004). Leaders foster relationships and positive work environments built on trust. When leaders create an environment in which staff feel physically and emotionally safe, they feel comfortable to question decisions and contribute their opinions.

Leaders are honest and transparent about their program’s strengths and challenges. They foster an environment that encourages open discussion of new ideas and problem solving. They align personal strengths of staff to the program’s mission. Some issues that leaders consider in this alignment are:

- personalities and personal interests of the staff
- formal education levels and unique skills of each staff member
- each staff member’s public persona when matching talent to public initiatives
- an individual’s willingness or unwillingness to take on new initiatives, often due to stressors and responsibilities in his or her personal life

When a match between initiative and talent exists, outcomes are generally quite positive.

Prudent early childhood leaders are kind and courteous. Adults need the same basic supports in their work environment that early childhood teachers know children need to flourish: safety, respect, common courtesy, opportunities to problem-solve, support in challenging situations, humor, successful experiences, and positive feedback. The benefits of a workplace built on respect and kindness are tremendous. Ultimately, staff feel valued and that they have some control over their work lives. This may lead to low turnover rates.

Another aspect of a positive work environment is collaboration. When leaders communicate initiatives and decisions affecting the program and staff feel comfortable expressing their
opinions and generating solutions to problems, the effort toward continuous improvement and program excellence becomes a collaborative journey.

Providing time for working together on projects and initiatives can be challenging when teachers must be in the classroom with young children. Leaders who value collaboration time occasionally hire substitutes and/or build teacher work days into the master schedule much like most school districts do.

Unfortunately, full-day/full-year child care programs find this very challenging from a financial and family convenience stance. The long-term benefits of treating staff professionally by identifying professional days in the calendar, however, are well worth the investment. When families know in advance that a center will be closed, they often request a vacation day from their jobs to spend time with their children or find alternative care for that day. Collaboration time is critical to foster communication among employees and build ownership of the program.

Mutual Understanding

Learning to be an effective listener and communicator is a crucial skill for individuals in leadership positions. When most people are engaged in conversation, they are too busy thinking about how they are going to respond to fully comprehend what is being communicated. Mutual understanding is a vital dimension to principle-centered leadership.

Excellent leaders are tuned into what is being communicated through words and body language to truly understand the message. Active listening skills such as these are essential:

- focused attention on the speaker
- restating or summarizing key points to ensure understanding of the message
- attending to non-verbal messages
- asking non-threatening questions to solicit further details

These strategies enable listeners to understand the other person’s perspective. People who truly understand the message can then generate a thoughtful, appropriate, and understood response.

Effective leaders respond in ways specifically related to the behaviors that can be modified instead of to factors that cannot be controlled. They self-monitor their voice and non-verbal messages for genuineness. Feedback should be sincere, honest, and focused on solutions and mutual understanding and growth. Issues related to policies and procedures may require follow up.

Creative Cooperation

Overall, finding a balance for program and employee needs requires creativity and cooperation. A win-win attitude is one that seeks to find mutual benefit for all staff members while
striving for and maintaining program excellence. Encouraging autonomy among staff and supporting program initiatives facilitates ownership of the program and encourages participatory actions toward responding to children, families, and program stakeholders.

Effective early childhood educators assist children in the development of autonomy, initiative, and intrinsic motivation. Leaders do the same for staff by soliciting their input, acknowledging contributions, and providing resources for creative growth. This is the impetus for creating synergy.

Program synergy results from creative cooperation and collaboration. Generating decisions in isolation, dictating mandates, micromanaging, and distancing oneself from staff are giant barriers to synergy. Valuing and respecting differences of opinion, attitudes, and culture while building on the strengths of individual staff are central to developing leadership synergy.

Fostering and rewarding collaboration by acknowledging positive outcomes and inspiring and empowering staff to reach individual and collective potentials are strategies for building a strong synergistic program whereby staff are involved in solving problems and respected for their knowledge and initiatives. Synergy is the essence of principle-centered leadership.

Renewal

Synergy allows for organization nimbleness—the ability to seize opportunities when they arise. When a program’s mission and philosophy are clearly defined and the path toward excellence is explicitly laid, staff can experiment with new teaching methods, try new curricular ideas, and express their individual and collective voices. A program with knowledgeable teachers is far more prepared to be spontaneous and responsive to children and families than programs with severe hierarchies. Leaders can support staff by encouraging professional development and providing educational opportunities, resources, and materials for learning and reflection. This leadership practice promotes program quality and helps ensure sustainability.

![Image](image.jpg)

The leader’s orientation is to build on each person’s strengths and interests and to create a structure that enables staff, volunteers, and children to contribute in ways that match their creativity, skills, and capabilities.

The concept of early care and education is just now becoming an integral part of the national infrastructure (Goffin & Washington, 2007). Policy makers and others who have historically ignored the field are now proposing policies and accountability measures. Early childhood programs that intend to remain viable and sustainable must meet new state, national, and professional mandates and be accountable for professionalization of the field.

Principle-centered leaders who adhere to the dimensions of leadership that guide programs down the path
toward excellence will have ample opportunities to celebrate success with program staff and families. It is vital that all stakeholders recognize the part they play in program achievement and that competition is minimized. Program excellence is a collaborative effort, so the celebration of successes is for all stakeholders.

Acknowledging individual contributions, however, is appropriate. Leaders can specify contributions that led to collective success by embracing and supporting each individual’s unique, personal significance to the program. By aligning personal strengths to the program’s mission and encouraging creative and intellectual discussions, organizations may find that they have much to celebrate in terms of achieving the three kinds of greatness:

• personal,
• leadership, and
• organizational (Covey, 2004).

When personal strengths are aligned to the mission of the program, individual greatness can be cultivated and achieved.

Effective leaders who inspire staff to collaborate, assume program ownership, and express their individual and collective voices, will achieve leadership greatness. When early childhood programs generate synergy, are accountable to all stakeholders while providing children and families with curricular and instructional excellence, and thrive under principle-centered leaders, they have the capacity to achieve greatness.

Bibliography
Put These Ideas Into Practice!

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Principle-centered leaders take responsibility and initiative
- Foster knowledge, positive attitudes, and skills in all staff
  - Be clear about leadership goals
  - Proactively support evidence-based practice
- Unleash human potential
  - Acknowledge individual strengths and contributions
  - Inspire teachers to build on their strengths
- Encourage mutual ownership and responsibility
  - Assure that all have a stake in goals and outcomes
  - Ensure that all share in success

Skilled leaders adhere to core vision and values
- Point the way with end goals in mind
  - Implement policies that support goals
  - Embrace and remain centered around the program’s vision
- Demonstrate personal character
  - Keep promises and confidences
  - Understand what things mean to people

Effective leaders demonstrate integrity
- Maintain a clear, focused strategy
  - Be passionate about early childhood education
  - Make thoughtful choices
- Carry out the mission of the program
  - Focus on priorities: Put first things first
  - Be conscientious about program requirements

Principle-centered leaders encourage mutual respect
- Build trust among co-workers
  - Be honest and transparent
  - Be kind and courteous
- Work in collaboration with one another
  - Communicate initiatives and decisions affecting the program
  - Provide time to work together on projects and initiatives

Excellent leaders embrace creative cooperation
- Create a win-win balanced program for employees
  - Encourage autonomy
  - Provide resources for creative growth
- Strive for program synergy
  - Foster and reward collaboration with positive outcomes
  - Inspire and empower staff to reach their collective potential

Leaders foster mutual understanding
- Focus on understanding first
  - Use active listening skills
  - Set aside time for individual and group forums
- Ensure messages are understood
  - Communicate effectively
  - Follow up on policies

Early childhood leaders encourage renewal and greatness
- Support knowledgeable caregivers who have a voice
  - Encourage and provide resources for professional development
- Embrace and support unique, personal significance to the program
  - Align personal strengths to mission of program
- Celebrate successes
- Encourage creative and intellectual discussion

Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.