LEADERSHIP AS A WAY OF THINKING

PAULA JORDE BLOOM
Professor of Early Childhood Education and Director of the Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National-Louis University, Wheeling, IL

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The term leadership evokes images of great men and women—for example, Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy, Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King Jr., Susan B. Anthony, and Nelson Mandela—powerful, dynamic individuals who have led nations, inspired armies, and shaped history. But leadership is not the exclusive domain of corporate CEOs, heads of state, and those with lofty titles overseeing legions of worker bees. Leadership is the business of every director who administers an early childhood or family service program. It is an essential ingredient in any thriving organization and one of the strongest predictors of high-quality early childhood and family service programming.

Although news headlines tend to focus on the things that leaders do—those bold and gallant behaviors that help their organizations achieve excellence—a leader’s actions are only part of the story. Leadership begins in your head. It is a way of thinking about yourself and the vital role that you play in your organization. This article addresses the philosophical questions of what it means to be a leader and how you perceive yourself as a leader. It looks at leadership from three perspectives: as the exercise of influence, as an expression of your values, and as a statement of your hopes and dreams.

Leadership as the Exercise of Influence

Most early childhood and family service administrators readily accept the notion that an essential part of leader-

ship is one’s ability to inspire, motivate, and affect the feelings and actions of others. But when the conversation expands to include a discussion of authority and the exercise of power, many in our ranks feel uncomfortable, believing that these terms carry negative connotations. This is unfortunate, because the way in which leaders view the authority and power relationships inherent in their organizations has everything to do with their ability to achieve their programs’ missions.

Our beliefs about authority and power guide our behavior every day. Different organizational decisions—determining job titles, pay, and compensation levels; reporting relationships; providing access to information; and involving others in decision making—all relate to how you view authority and power. The equation does not include just you and your staff members—it also includes your relationship with the children in your program, their families, the board, the center’s neighbors, and the broader professional community in which you operate.

Authority and power are concepts that early childhood administrators cannot ignore. Being clear about your own

at a glance

- This article addresses the philosophical questions of what it means to be a leader and how you perceive yourself as a leader.
- Leadership can be viewed from three perspectives: as the exercise of influence, as an expression of your values, and as a statement of your hopes and dreams.
- Effective leadership embraces a way of thinking about your role and your work. The transformation occurs from the inside out.
management philosophy as it relates to these issues will help you understand the subtleties between terms such as authoritarian and authoritative, cooperation and collaboration, and patronizing and empowering. Put simply, how you view yourself as the person in charge affects the interpersonal dynamics in your organization every day.

Sources of Power

Power is a dynamic that exists in all adult-child and adult-adult relationships. It is the ability to get others to do what you want them to do. We can think of power as control, authority, or dominance over another individual or as sharing authority and responsibility with another person. So the central question is not “Will we use power?” but rather, “How can we use power wisely?” How can we use it to engage, guide, and support children, staff, and parents in the pursuit of common goals?

We can further understand the concept of power by exploring the reasons that prompt individuals to comply with requests, requirements, or demands from others. For example, the use of reward power—in the form of bonuses, perks, and other incentives—is common in many organizations. Although reward power may promote short-term compliance with specific rules or requests, over time employees may perceive it as manipulative. When misused, reward power can result in competition among staff, thus undermining your efforts to establish norms of collaboration. The flipside of reward power is coercive power—the threat of a reprimand, closer supervision, or even termination. Coercive power may also yield short-term compliance, but over time results in resentment and alienation of staff. Teachers who quit without notice or walk off with a year’s supply of colored markers are often retaliating in response to coercive power.

From Power to Empowerment

We need not think of power as a negative or constraining force in early childhood and family service organizations. In fact, by being aware of the power dynamics at play in programs, directors can become more cognizant of how they might put power to good use to energize and empower children, staff, and families. This knowledge requires a paradigm shift from thinking about power over others to thinking about power with others. The questions you ask yourself now are framed a bit differently:

- How can I help people feel more powerful?
- How can I turn the power pyramid upside down and use the influence and resources of my position to ignite passion and purpose in my staff?

Empowerment is the process through which early childhood and family service administrators share their legitimate authority and power, helping others use it in constructive ways to make decisions affecting themselves and their work. Empowerment happens when leaders help staff members to find greater meaning in their work, to meet higher level needs through their work, and to enhance their personal and professional capacities. This form of power is unlimited.

Similar to many leadership constructs, empowerment is best conceptualized on a continuum, with tight controls over all aspects of the program’s operations at one end and
complete delegation of authority and power at the other end. Most program administrators strive for a comfortable balance midway on the continuum, seeking ways to create more meaningful partnerships with staff members and parents to address issues that deeply affect their well being but not abdicating oversight or accountability.

A New Model—Facilitative Leadership

Rethinking personal conceptions of power and moving to a model of facilitative leadership means rethinking the specifics of how you can create partnerships in every facet of your organization’s operations. It means finding ways to give staff members a greater voice on issues that affect them every day—allocation of educational resources, curriculum, scheduling, and so forth. And it means constructing meaningful partnerships with families by providing them with a greater voice in their children’s daily experiences and in parent policies.

Facilitative leaders help others learn how to learn. These leaders understand that although rewards and external controls generate compliance, staff members’ internal sense of mastery, accomplishment, and validation generates their long-term commitment to an organization. Rather than encouraging staff members to rely on their (leader’s) expertise, facilitative leaders seek to decrease the group’s dependence on them as the leader. Facilitative leaders aim to elevate expertise within the whole group and develop a sense of shared responsibility for organizational problems and organizational achievements. A facilitative leader’s influence does not stem from the authority of the position, but rather from his ability to help others accomplish what they want to accomplish.

Facilitative leadership is a reciprocal process between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow. It is not something that is done to people, but rather it involves working with and through other people to achieve organizational goals. Trust is essential for this kind of leadership. Staff members need to believe that the leader operates in their best interest, rather than out of self-interest. Facilitative leaders exemplify the qualities of competence, connection, and character. They understand that leadership does not mean being in charge, but rather, means serving and supporting others. Leadership is about compassion and the day-to-day practice of social justice in a caring community.

Leadership as an Expression of Your Values

If you think of some of the great leaders who have inspired us through the ages—Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa—their accomplishments tell only part of the story of why biographeS write volumes about their lives. It is the values, beliefs, and deeply held principles made evident through their actions that define their characters and make them legends across time.

A value is a deeply held and enduring view of what we believe to be important and worthwhile. Our personal values shape our beliefs about what is important to pursue, how we treat others, and how we choose to spend our time. A belief is different from a value. Our personal conviction is that certain things are true or that certain statements are facts. To gain insight into your own core beliefs and values, think about how you would complete the following phrases:

- I value . . .
- I stand for . . .
- I believe that . . .
- I feel passionate about . . .

Your responses no doubt capture just a few of the values, beliefs, and deeply held principles that make you a unique thinking, feeling, and acting human being from everyone else on the planet. You are, in essence, a complex combination of values and beliefs; some are immutable and strongly define your personality, some only slightly define who you are as an individual.

To become a respected leader of an early childhood or family service program, it is not enough to master the technical skills of administration. The values and beliefs that give life to a director’s convictions and are lived through daily actions are what distinguish ordinary from extraordinary directors. To effectively model the behavior they expect of others, early childhood leaders must be clear about their own values and belief systems.

Personal Values and Beliefs

Our core values cut across all aspects of our lives. They serve as a point of reference, a moral compass for making daily decisions. They give rise to our fundamental commitments, the things in life that we consider worthy for their own sake. Because values influence and guide people’s choices, being crystal clear about the beliefs and values that shape their identity is central for leaders in any setting.

Although values certainly reflect our family upbringing and cultural backgrounds, they are also shaped by personal experiences, education, and society. Consider values as the lenses in a pair of glasses. They bring focus and clarity to your interpretation of the world and are strong motivators for personal action.

What does this mean in your day-to-day life as an administrator? If you value cooperation, for example, you probably spend a lot of time encouraging staff members to share resources and work together on team assignments. If
you value independence, you may structure work assign-
ments to promote autonomy and personal achievement
instead of team efforts. If you value neatness, you probably
praise staff for their tidy and organized classrooms or
offices. If you value creativity, however, you may be more
tolerant of the mess that often accompanies inspiration
and imagination. We all value different things and cannot
presume that others think or feel as we do.

Even with commonly identified
values such as honesty, responsibil-
ity, caring, happiness, self-respect,
and harmony, opinions vary widely
on what behaviors and actions give
evidence to these values. That is
because every person represents a
rich composite of values, each influencing decisions and
actions in slightly different ways.

Does Your Rhetoric Match Your Actions?

On a personal level, exploring values means determin-
ing if your rhetoric matches your actions. How administra-
tors spend their time is the single clearest indicator to
others about what is important to them. If an administrator
says that her top priority is her relationship with parents but
then closes her office door during arrival and dismissal, a
disconnect may exist between espoused values and action.

Conducting a personal audit of how you allocate your
time, how you spend your money, and where you focus
your attention provides clear evidence of how your
espoused values do or do not match your behavior. The car
you drive, the clothes you wear, the food you eat, the
things that make you laugh, and other personal idiosyn-
crasies all communicate your personal values.

One early childhood administrator decorates her office
walls with the children’s artwork; another displays pho-
tographs of his family; still another displays her professional
degrees and certificates. These decisions send signals to oth-
ers about what the individual sees as important. Even the
layout and design of space in a facility—the size of the direc-
tor’s office, the presence of a parent lounge, the availability
of a professional library for staff—reverberate with values.

The form and substance of written communications
also convey personal values. Even the characteristics of
memos and newsletters—the attention to detail, the infor-
mation included, and the use or absence of educational jargon—provides evidence of values. There is no avoiding it.
Everything that you do or say communicates something
about you and the values that you embrace.

Organizational Values and Beliefs

The most important conversations that we have in our
programs are conversations that reveal our core values.
Your role as a leader is to help staff members clarify their
own core values and then together develop a set of shared
values that define excellence and success for your program.

This is not an easy task. It is also not something that is
accomplished in a single, hour-long staff meeting or 1-day
retreat. It is an ongoing process that takes place over
months, even years. Engaging your staff in a dialogue about
values will help you understand the motivations for peo-
ple’s behavior and help you shape the essential values that
define your program. In the process, you and your staff will
wrestle with these fundamental questions:

- What do we stand for?
- What behaviors provide concrete evidence of our shared
  values?
- How do we define success in our program?
- How do we want to be seen by the community?

Reinforcing Values Through the Questions You
Ask and the Stories You Tell

The best way to reinforce a program’s core values is to
consciously think about them as a framework for structur-
ing interpersonal actions. This means that every time you
write a memo to your staff, respond to an e-mail, send a
thank you, or leave a voice mail message for someone, you
should think of it as an opportunity to reinforce one of
your program’s core values. For example, you might say,
“Jamie, thanks for helping Blanca with her computer yester-
day. It’s that kind of cooperative spirit that makes this
agency a great place to work,” or “Malcolm, it took courage
to make the comment you made at our staff meeting yester-
day. I really valued your openness and directness in com-
munication.”

Think also of the important questions that correspond
to each of your organization’s core values. Ask these ques-
tions every opportunity you have. This act helps others to
be more conscious about what they are doing to put the
center’s values into practice. For example, if one of your
program’s core values is personal growth, you can ask, “How
will this decision help promote the personal growth of our
staff?” If one of your core values is community, ask, “How
will this action reinforce our goal of promoting a sense of
community?”

Leadership as a Statement of Your
Hopes and Dreams

Rare is the early childhood director who does not feel
captured in a whirlwind of activity created by the daily
demands of the administrative role. Menus to review, chil-
dren to console, prospective parents to enroll—the nitty-
gritty of the director’s job leaves precious little time to
stand back and envision the future.
It's no wonder that when administrators are interviewed about their goals for their programs, their aspirations seem flat—so concrete, so limited, so narrow in scope. A new roof, a new climbing structure for the playground, new cots, and a fresh coat of paint for the infant room. Few administrators dare to dream big; the absence of crises in their programs or the desire to be fully staffed and fully enrolled may serve as their sole measure of success.

Directors who dare to dream big, who have a compelling sense of purpose and vision for their programs, are indeed rare in our profession. This is understandable. For many, the gravitational forces of limited resources, demands for accountability, and an inhospitable regulatory environment are just too strong to overcome.

But how is it that some early childhood and family service administrators seem undaunted by the limiting realities of the early childhood field? Despite the same obstacles, they create organizations that achieve extraordinary outcomes for children and families. The key to their success is their ability to breathe life into their hopes and dreams and help others envision the exciting possibilities the future holds. These directors see themselves as agents of change whose calling is to forge a unity of purpose that creates the will and the momentum for achieving their vision.

**Connecting the Dots: Values . . . Mission . . . Vision**

Someone once asked Helen Keller if there was anything worse than living without sight. She replied, “Living without vision”—wise words indeed from a woman whose achievements astounded the world. A vision serves as a lighthouse, a point in the distance that gives direction through the fog. It is not something that happens by accident; it is created purposefully. Creating a vision entails creating an organization that expresses your deepest values about children, family, work, achievement, community, and society. It comes from the heart. In essence, it is your scenario for a preferred future.

A vision is different from a mission statement. The latter is more intellectual; it comes from the head. Mission statements describe the purpose of an organization and answer the question, “Why do we exist?” An early childhood program achieves its mission by accomplishing various goals, which in turn are achieved by performing various tasks. A clearly articulated mission statement serves as a yardstick with which to measure and evaluate an organization’s activities.

The problem with most mission statements is that they are simply too long. A good mission statement should be no more than one or two sentences, easily understood, and simple to memorize and repeat. The core elements of a mission statement for early childhood programs are often very similar and include phrases such as, “We provide care and education for young children to help them achieve success in school, become productive future citizens, and develop into lifelong learners.” These noble sentiments are important, but they say nothing about what distinguishes one program from another. There is so much more that early childhood programs can be reaching for. The vision statement takes an organization’s values and mission to a higher level.

Although a mission statement focuses on the purpose of a program, a vision statement is a mental picture of what you hope to accomplish—it is the end result you will achieve if your mission is carried out. A vision statement should be filled with descriptive details that breathe life into your dreams but are still anchored in reality. Together, your mission and vision statements can serve as a template for initiating new programs, monitoring activities, and evaluating progress in your organization.

**Getting Started**

Developing a vision statement doesn’t require special prescient talents or gazing into a crystal ball, but it does require a commitment of time to reflect on the deeper purposes behind your center’s mission and the legacy for which you want to be remembered.

Developing a vision statement for your program is not a solitary exercise. No matter how capable you think you are, you cannot do it alone. The essence of vision-building is engaging in meaningful discussions with the people who are at the heart of your enterprise—teachers, board members, mental health professionals, parents, and community representatives. Here are some questions to get you started:

- What would a program look like if it succeeded every day in creating memorable childhood experiences full of joy and laughter, adventure, and a sense of wonder?
- What does it mean to be engaged in meaningful work that makes a difference in the world?
- What would it feel like to be part of an organization where loyalty and commitment go hand in hand with high expectations and peak performance?
- What does it mean to be part of a learning community where children, staff, and parents grow together?
• What would it take to build a strong community that promotes access, equity, and social justice?

Involving the people who will actually be living the vision has the ancillary benefit of strengthening the very relationships that will ensure that the vision becomes reality. Crafting a vision statement can be an empowering process that unites individuals in a common cause. When people feel like their voices have been heard and their ideas have been taken seriously, their commitment to the program rises commensurately.

Going Public

Creating a compelling vision statement is only the first step to making it a reality. At some point, you need to go public with your ideas, sharing them with a broader audience. This does not mean that you need the charismatic appeal of a Martin Luther King Jr. delivering his inspirational "I Have a Dream" speech, but you do need to be credible, persuasive, and genuine in the eyes of those you lead.

The most important aspect of your leadership role is communicating your organization's vision in a way that connects with, and gives clear direction to, those in it. Communicating your vision for the future means helping people make the quantum leap from expecting the ordinary to anticipating the extraordinary. Your vision should include the major accomplishments that you will attain as an organization, the level of quality that you will achieve, and the character of the relationships that you will have with children, their families, and the community.

The key is to distill these ideas into images, symbols, or metaphors that best represent your vision of the future. Used repeatedly, these mental pictures will help shape people's expectations of you and your program. They will begin to see what you want them to see, the essence of your vision unfolding. They will have a vision-oriented mindset.

Although visionary pronouncements are important, remember that words are not enough to make your vision take hold. The real work takes place every day in your program. In your leadership role, your job is to help each person on your team understand unequivocally what it means to support your center's vision. Employees need to know how the vision relates to them directly and how their daily actions are part of a greater whole that moves the program forward toward a more preferred ideal. Only in this way will your vision unite, inspire, and give purpose.

Conclusion

The good news is that leadership ability is not static. Although it is true that some people are born with natural gifts, anecdotal evidence confirms that the ability to effectively lead an early childhood or family service organization is really a collection of skills and dispositions, nearly all of which a leader can learn and nurture. Effective leadership does not involve formulas or quick solutions: It embraces a way of thinking about your role and the vital work you do every day. The transformation occurs from the inside out.§