How Can I Be a Leader with Chicken Noodle Soup in My Pocket?
by Pauline Davey Zeece

The overarching task of leadership today in every segment of American society is to give our youth, and all Americans, a sense that we can engage in enterprises that lend meaning to life, that we can regain control over our families and our national destiny, and can make a positive difference individually and collectively in building a decent, safe nation and world.

I’m the boss because I have hard shoes.
— Daniel, age 4, at the sandbox, 1990.

The Seeds of Leadership

Leadership is not always or necessarily something we do, but rather it continues to be an ongoing part of who we are inside and how we act upon this part of ourselves. I remember the day when I came to this conclusion. Members of the Board of Regents were coming to hear presentations about programs and research foci in the college. I was asked to represent the Child Development Laboratory program. As I passed through the building on my way to the meeting, I stopped to watch the day care children who were busily chatting over their lunch. From the corner of my eye I caught a child waving and smiling at me. I distinctly recall looking at my watch and chiding myself that these few minutes belonged to this child.

Using my best child development techniques, I bent down to talk to Benny. Now Benny was no ordinary child. In fact, one teacher described him as a child who saw the world from the top of a ladder. Benny leaned over to visit with me. Unfortunately, he did not put his cup of chicken noodle soup down as he leaned . . . and with one quick motion my pocket was filled with lukewarm broth and slippery noodles. Ten minutes from my meeting time, 20 minutes from my home, and thus an eternity away from a change of clothes, I bailed out my pocket, bid my goodbyes, and was off to my meeting.

For those of you who have never worn chicken noodle soup, I would like to inform you that it creates a curious and distinctive smell when mixed with linen. I have never met a living soul who reported fond feelings for the smell of chicken noodle soup and linen. (I must admit that I did once know a four year old who reported loving his caregiver because she smelled like Chicken McNuggets.) But back to leadership.

I am not sure how well my presentation went. I do know that one of the business cards I handed out at the end of the session had a half dried noodle on its back. For all of the trouble of the moment, this experience did reaffirm my feelings about leadership roles in child care. Perhaps everyone who purports to know what is needed for society and child care should be required to
carry a few noodles around in their pocket . . . to remind them of the Bennys and the moments that must be created for them. Leaders must be able to really understand what it is to be three and see the world from the top of a ladder and live in a child care center for ten hours each day. To do this best, leaders must know about leadership, about themselves, and about those they lead.

What Effective Leaders Know — About Leadership

Leaders understand that change is a process rather than an event and that change for the sake of change is the most dangerous kind of change there is.

Bennis and Nanus (1985) remind us that managers do the right things while leaders do what is right. Oftentimes what is right is already happening in quality programs. In society today there is the temptation to use “looking different” as an indicator of contemporary thinking. What is best for children may be measured by how things look on the outside, rather than by long term child outcomes. Yet what is known today about quality early life experiences for children was not discovered overnight. Rather, this body of information evolved from long term observations and experiences of researchers and child care workers. The role of effective leaders then is to aid in the discovery of the usable, as well as the unusable: to affirm the value of conventional wisdom as well as the value of innovation.

Leaders must commit to the importance of vision and the practicality of short term goals.

The mandate to improve performance and to pursue excellence has multiplied the number of demands on leaders. Yet administrators of child care programs know that steps toward the ideal are often small and unnoticed. In fact, seeking ideal solutions oftentimes may conflict with the day-to-day demands of a program. Kantor (1989) proposes several dichotomies of demands for the 1990s that seem especially appropriate for child care administrators. These include:

• thinking strategically and investing in the future—but keeping the numbers up today.

• being entrepreneurial and taking risks—but not costing the business anything by failing.

• continuing to do everything you’re doing now even better—but spending more time communicating with employees, parents, and children, serving on teams, and launching new projects.

• becoming passionately dedicated to “visions” and fanatically committed to carrying them out—but continuing to be flexible, responsive, and able to change direction quickly.

Leadership is obviously no easy task.

The trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you’re still a rat.


Leaders understand the role communication plays in successful personal and professional interactions.

Communication is the thread that weaves the players in a child care program together. When it is strong, a program greatly increases its chance for success. Leaders do not have to be orators or stand-up comics. In fact, some of the most effective communication in which leaders engage involves listening, observing, and really hearing what others have to say. Healthy communication drives a program; unhealthy communication destroys it.

What Effective Leaders Know — About Themselves

Leaders survive best when they are compassionately able to laugh at life and themselves.

Last month a teacher brought a child into my office with a Lego lodged in her nose (the child’s, not the teacher’s!). A director of a local program recently confided that she had a child in one of her programs color his genitals green with permanent markers. You have to work pretty hard at not laughing at life in a child care program. But the key word here is compassion. The Lego incident wasn’t funny until it was clear that the child was safe. The marker incident caused distress for parents and caregivers. So often administrators are able to show compassion to everyone else in a program but themselves. It’s healthy not to be perfect . . . to laugh at life with children . . . to understand and then forgive the mistakes people make, even your own.

Leaders learn from their mistakes—or at least they are able to recognize when they make the same mistake again.
Understanding why something went wrong or did not work oftentimes provides more insight than knowing why something worked. While making mistakes is part of being human, understanding those mistakes is part of being a competent leader. Effective leaders walk a fine line between dwelling on failures long enough to learn from them and being consumed by remorse or self-pity. They understand the danger in feeling sorry for themselves and the power in getting on with their lives and their business.

What Effective Leaders Know — About Others

Leaders enable others to believe that people do not have to be rich or famous or titled to make a difference.

The real power in leadership rests in a leader’s ability to empower others. It is difficult to watch children grow from tiny infants into confident five year olds without knowing that someone is making a difference. Perhaps the difficulty in helping others understand and believe that what they do DOES matter rests in the notion that quality child care work is an unopened gift to society. Quality early life experiences build a foundation for all of later life. The consequences of such care is cumulative and ongoing for as long as a person lives. Leaders help others not only understand, but truly believe that this is the case. One of the most effective ways leaders make this happen is through reasonable rewards. Roberts (1989) recounts some worthwhile advice from Attila:

- Care more for the rewarding of your Huns than for rewarding yourself. Your own rewards will then far exceed even your greatest hopes and dreams.
- Never give a Hun a reward that holds no value for yourself.
- Be generous with small tokens of appreciation—they will multiply in returned loyalty and service.

Leaders understand the strength that comes from diversity in people and situations and the weakness that comes from demanding that all people perform identically.

Bennis (1989) posits that leadership gives pace and energy to work and empowers the work force. This is best accomplished when people feel significant. It also occurs when leaders are able to capitalize on strengths and minimize weaknesses. One of the biggest strengths in any child care center is the diversity the staff, children, and parents bring to the program. Asking everyone to perform identically denies the opportunity for growth for all who are involved in programming. Allowing for the expression of individuality in appropriate ways fosters the idea that all people are valuable. Effective leaders understand these differences.

Leaders understand the greatest success comes from the success of those they lead.

Collaborative success is one of the most powerful ways to promote and sustain quality in child care programming. One of the greatest by-products of individual success is its contagious nature. Peters and Austin (1985) suggest that excellence in programming comes from the regular celebration of superior day-to-day performance. Effective leaders ensure that all workers in a child care program know when they are doing well. Individual and group successes are acknowledged and recognized in meaningful and ongoing ways. Effective leaders meet this need because they under-
stand that every success in a child care program is a collective success.

**And Finally**

Leaders understand that all decisions have a cost and few, if any, are painless.

One of the best kept secrets about leadership is that many times the role involves situations in which no one “wins.” There is nothing victorious about firing a long time worker who can no longer perform effectively. There is nothing exciting about asking child care workers to subsidize their jobs with their own sweat. There is little that is glamorous about trying to balance budgets which never seem to go quite far enough—no matter how real the needs are. What is exciting is that, painful or not, effective leadership does make a difference. This difference is felt most keenly by those who are able to acknowledge it least effectively but who benefit from it most dramatically—young children.

Thus, it is necessary that we have leaders at every level who possess the skill and the commitment to advocate for quality early life experiences. Attila (Roberts, 1989) reminds us that there is no quick way to develop leaders because learning to lead effectively continues throughout life. Effective leaders, then, are those with a willingness and ability to serve. They are those who are willing to take risks and to cause others to excel through unity of action. They are those who have a human quality and a strong commitment to their cause. And, hopefully, they are those who are willing on occasion to carry a few noodles in their pocket.

**References**


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