



# What Does It Mean to Be a Director?

Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality.

—**Warren G. Bennis**, *Executive's Portfolio of Model Speeches for All Occasions*

## Terms Used in this Book

There are many titles used in early childhood programs nationwide for education administrators. Throughout this book, *director* and *program leader* are used interchangeably to be inclusive of all programs, both large and small.

Directors have a diverse set of responsibilities, and managing them all can often feel like a delicate balancing act. You have to provide a safe, healthy environment for children and teachers. Hire and retain a qualified, diverse staff. Have a solid business plan. Understand child development and best practices in early childhood education. Establish collaborative relationships with families and program stakeholders. Market your program. Help out in a classroom when you're needed. Take time to care for your own physical and emotional health. Remain calm under pressure.

Your overall responsibility is to create a physically and emotionally safe educational environment where learning and care can flourish for children, staff, and families. To do

this, you must prioritize your duties and tasks on an ongoing basis and focus on what is most important at any particular moment, even as you keep an eye on the long term.

## The Director as Both Manager and Leader

Many writers have noted the differences between the role of a manager and that of a leader (see Carter & Curtis 2010; Talan & Bloom 2011). A manager focuses on people, problems, and tasks. A leader must tend to these managerial functions while bringing them into focus with the program's shared vision, mission, and goals (see pages 28–31 in Chapter 3 for information on developing these important elements of your program). Effective program directors are both leaders *and* managers. As directors develop professionally, their acquisition of skills follows a predictable progression. In the beginning, it is common to focus on your managerial functions out of necessity—the immediate daily tasks that are the nuts and bolts of running a program. As you put processes in place and develop confidence and self-efficacy, you gradually widen your focus to include the big picture—long-range vision building and systemic changes. The figure on the next page, based in part on Bloom's (2014) distinctions between the functions of management and leadership, illustrates elements of both of these sides of early childhood administration.

## Managers . . .

- › Focus on efficiency
- › Value stability
- › Concentrate on organizing systems
- › Focus on short-term goals
- › Establish work plans

## Directors . . .

- › Focus on efficiency *and* effectiveness
- › Value stability *and* risk taking
- › Concentrate on organizing systems *and* motivating people
- › Focus on short- *and* long-term goals
- › Establish work plans *and* co-establish the vision and mission

## Leaders . . .

- › Focus on effectiveness
- › Value risk taking
- › Concentrate on motivating people
- › Focus on long-term goals
- › Co-establish the vision and mission

# Know Yourself

Developing your leadership skills is a journey, and it begins with some self-examination.

## Recognizing Your Personal Attributes

Understanding your strengths, weaknesses, emotions, and motivations is an important part of being a leader. Self-awareness of your skills enables you to identify which ones contribute to the effectiveness of the program and which you need to hone. A director rarely has all the skills needed to lead a program. While building on your strengths, look for ways to further develop your abilities to communicate, forge relationships, make sound financial decisions, or whatever other skills you need.

Reflecting on your beliefs and motivations provides insight into your emotions, another essential ingredient for effective leadership. Consider your blind spots, such as a tendency to refuse to ask for or accept help, a reluctance to take a stand on unpopular issues, or being unwilling to confront individuals when necessary. How do these affect your interactions with others and your ability to get things done? When engaging with a staff member or family with whom you disagree, it is easy for your emotions to cloud the situation. When this occurs, take a few moments to reflect on why you might be experiencing a particular emotion, like this director:

During the second week of school, Midori is approached by a teacher, Jo, in the program she directs. Jo tells Midori about a situation she believes is a parent-child separation issue in her classroom. Each morning when 3-year-old Zelda Maisel arrives with her mother, Mrs. Maisel insists on spoon-feeding Zelda her breakfast at the snack table. She is upset that Mrs. Maisel does not let her child feed herself, something Jo has been working on with Zelda at lunch and snack time, and asks Midori to intervene.

Midori's first reaction is that Jo is in the right and Zelda must be allowed to feed herself. Not only is it program policy, but Midori firmly believes that it is also a necessary part of developing self-care and fine motor skills. She feels that it is difficult for some parents to give their young children opportunities to develop independence and thinks that perhaps Zelda's mother is pampering her daughter. However, before responding to Jo, Midori takes a moment to consider Zelda's family's culture and background. A few interactions Midori personally had with Mrs. Maisel suggested that she does not tolerate waste. It might be that she feeds Zelda to avoid having food spilled and wasted. Midori mentions this to Jo. Together, they discuss why the situation is challenging and what they could do to support both Jo's goals for children in the classroom and the family's goals that center on feeding and eating.

When you are able to recognize and separate your emotions from a situation, you are calmer and can consider a variety of perspectives. This allows you to address the situation in a collaborative, productive way.

## Identifying Your Leadership Traits

In addition to your skills and emotional makeup, your personal values and beliefs influence your day-to-day leading of the program as well as your organization's overall purpose and goals. When you integrate your personal principles and professional voice, you will find the strength, passion, and—most important—the authority to lead others (Espinosa 1997). One way to start identifying your own values and beliefs is by thinking about leaders and mentors in your life who have inspired or disappointed you. What qualities and traits have you admired most in other leaders? What qualities have you disliked?

Here are some questions to help you think about your own leadership traits and your approach to professional relationships:

- › Am I organized and good with details or more of a big-picture person?
- › Do I tend to be outgoing or more reserved?
- › Do I work collaboratively, or do I use a more authoritative approach with others? In what situations am I more likely to act in each way? Why?
- › When faced with a task, do I focus more on getting the task done or on the best way to do so? How does it vary with the situation?
- › How comfortable am I with disequilibrium and conflict? How do I tend to handle situations involving them?
- › How flexible am I?
- › Is my communication style more direct or indirect?
- › Do I make decisions easily and quickly, or do I take my time?
- › Do I keep my feelings to myself or freely show them?
- › Do I stick with methods I know work, or do I tend to consider more unique approaches?

Consider how these qualities affect your relationships with staff, families, and children.

## Practice Facilitative Leadership

Your leadership traits strongly influence how you work with your staff, the families, and others involved in the program. While many types of leadership styles have been identified, we advocate *facilitative leadership*, a process

where the power and responsibility to meet an organization's goals are shared (Forester 2013). This means finding ways to create partnerships with staff and give them a greater voice on issues that affect them every day, such as resource allocation, curriculum, and scheduling. Facilitative leadership also means constructing meaningful relationships with families by providing them with opportunities to weigh in on parent policies and their children's daily experiences. Facilitative leaders invite and inspire group participation, proactively involving staff and families to contribute ideas and perspectives about improving center processes. Facilitative leaders build on individuals' strengths, increase engagement, and help others learn how to learn (O'Neill & Brinkerhoff 2018). That said, there are decisions that ultimately are the director's responsibility, such as hiring staff or budgetary issues. Even in those situations, an effective leader gathers input from staff and families before making a final decision. Regardless of a tendency to lead in a certain way, an effective director adapts to each situation as needed.

## Treat Teachers the Same Way You Expect Teachers to Treat Children

Many of the most effective program directors started as classroom teachers, and there are a number of parallels between working with children and working with adults that can help you in your director role. A teacher's job is to create a classroom community where children feel safe to independently learn, problem solve, and take risks, and a director needs to create the same type of space for the teachers in her program. Just as teachers see each child as an individual with unique strengths and challenges, directors should recognize the same in each teacher. Deep learning occurs for both children and adults when they have opportunities to try new things, can make mistakes that they can learn from, and are supported by others who have more understanding or skill. At any age, we all feel more motivated and invested in our learning when our voices are included in the process, whether that means letting a child choose which center to visit first that day or giving teachers the flexibility to choose materials for their classroom.

Setting goals and objectives for learning is another parallel process. Teachers observe children, discover what they already know and can do, and scaffold learning experiences to help children develop their knowledge and skills. Effective directors—whether they are developing or mature leaders—not only supervise their staff but also mentor them and help them set professional development goals (see pages 112–116 in Chapter 7). And directors as well as teachers can model for children, families, and the larger community how to be lifelong learners when they share their thinking about an issue or topic, their questions, their decision-making processes, and even their mistakes. Additional similarities are outlined in “Some Similarities in Guiding Children and Guiding Adults” on the next page.

# Some Similarities in Guiding Children and Guiding Adults

	Guiding Children	Guiding Adults
<b>Relationships</b>	Develops individual relationships with each child	Develops individual relationships with each staff member
<b>Skills</b>	Celebrates current skills	Recognizes and builds on current skills
<b>Expectations</b>	Conveys simple, age-appropriate expectations	Provides job descriptions and clear expectations
<b>Emotions</b>	Validates children's emotions and helps them to express their emotions appropriately	Listens to staff members' feelings and encourages a solution-oriented attitude
<b>Conflict</b>	Helps children learn to resolve conflict	Guides staff members to resolve conflict on their own and helps when necessary
<b>Behavior</b>	Redirects children to appropriate behavior	Coaches staff members to meet job expectations
<b>Self-Sufficiency</b>	Gives children opportunities to learn self-help skills	Delegates to help staff members become more self-sufficient

# Give Yourself the Permission to Lead

Many program directors never intended to be in the role. Quite a few are classroom teachers who became very knowledgeable about the program and

advanced over time to lead it. Some directors are placed in the position at the request of their program boards; others are asked to step in during transitional periods or emergency circumstances. In cases like these, directors often find it hard to lead a group of individuals who have been their peers. As a classroom teacher, you are trained to be warm and nurturing at all times, and you work hard to build the trust and respect of children and families. But while directors should likewise be approachable and supportive, they also need to be authoritative, confident decision makers—whether it makes everyone happy or not.

Building partnerships with staff and exercising facilitative leadership are important, but to fulfill all of your different responsibilities, you must give yourself the permission to lead and act with authority in your role. Though pointed out earlier in this chapter, it bears repeating: being an effective director requires striking the right balance between good management and good leadership. Neither directors nor teachers want authority to be the only aspect of their work relationships. Most people want—and greatly benefit from—boss–employee interactions that are grounded in human connection and motivation, and research shows that when employees have a more personal relationship with their boss, it improves their level of engagement in their work (Anitha 2014; Artz 2013).

## Directly from a Director

I never thought I would be a director. I always loved kids and my job as a classroom teacher, and I wasn't looking for something else. But when an opportunity presented itself, I thought, "I can do that job." I took the leap and never looked back. While some days the challenges are more difficult than I bargained for, overall I have found the rewards of supporting teachers and creating a center-based system, organization, and community that goes beyond one classroom deeply satisfying . . . and certainly never boring!

You can build your effectiveness as a leader by following these three essentials (Hill & Lineback 2011):

- › **Manage yourself.** Formal authority alone does not motivate or influence people. Instead, model the kind of behavior you expect from your staff. Be a leader they trust and want to emulate. For example, when listening to a teacher express a concern, model active listening and acknowledge his concern. Invite his thoughts on solutions and contribute thoughtful responses.



- › **Manage your network.** Familiarize yourself with the roles, needs, and expectations of your staff, the program’s board members, the families you serve, and the community. For example, be sure to make time to understand the role of each of the program’s constituents and to meet with them as often as necessary to maintain a collaborative relationship.
- › **Manage your team.** Think about the individual performance of teachers and staff who report to you and how you can inspire and empower them to be their best by supporting and fostering their goals and professional development. Promoting a high-performing “we” will lead to an effective, high-quality program. (Chapter 7 discusses this in more detail.) For example, engage teachers by offering a goal sheet at the beginning of each year on which they list things they want to accomplish in the classroom and as part of their professional growth. Check in at least once during the school year to see how things are going, and ask what resources you could provide that would help them accomplish their aims. At the end of the year, discuss what went well and what could be improved.

#### Directly from a Director

My problem is that I want my staff to like me. I have never been good at being a “boss.” That’s why during staff meetings, I use the state licensing regulations and NAEYC guidelines to justify my decisions. I tell my staff, “This is best practice. This is what we need to achieve.” I want to get better at being a strong leader without falling back on a larger organization for support.



As you build a solid foundation in these areas, your confidence in your ability to make intentional decisions and to lead with purpose will grow.

## Recognize What You Really Have Control Over

It is easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer number of responsibilities and problems you face on a daily basis. Each person who comes to you with a concern can often make it seem that *her* dilemma is the most pressing issue for you to address and resolve. Some problems are clear cut and relatively straightforward, while others are more complex. So, what should the director do to effectively prioritize and respond to issues? Start by considering these two points:

- › **Clarify your role.** Ask what the person (or situation) needs or wants from you: A quick yes or no answer? A specific resource? Advice on what to do next? Simply a good listener?
- › **Clarify your limitations.** What can you do to help resolve the problem? What can't you do? What do you have control over? What is out of your hands?

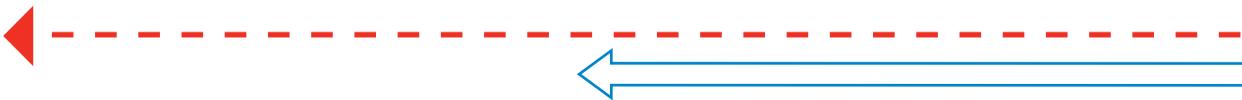
Knowing your role and your limitations can help you prioritize and focus your time and energy where it will be most effective. The following vignette illustrates how being mindful of these two points helps the director determine if and how she should act:

Zoya, a kindergarten teacher, walks into Melissa's office before the children arrive, shuts the door behind her, and begins to cry. Melissa is alarmed, wondering if there is a concern with a child or if Zoya is having an issue with a colleague. Her immediate priority is to find out the problem and to help Zoya regain her composure. If the issue is complex, it might require further conversations with Zoya, but for now, Melissa must try to help her return to the classroom to begin her responsibilities for the day.

She expresses concern and asks what is happening. Zoya confides that her home life has been very stressful lately; she and her husband have been fighting about finances.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," says Melissa, offering Zoya a tissue. "How can I help you?"

Zoya asks about her salary and if there is the possibility of a raise. Melissa knows that she does not have the authority to decide this, and she replies that she will reach out to the board for more information about the budget allocation plans for teacher salaries in the coming year. She also offers to meet with Zoya after school later in the week so they can take the time to discuss her concerns in more detail. With a plan in place and after talking a bit more with Melissa, Zoya calms down and returns to her classroom to get ready for the day.



The chapters that follow, each self-contained and focused on typical functions of the director role, are grounded in the concepts and self-reflection explored here. Every decision you make, from curriculum to family engagement, has implications. Being aware of and in tune with yourself as a leader will help you be intentional and strategic in your decision making. Your work as a director will include challenges, but you'll be sure to find there are rewards as well.

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## Big-Picture Takeaways

- › Directors are both managers and leaders. They must tend to managerial functions while bringing these functions into focus with the program’s shared vision, mission, and goal.
- › Leading adults is grounded in many of the same techniques used in working with children.
- › Directors develop collaborative partnerships with staff and families so there is a shared, collective voice in planning, decision making, and implementation.
- › Don’t be afraid of being an authoritative figure. Effective leading means being a confident decision maker
- › Every decision you make as a program leader needs to be intentional. Lead with vision and purpose.

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## Go Deeper

*The Director’s Toolbox* (series), by P.J. Bloom (New Horizons, 2007–2016)

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*Five Elements of Collective Leadership for Early Childhood Professionals*, by C. O’Neill and M. Brinkerhoff (Redleaf Press; NAEYC, 2017)

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*What You Need to Lead an Early Childhood Program: Emotional Intelligence in Practice*, by H.E. Bruno (NAEYC, 2012)

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