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Heart-Centered Leadership

by Nancy Rosenow

Becoming a heart-centered leader is an inside job, and it’s not for the faint-of-heart. It’s a process of getting to know and accept ourselves so well that nothing outside of us feels threatening anymore. It’s making peace with the fears we find in our heart when we get really honest. The classic children’s book, *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Williams, 1958), contains a famous paragraph that describes the process perfectly:

> You become. It takes a long time…. Generally by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.

Heart-centered leaders no longer try to cover up their “Realness” for fear of what others will think. They learn to stop judging any parts of themselves as ‘ugly.’ They move to a place of greater acceptance and love for themselves first, and then for everyone else in their lives.

That all sounds good, but, wow, it’s not easy. It’s a process, not an event.

It was a revelation to me a few years back when I finally understood that the judgments I feared the most weren’t from others, but from myself. I had been living for years as my own worst critic, looking outside myself for acceptance and validation, all the while keeping up an internal dialogue of criticism and judgment. My greatest fear was that others would ‘find out’ about my flaws and come to the same conclusion I had — that I may not be worthy enough, perfect enough, or good enough to be an effective leader. The irony is that the fear of facing my ‘realness’ kept me from creating the most real relationships with others. I wasn’t able to lead as effectively because my fears got in the way. Only when I began to risk revealing all of me was I able to move into a place where my leadership became more loving, collaborative, and yes, effective.

Author Brene Brown, famous for her TED Talk on vulnerability, has written a wonderful book called *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way we Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (2012). “Courage starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen,” she writes. That sounds great, but I know how tough it is to really allow myself to be seen. If others truly see me, then they’ll notice the parts of me that are “loose in the joints and very shabby” — in a metaphorical sense. (Okay, a little bit in a literal sense, too, since I’m practicing honesty.) It’s only when I can move into a place of acceptance and love for all my ‘shabby’ places that I can be open to real relationships. Because we all have the places inside ourselves we judge as not-good-enough. Much of the hurt in our world comes from trying to hide those places from each other. More connection and meaning and joy is possible as soon as we embrace our ‘shabbiness’ as an acceptable part of ourselves.

**Find Your Kinder Voice**

That brings me to what I believe is the first and most important characteristic of a heart-centered leader: the ability to become intentional in our self-acceptance. I’ve learned to really pay attention to the voice in my head now, asking it to be much kinder. When I hear self-judgment and criticism, I ask myself if I’d want to talk to a friend that way. While the answer is always “of course not,” I’ve really come to understand that the more my self-talk is filled with negativity and criticism, the more likely I am to turn that
unkind voice on others, even if I don’t mean to. In a school environment, especially, this is a cycle we very much want to break. Consider this: An administrator who is unaware of how self-critical she is passes on her judgmental feelings to the teachers on her staff. The teachers, affected by that negativity, inadvertently pass on those judgmental feelings to their students. And, since we know that the words our children hear from the adults in their lives soon become their own internal voices, the unhealthy cycle lives on in another generation. Or, it stops because we choose to stop it.

Choose Love More Often than Fear

Another vitally important characteristic of a heart-centered leader is the ability to make more choices that are motivated by love instead of fear. Fear and love are always at odds with each other. It’s very hard to be truly loving when fear is in control. Almost every day I find myself confronted with the choice to take a deep breath and move through fear into a more loving space, or ride the wave of fear into negativity and doubt. Sometimes, despite my best intentions, fear gets a hold of me and pushes me to the ground. Then I find myself snapping at others, trying to control the uncontrollable, and making decisions I later regret. When I notice that fear has been pushing me around, I get very still and give myself a big dose of love and self-forgiveness. I remind myself that I am human and fear is part of the human condition, even though it’s not as powerful as it would like us to believe. I also remind myself that one of my deepest intentions — not just as a leader, but as a human being — is to operate as much as possible from a place of love and acceptance.

With practice, I have been able to keep fear from controlling me so much. I’ve learned that fear is quite the liar; it often tries to convince me that I can’t take the time for human connection and loving interactions because there’s an ‘emergency’ that’s more important, or that ‘things will fall apart’ if I don’t try to exert more control. Over the years, I’ve started dealing with fear’s lies in a gentler way. I treat them like I would a young child… with reassurance and firmness. Often I’ll say out loud to myself: “I choose to be loving right now. Love is more powerful than fear.”

Believe in Your Own Strength of Heart

For many years, leaders were taught never to appear too emotional. In the past, administrators were often judged as too weak if they ever discussed concepts as ‘squishy’ as leading in a heart-centered way. Recently, though, this misunderstanding has been turned on its head, as more and more has been written about the need to enlist both head and heart in service to effective leadership. In addition to Brene Brown’s work, other popular titles in recent management literature include: Leadership from the Inside
Heart-centeredness is no longer being judged as weakness, but instead as a source of strength. A new understanding is coming into awareness as leaders increasingly embrace the fact that their effectiveness is grounded in a strong relationship with themselves. The third characteristic vitally important to a heart-centered leader is that she believes in the deep value of her own strength of heart.

A few years ago when I wrote a book about heart-centered teaching, a number of educators contacted me to say I’d touched on a subject they’d been afraid to talk about openly. Many told me they longed for more heart-centered relationships among fellow staff members and with their students, but worried they would be judged harshly if they ever expressed those sentiments. I’d like to think we’ve now moved into a new era of understanding where no one need apologize ever again for valuing heart-centeredness as a crucial and strong component of effective teaching and leading.

Believe in Everyone’s Strength of Heart

Once we as heart-centered leaders have come to accept our own ‘Realness,’ learned to choose love over fear more often, and come to believe deeply in our strength of heart, then we’re ready to support others in doing the same. As we let our staff learn to know more about our ‘shabbiness,’ we invite others to reveal more of themselves, ‘warts and all.’ This opens the door to closer connection and keeps people from expending so much energy trying to hide insecurities. With the staff I lead, we have two traditions I value greatly. One is a time when people are invited to tell stories. We choose three names at random each month and those people tell us a story about their ‘Realness’ in whatever way they choose. There are no rules, no pressure, just an invitation to tell us more about their authentic selves. Over time the stories have become richer and more meaningful as people have ‘dared greatly’ to ‘show up and be seen.’

We also have a tradition of spending some of our staff meetings talking to each other about the ‘mistakes’ we’ve made and what we learned from them. As it became more and more acceptable to discuss things that didn’t work, it became increasingly obvious that having the courage to ‘fail’ (by the world’s standards) is a prerequisite for doing important work. Heart-centered leaders help others accept honest mistakes as an important part of a learning orientation to life. It’s a joy to work with a staff that has the courage to be ‘Real.’ No one judges others as ‘ugly.’ And if that ever happens, the heart-centered leader knows that it’s because the person who judges does not yet understand.

Celebrate Often

Heart-centered leaders know they must help set the tone they want in their organizations by focusing more on what’s working well than on what’s not. Management guru Tom Peters, author of many acclaimed books such as In Search of Excellence (Peters & Waterman, 2006) and The Pursuit of Wow (1994), has been widely quoted as saying, “Celebrate what you want to see more of.” Heart-centered leaders are great celebrators. They rejoice in effort as much as achievement. They notice courage, kindness, commitment, and celebrate those qualities often and exuberantly. They don’t wait for the ‘big success’ to plan a party, for they know that the loving energy people bring to their work is actually more important than any particular achievement.

Organizations led by heart-centered leaders become interdependent, mutually supportive, and joyful. That doesn’t mean people don’t work hard, get discouraged at times, or face challenges. What it does mean is that any challenge is secondary to the sense of purpose and pleasure felt by a shared commitment to an important mission. Heart-centered leaders feel the mission of the organization deeply and speak of it often. And since each person in the organization is valued for being ‘Real,’ the mission grows and strengthens as more and more people help define its richness. Work is done with a sense of purpose and dedication to something that transcends each individual. The satisfying feeling of contributing to the greater good flourishes. Now that is something truly worth celebrating.

References


Go to the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have. But with the best leaders, when the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say, “We have done this ourselves.”

— Lao Tzu

What is Collective Leadership?

Collective leadership is a group of people working together toward a shared goal. Collective leadership goes above and beyond working as a team; it entails working as a system. When collective leadership is present, people say: We have done this ourselves.

Collective leadership can operate within a team, an organization, a collaboration, a community, and even a profession or system. It enables those in leadership positions to feel surrounded by support and resources rather than figuring out everything alone. In collective leadership, the concept of leadership shifts from something you do to or for others to something you do with others. And it is a way for people in any position within an organization to contribute to their fullest ability.

Not only is leading in this way more enjoyable, it surfaces and utilizes the gifts and strengths of staff, volunteers, program participants, and community members. In addition, this construct of leadership is a perfect fit for the early childhood field. Collective leadership is not far removed from the concept of valuing children as capable, competent learners, honoring the gifts and strengths of each individual child, and encouraging reflection and learning through asking thoughtful and intentional questions.

There is a growing recognition that society needs leaders who can navigate complexity, as many of the challenges that we face are not simple (Senge, Hamilton, & Kania, 2015). Similarly, our field is complex and our work crosses multiple systems. The time is right to rethink leadership.

In her foreword of Professionalizing Early Childhood Education as a Field of Practice: A Guide to the Next Era (2015), Rhian Evans Allvin, executive director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) writes:

Collective Leadership: Activating the Gifts of Your Team

by Monica Brinkerhoff, Albert Murrieta, and Cassandra O’Neill

Monica Brinkerhoff, M.S.W., is the Organization and Employee Development Director at Child-Parent Centers, Inc., the Head Start grantee for southeastern Arizona. With over 20 years of experience in early childhood care and education, Monica has worked in our profession in many capacities, including preschool teacher, preschool director, coach, consultant, and administrator. Her passions are advocacy, policy, evaluation, leadership, and systems thinking. She is an Exchange Promising Leader for 2015.

Albert Murrieta, M.Ed, currently works as an Infant and Toddler Coordinator providing quality training and professional development with a Head Start grantee in Southern Arizona. His experience includes working with preschool children and their families as a classroom teacher, and as a curriculum specialist providing coaching, mentoring, and support with Head Start teachers and home visitors. Albert received his Master of Education in Early Childhood Education from Northern Arizona University in 2012 and his Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education from the University of Arizona in 2010.

Cassandra O’Neill, CEO of Wholonomy Consulting, has over 25 years of experience building leadership capacity in the social sector. She is passionate about helping leaders create high performing teams so they achieve exceptional results. She has worked with leaders in over 200 organizations including libraries, schools, government agencies, foundations, and a variety of nonprofit organizations. Cassandra uses models that focus on getting more of what you want, creating a learning environment that is optimistic and enjoyable. She is passionate about building capacity for organizational effectiveness, system change, collaboration, collective impact, collective leadership, strategic learning, and evaluation. She has written articles for two Charity Channel newsletters and contributed chapters to multiple books on governance and community engagement. She has also authored multiple publications related to building capacity and readiness for collaboration and collective impact. Learn more about her at www.wholonomyconsulting.com and her new program www.bethebestbossever.com.
“Among other systems-building strategies, (we are asked) to contemplate our existing mental models, as they are often deeply embedded and might be obstructing our progress. (We are encouraged) to engage in personal reflection and initiate or participate in conversations with intent to develop a shared understanding and evolved direction… moving this boulder will take both a personal and collective commitment, and… the action required must come from inside the field.” (p. 9)

Nowhere are old mental models more destructive than in the realm of leadership. Traditional models of leadership are hierarchical, directive, and utilize top-down communication and decision making. In these models, the leader is the hero. These mental models have underlying assumptions that people need to be told what to do, often by one person at the top of an organization. Unfortunately, these structures prevent people from using their gifts and talents toward shared goals in schools, organizations, and communities across the country. At the same time, there is a national dialogue about collective impact initiatives, whose success is dependent on true collective leadership (Senge, Hamilton, & Kania, 2015).

Collective Leadership: Identify Shared Goals

The first step in collective leadership is to create common ground and establish shared values, goals, and motivation. Take time at the outset to explore what values those on your team bring to the work. Provide space for sharing values, goals, and motivations aloud, and then look for commonalities: Whose goals are being pursued? Do people feel they have a shared goal or that they are working toward someone else’s goal? A collective leader helps people co-create a vision of the conditions they want to see.

Collective Leadership: Use Structures and Processes for Shared Decision Making

Explore shared decision making by looking at the kinds of decisions that are currently being made by leaders in your program, and how they are being made. If important decisions are being made by one or two people and then told to staff, there may be an opportunity to identify some decisions that might benefit from more staff involvement. There is an important caveat here: Although people love the opportunity to share their opinions and experiences, they don’t like to be asked their opinion only to have it ignored. Prevent this by being clear about what you are seeking input on, and follow through with acting on feedback provided.

Collective Leadership: Identify and Build on Strengths

Explore what people are good at. What are their talents and interests? Building on strengths may seem obvious, but Gallup research (2014) suggests that the majority of businesses in the United States don’t focus on employees’ strengths. There are several good resources for surfacing the strengths of those on your team (see Resources section), but the most simple is to ask appreciative inquiry questions such as:

■ “When do you feel you are at your best in your work?”
■ “What gifts do you bring to the team?”
■ “What are five (or your top) strengths?”
■ “How might you use your strengths in your work/this coalition/this profession?”

According to Gallup, people perform better when leaders build on their strengths (Sorenson, 2014).

Collective Wisdom: The Whole is Greater Than the Sum of the Parts

To realize this ideal requires activation of the collective intelligence of the staff. How do you do that? First, it is necessary to begin with yourself. Make sure that you regularly engage in self-reflection and are committed to leading with a stance of collaboration.

Margaret Wheatley (2015) lists seven core practices of life-affirming leaders, which establish a solid foundation for anyone exploring collective leadership. According to Wheatley, these leaders:

■ know they cannot lead alone.
■ have more faith in people than they have in themselves.
■ recognize human diversity as a gift and the human spirit as a blessing.
■ act on the fact that people only support what they create.
■ solve unsolvable problems by bringing new voices into the room.
■ use learning as the fundamental process of resiliency, change, and growth.
offer purposeful work as the necessary condition for people to engage fully.

These core practices support the process of realizing collective wisdom. And they are exactly what is necessary to convene and facilitate the intentional conversations that are necessary for our profession.

Collective Leadership in Practice

A champion of collective leadership, I saw an opportunity to build this capacity within our Head Start agency through a transformation of our pre-service professional development program. The goal was to create a team to lead this transformation that was passionate about facilitating the changes staff said they wanted — and in such a way that they felt it was their success.

My Story

Our agency is a large organization of over 500 employees. We serve approximately 2,300 children ages birth to five. As a Head Start agency, we provide comprehensive services, including education, family support, and health. Each year our organization hosts an event to welcome teachers back for the school year and to provide professional development. As can be imagined, we have multiple departments with a wide variety of interests and priorities that need to be considered and planned for:

- We started the planning process by gathering feedback from every level of the organization, asking staff what they wanted from the experience.
- We also hosted a facilitated discussion with staff from all departments to find out what topics would be a priority, based on best practice, Head Start Performance Standards, program evaluation results, and what participants wanted to know more about.
- We found commonalities among each and those became our topics.
- We also asked those in the planning group to talk about what our vision and goals were for pre-service training, using the feedback from participants as a starting point.
- All staff who would be planning and delivering the content participated in a learning session together about creating engaging adult learning experiences.
- Next, committees were formed to plan and develop content.
- We encouraged staff to take on tasks that they wanted to do to allow people to build upon their strengths; this way people were doing what they were naturally good at.

Albert, a curriculum coach, helped develop content and was one of our facilitators. His story illustrates how our shared goals were infused at all levels of the process.

Albert’s Story

As a planning committee, we established a mutual goal to create training that would bridge learning with creativity, playfulness, and connecting with ourselves as leaders. During the planning process:

- we remained flexible in our roles; some of us preferred to research and design content while others emerged as lead facilitators for the workshops.
- we shared roles through a process of allowing each other to engage in ways that were aligned with our individual strengths.
- we strive, as facilitators, to create a learning climate where participants engaged with each other as fellow leaders, shared ideas by empowering one another, and learned key elements through the focus and use of materials. This allowed us to tap into the collective wisdom of those in the group.

In the activity shown in the photo, participants were invited to create an image of their leadership — in a way similar to how children are invited to create their self-image in our Reggio-inspired curriculum. Photograph by the authors
To the inexperienced eye, nothing particularly special or spectacular would seem evident from a pre-service workshop in Nogales, Arizona; on the other hand, deep learning and collaboration were happening. Nearly 30 teaching staff, home visitors, site supervisors, and program specialists came together on a Thursday afternoon for approximately three hours to think, explore, interact, and learn.

Participants began the afternoon by identifying and discussing leadership qualities, traits, and characteristics in connection to the Languages of Learning curriculum framework (Child-Parent Centers’ Reggio-inspired curriculum), and made the parallel connection for how these tenets can relate with adults, just as they would be with children. The design of the workshop utilized what we know to be best practice in adult learning.

Conclusion

In our field we can feel isolated and overwhelmed by the pressure to get everything accomplished on our own. We are drawn to early childhood care and education because we want to help others and make a difference in the lives of children, but we can’t do it alone. Opening your eyes to the possibilities of what you can accomplish with others can be liberating. There is power in the realization that not only do you have people to help you, but that you have a responsibility to recognize and build the strengths and leadership of others in the field. Your impact will be much greater when you work in partnership with those around you, inspiring and empowering their contributions in actualizing your shared goals.

References


Resources

If readers would like to learn more about Collective Leadership, we have found these resources to be very helpful in our learning journey:


Leading with Humor and Humility

by Holly Elissa Bruno, Janet Gonzalez-Mena, Luis A. Hernandez, and Debra R. Sullivan

Leading with Humility and Humor

Debra R. Sullivan

In my mind, leadership is always a fruitful topic of conversation because there is an endless variety of perspectives and positions. We are currently talking about emerging leadership, developing leadership, mastering leadership, and passing the leadership baton. This can all become very heady — in a serious and academic way. Now might be a good time to tether ourselves to solid ground and reflect on what happens when we come out of our heads and delve into our hearts. My colleagues and I absolutely love to go back and forth with each other about leadership so now we are taking a look at the role, influence, and impact of humility and humor in the leadership process. What happens when leaders do and do not take themselves too seriously?

Leading with Humility

Luis A. Hernandez:

“True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.”
— C. S. Lewis

A few years ago, I visited a program where teachers practiced a greeting and welcome to all new families coming to the center: “Hello! My name is Miss Andrea and I’m your child’s second teacher. At our center we consider you as your child’s first teacher.” While this has become part of my repertoire in sessions on family engagement, the follow-up discussions usually center on the dynamics of the power relationship between the ‘role’ of a teacher and the perception of families as to who and what a teacher is. With further reflections on this dynamic, many teachers welcome the modesty and unassuming nature of this partnership. “Yes! I am important, but I recognize that families are the child’s most important teacher.” This is an example that embodies humility as a regular exercise.

Holly Elissa Bruno, MA, JD, is a best-selling author, international keynote speaker, ground-breaking radio host and seasoned team builder. She served as Assistant Attorney General for the state of Maine and Assistant Dean at the University of Maine School of Law. An alumna of Harvard University’s Institute for Educational Management, she teaches leadership courses for The McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership and Wheelock College. Holly Elissa’s books include the best-selling, What You Need to Lead an Early Childhood Program: Emotional Intelligence in Practice book (NAEYC, 2012), Mastering Legal Risks in Early Childhood Programs (Columbia University’s Teachers College Press, November 2012), and Learning from the Bumps in the Road (Redleaf Press, 2013). Her first book, Leading on Purpose was published by McGraw-Hill in 2008. To share your story in Holly Elissa’s upcoming book on 2nd chances, go to her blog at hollyelissabruno.com. To ‘recovering attorney’ Holly Elissa, life is too short to anything but enjoy it daily.

Janet Gonzalez-Mena was a student of Lilian Katz, Magda Gerber, and Anna Tardos. Today she does consulting and training in infant-toddler care, parenting, and diversity work.

Luis A. Hernandez, T/TAS Early Childhood Education Specialist, holds an MA in Bilingual/Multicultural education from the University of San Francisco. He is active in a number of national organizations that support children and family interests. At NAEYC, he is active in the new accreditation process, and developing professional and leadership development opportunities. He currently serves on the Board of the Parent Services Project in California, the Advisory Board of the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership, and the United Way’s Center for Excellence in Early Childhood. He has served on the Boards of the Florida Children’s Forum, the Child Care Workforce, and NACCRRA, the Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies. A regular speaker at national, state, and local conferences, his special interests include early literacy, second language learning, collaboration and partnerships, changing demographics and diversity, adult learning, and ECE management topics.

Exchange is all about community and Dr. Debra Ren-Etta Sullivan is Exchange’s Director of Community Development. She is also the co-founder and President of the Praxis Institute for Early Childhood Education. Dr. Sullivan has a doctorate in Educational Leadership, a master’s in Curriculum and Instruction, and a bachelor’s degree in Cultural Anthropology. She has 30 years experience as a teacher, researcher, curriculum developer, and an administrator. Her first book, Learning to Lead: Effective Leadership Skills for Teachers of Young Children, is a self-directed guide to leadership development for early childhood teachers, aides, assistants, and care providers. Her newest book (co-authored with Holly Elissa Bruno, Janet Gonzalez-Mena, and Luis Hernandez) is titled Learning From the Bumps in the Road: Insights from Early Childhood Leaders and is available from Redleaf Press. Dr. Sullivan has also written several articles for Exchange Magazine.
“The soul is healed by being with children.”
— Fyodor Dostoyevsky

It starts with our time with children. As a teacher, do I have a tight ‘control’ as to the pace of learning activities, opportunities for self-exploration, or the magic of spontaneous rainstorms? Humbleness in classrooms begins with the willingness to respect children’s myriad interests, to listen to stories of their world, or simply make yourself as silly and inquisitive as a four-year-old. The sense of joy in the work of early childhood is to learn from the children as much as they are learning from us. The passion for the work is based on “they can do it!” via individual development, learning milestones, and an uncanny combination of humor, affection, and smiles. The work truly starts and ends with high notes of humility — they have achieved it on their own!

“There are a few ways we can practice humility; one is: to speak as little as possible of one’s self.”
— Mother Theresa

How refreshing it would be for that next speaker at a conference, forum, or classroom to be less of themselves and more about others and their work. For any leader out in the world, there should be a requirement for active listening skills and penalties for bloating egos and smelly arrogance. For any leader who feels and acts superior should be quickly dismissed as being a true leader. The qualities that are admired and desired are based on genuine kindness of heart and sensible wisdom and expertise. Humility is not a weakness, but a sign of acceptance and fearlessness by which leaders inspire others to be more of themselves. It works with children, families, teaching teams, and organizations. Kudos to all humble leaders!

Janet Gonzalez-Mena:

The word humility immediately made me think of ‘self-esteem,’ a word we ECE folks think about and use a lot! Do we ever teach humility? Interesting question, huh? I’m well aware that this is a cultural issue. Teresa, a recent immigrant from México, questioned my use of the term ‘self-esteem.’ She said with firm conviction, “You can’t esteem yourself. You can only esteem other people.” As a preschool teacher, her goal was to teach humility and downplay self-esteem. Certainly, I’ve considered that sometimes we go overboard when I see arrogant, self-centered children who ooze self-esteem. Has anyone besides Teresa suggested teaching humility to those children? Maybe all children could gain from lessons in humility. Then the question is, if we decide to teach humility, how do we teach it?

Obviously, one way to teach is through modeling. It’s easy to model competence, but do we also model humility as part of our conscious teaching style? And if we do model humility, how do we do it? Another way is to admit mistakes. And in a classroom there are the obvious teaching tools of using stories and books that illustrate the benefits of humility. Maybe using stories that contrast arrogance with humility would help. These are all new ideas to me. I hope they are helping you think about expanding your repertoire.

Holly Elissa Bruno:

I know how arrogance works. Do you? Feeling bad about myself drove me to arrogance: pretending superiority to a troubling situation, I could trick myself out of feeling inferior. The trick never works; superiority is a lie.

Humility calls me with a truer voice than arrogance. Humility, a hound of heaven that circles my legs and yelps until I release my pretensions, calls me to surrender. Surrender! Since when is a white flag the banner of humility?

I’ve since learned that vulnerability is strength. When I own my mistakes, apologize, have a change of heart and change my ways, accept my deepest imperfections, I feel a deeper strength.

I am humbled by this mistake: Just before a workshop, I exuberantly asked a very pregnant-looking woman in the front row when her baby was due. She responded: “I’m not pregnant.” So ashamed, I fell on my knees: “I’m so sorry.” The woman quickly moved on. Me? Not so easily. I had humiliated myself.

Humiliation and humility look alike, but they are opposite. Humiliation is feeling flawed to the core. Humility is knowing I am imperfect and turning my flaws into healing action. I am continually reminded by author Henri J. M. Nouwen that we become the most spiritual in the places where we are the most broken.

Today, I surrender more to learning in the moment, to letting go of (limiting) expectation (for others and myself), and to being open to the moment’s blessing.

Humility allows us a second chance, a sacred glimpse into what is timeless and what matters most. I am forever a student.

Debra R. Sullivan:

Part of being humble is being aware of how much time we spend operating with an ‘auto-pilot’ set of shortcuts that pro-
vide initial actions and reactions that help us move efficiently through our day. Most of these shortcuts are with good intent. We are excited to share what children are going to learn from us this year, but that shortcut leaves out what children already know and what their families have already taught them. We are excited to provide learning environments where children develop and appreciate their unique identities, but that shortcut may not teach them how to esteem others. We are excited about seeing the miracle of a future child in the making, but that shortcut often has many of us women looking for body shapes that resemble that miracle. We often take autopilot shortcuts that can really trip us up, forcing humility upon us. Walking with humility, leading with humility, helps us stop falling back on shortcuts, allowing us to pause and ask:

■ What am I missing?
■ What am I not seeing?
■ What assumptions have I made?

We’ve all been there. My advice is to be humble or you will be humbled. All children know when the emperor is not wearing any clothes!

Leading with Humor

_Holly Elissa Bruno:_

When I’m having a bad hair day, I lose my sense of humor. I take myself and my work too seriously. I take things personally. Nothing fits, everything’s scratchy. My neck’s out-of-whack. I’d like to smack whiners upside the head.

Leaders must be bigger than the job, bigger than naysayers, and big enough to lighten up.

Robin Williams’ Mrs. Doubtfire rocked with her vacuum cleaner to “Do the Sexy Lady.” When Robin took his troubles too seriously, he lost balance. Meaning emerges when opposing forces balance: pain and courage; failure and forgiveness; sorrow and humor.

Laughter signals I am too blessed to be depressed. Laughter’s endorphins soothe like a summer breeze.

We hear attitude: _My cat threw up, so I’m late; Change my start time and I’ll be on time; My team teacher’s a mess, get me someone else (again); That’s not in my job description._ We see attitude, entitlement, and “it’s all about me”-ism.

Consider this Serenity Prayer: _Grant me serenity to accept that I cannot change anyone else, courage to change the person I can, and wisdom to know I am that person._

Leaders need courage, passion to make things better, and self-effacing laughter. Laughter heals the soul. Once I accept I can’t change you, I change.

Viktor Frankl, surviving indescribable Nazi concentration camp trauma, asked: “Why do some people find hope in desperate circumstances?” He learned: “The last of the human freedoms is to choose our attitude.”


_Luis A. Hernandez:_

I got a chuckle from Holly Elissa’s opening statement: an existential crisis about an occasional bad hair day that makes her lose her sense of humor. Guess having no hair makes me a poster child for heavy medication. Lighten up, Holly Elissa, at least you got hair!

In the range of emotions we possess, humor comes up as an all-time favorite. Teachers will tell you that they love their work because “children make me laugh, they are so funny.” Then we have teachers generous with laughter and the physicality of goofiness, natural magnets for kids yearning for a good belly laugh. In many families, we hold a special place at the Thanksgiving table for those who bring good jokes along with limp green beans. And if you ask couples in decades-old relationships as to their ‘secret,’ three out of four will say having a sense of humor (while the other fourth refuse to answer under court order).

For leaders, the expectations are high in charging ahead with those elusive visions and missions of any organization. Leaders set the tone, the light, and enthusiasm in building and nourishing the team that will go forth with the work at hand.
Plus they hold the best staff meetings with skits, rubber chickens, and extra cheese pizza.

It boils down to a willing attitude for humor — most often natural, sometimes risky. Creating that joyful presence in all relationships gives us the glue and fire to be more of who we are: Better teachers, better parents, better partners, better leaders.

And very much like Holly Elissa, I also adhere to my own Serenity Prayer to get me from day to day: *Give me coffee to change the things I can change and wine to accept the things I can’t.*

**Janet Gonzalez-Mena:**

When I think of that word, humor, I think ‘funny.’ So let me start with a story told to me by the father of a child in the two-year-old program where I used to work. On the 4th of July, Dad was explaining the concept of freedom to his two young daughters. When he finished, he asked the two-year-old, “So, now do you know what it means to be free?” She nodded, said yes, and then announced with confidence, “I’m two. On my birfday I’ll be free!” So much for abstract concepts for two-year-olds.

Lucky for me, humor isn’t an abstract concept — it’s something real and available to lighten things up. I’ve watched my three co-authors when we present together. They are masters at bringing humor into any situation. I remember our first NAEYC workshop together in 2003. We were in Portland and our subject was ‘power.’ (I forget the exact title.) Luis started off by barking orders at the participants: “Get up! Move around! Form a line! Choose a partner.” They all did just what he said to do. Finally, he stopped and looked at his audience. They were a little stunned at this point. Luis simply stated, “That’s power!” Everyone laughed! I’m not exactly a laughing leader like Luis or Holly Elissa, but I’d like to be!

**Debra R. Sullivan:**

I love the Serenity Prayers! Humility has to come with a healthy and hefty dose of humor and, really, sometimes all you can do is laugh. Leadership can be stressful. *Life* can be stressful! Laughter helps release stress in ways that nothing else can. It’s a great opportunity to pause and reassess a situation: look at it from a ‘not so serious’ perspective. It can be very difficult to find a creative solution or approach to a leadership situation when filled with the stress of having to make the *right decision, right now!* Laughter can open up other areas in the brain that can take a more playful look — without downplaying the fact that we do, indeed, make very important decisions and choices every day. Leading with humor lets us choose our attitude in any given moment, take into consideration the perspectives of children, and focus on creating and being a joyful presence. After all, aren’t we all trying to make the world a better place for children, families, and communities? Arrogant, humorless leaders who take themselves too seriously and do not create a sense of joy in this journey will not get us where we want to be. And wherever they are headed, they may end up there alone. Leadership is a serious responsibility that we all shoulder in various ways. Leading with humility and humor will help us help each other. There is an African proverb that says, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” Humility and humor remind us how to go together.
Leadership Perspectives from the World Forum Foundation Working Groups

by Kirsten Haugen
World Forum Foundation Working Group Coordinator

Leaders of the World Forum Working Groups (worldforumfoundation.org/working-groups) share several unique qualities:

- A passion to work for and with young children, addressing the most critical and challenging early childhood issues worldwide
- A willingness to thoughtfully engage differences in beliefs, priorities, resources, and strategies
- The capacity to build relationships not in spite of, but often because of, our differences
- The ability to infuse serious work with a spirit of playfulness, hope, and joy
- A heart and mind always ready to learn and change

Our Working Group leaders apply these characteristics on a completely voluntary basis, as they instigate World Forum events, projects and conversations that "promote an on-going global exchange of ideas on the delivery of quality services for young children in diverse settings."

With this range of perspectives and experiences in mind, we’ve asked our Working Group leaders to reflect on the topic of leadership as it relates to their group’s particular knowledge, experiences, and aspirations. Seven groups offer the following insights on leadership qualities and strategies.

- Learn more and get involved: worldforumfoundation.org/leadership-provocation

Children’s Rights and Leadership

by Pamla Boulton, United States; Ellen Hall, United States; Edna Ranck, United States; Angela Fowler, United States; Sam Hall, United States; John Nimmo, United States/Australia; Karen Graham, Wales; Margo Greenwood, Canada; Larry Railton, Canada; Vashima Goyal, Singapore; Martha Llanos, Peru; Maria Theresa Marcilio, Brazil; Ana Marcilio, Brazil; Gustavo Amora, Brazil; Swati Popat Vats, India; Samiram Moosa, Oman

Leadership has many definitions and many connotations in unique contexts and cultures worldwide. The World Forum Foundation Working Group on Children’s Rights believes that true leadership in promoting the rights of the child begins with a broad and deep understanding of what children deserve in the present and in the future to develop as interdependent, capable citizens, who value and respect, feel part of, and contribute to the societies in which they live.

This belief provides a foundation for dialogue and actions that begin with an acknowledgement and respect for the uniqueness of each context and culture, broadening to utilize skills of communication, collaboration, and cooperation. The leader understands that steps towards progress and achievement may have the same goal but are likely to emanate from different points on the same trajectory, that they are incremental, often small and always intended to have an impact. While we work towards our goals, both short- and long-term, the leadership is fully aware that the impact of our dialogue and actions is felt when children experience an improvement in their circumstances, including increased visibility and recognition of the importance of their thoughts and ideas. The impact we seek requires careful listening and constant reflection, questioning, learning, mentoring, and positive, shared, purposeful engagement.
Leaders in children’s rights understand that enabling dialogue and actions leaves a legacy of sustained commitment beyond the life and scope of any project and always aim for that goal.

The Vital Importance of Developing Leaders Who Promote Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Skills in the Early Childhood Field around the World

by Diane Levin, United States; Kishor Shrethsa, Nepal

The Working Group on Peace Building with Young Children (IWGPB) is dedicated to:

■ helping young children begin to develop the foundations for peacebuilding and violence prevention, onto which increasingly sophisticated skills can be built through appropriate experiences with increasing age, a universal goal for all the children of the world.

■ supporting and empowering children and families affected by conflict and violence in the world, a goal that affects only some of the world’s children, albeit too many of them.

Believing it is vital that early childhood professionals throughout the world have specialized training to accomplish these goals, IWGPB recommends that:

■ IWGPB and the early childhood community, including educators, caregivers, teachers, policymakers and researchers, work to provide effective and appropriate early childhood peacebuilding education to young children through commitment, collaboration, experimentation, and research and more, as well as through appropriate and effective peacebuilding training to early childhood educators.

■ IWGPB and the early childhood field should work to create a corps of highly trained peacebuilding leaders who apply state of the art knowledge and skills, to provide high-quality peace building training to early childhood professionals around the world who incorporate peacebuilding activities into their work with young children and their families.

■ Help individual countries create culturally sensitive early childhood peace-building leaders who work to make peacebuilding training a basic requirement of early childhood teacher preparation and in-service training programs in their countries.

■ Peacebuilding leaders work with families, policy makers, and the wider community to expand their understanding of how the foundations of peacebuilding are laid in the early years and to build support for efforts to promote peacebuilding in early childhood settings, homes, and beyond.

■ Peacebuilding leaders also need to seek out state of the art knowledge on how to help children, families, and communities that have been affected by conflict, trauma, violence and war, heal — and provide leadership, training, and support to help other professionals develop these skills. IWGPB can take a leadership role in developing a network for sharing effective strategies, ideas, opinions and experiences as our knowledge about these issues grows.

Through comprehensive collaborative efforts, the IWGPB strives to build cross-cultural networks of knowledge, support, and advocacy for early childhood practices and policies that are culturally responsive in regions experiencing or emerging from violence or conflict. Because children are highly at risk of harm when conflict and violence occur, having knowledge, strategies, and resources ready to mobilize in order to protect and promote the survival and development of children must be a priority. IWGPB is committed to expanding our understanding of what it means to provide early childhood services in times of conflict, that support young children’s wellbeing, development, healing, and peacebuilding. The IWGPB proposes an advocacy plan of action that incorporates diplomacy with an inclusive framework of diverse approaches in building peace that are sustainable at the community level.

Men in Early Care and Education:
Leadership Statement

by Nick Terrones, United States; Ron Blatz, Canada; Jerry Parr, United States; Craig d’Arcy, Australia; Don Piburn, United States; Kenny Spence, Scotland; Henry Manani, Kenya

Leadership requires a strong understanding and ownership of one’s identity: grounded in courage, confidence, and unfettered willingness to engage in collaboration. Leadership is rooted in relationships, and the belief
that healthy relationships are reciprocal. Astute leaders promote challenge, change, and celebrate differences. They nurture and respect the diversity of those they lead, while maintaining their own values and identities.

However, what can happen to leadership if there is an absence of diversity? We currently live in times of the most significant change to gender role expectations, and the single most effective tool to encourage global gender equality is to change societal expectations, beginning at the youngest ages. Young children continue to be cared for and educated by an almost exclusively single gender early care and education workforce. Like shining little mirrors, children reflect back what they see in us.

It is the Men in Early Care and Education Working Group’s perspective that a single gender teacher and early years workforce serves to undermine the principles of self-determination, equal opportunity, and social justice. We have witnessed a similar issue in countries that limit girls’ and women’s access to education or employment opportunities — where educators are all male OR as is the case in western societies where early educators are almost exclusively female. It is clear that gender on its own is not the issue; rather it is whenever and wherever there is an imbalance that does not reflect the population and culture, harm happens. In the case of the early years workforce, it is the absolute right of children to have both men and women be their teachers.

It is important for the lives of children that we make progress in this area, and it should be done in the most public and transparent leadership arenas. This projects a very clear message that gender equality and workforce balance is what all young children can and must expect.

**World Forum Foundation Voices of Hope**

**Leadership Statement**

by Martha Vibbert, United States; Noreen Huni, South Africa; Alice Kabwe Grollnek, Zambia; Rosette Serwanga, Uganda

Our Working Group within the World Forum Foundation is Voices of Hope for Children Impacted by HIV/AIDS. Our mission is to directly link grassroots organizations that deliver care to young children and families affected by HIV/AIDS, and to share and promote evidence-based early childhood development (ECD) practices and approaches for young children affected by HIV/AIDS and adversity. In accordance with our ‘grassroots’ and collectivist approach, we have depended entirely upon collaborative leadership that draws on the unique and valuable experiences of an informal and ever-shifting network of member voices — past, present, and future.

**Key Concerns Requiring Collaborative Leadership on Behalf of Children Impacted by HIV/AIDS:**

- More focus on children is needed as the new Sustainable Development Goals emerge.
- Even though antiretroviral treatment is available, treatment regimens for children are still a challenge and treatment adherence is even a greater challenge.
- More attention needs to be paid to neurological complications in HIV and HIV treatment, particularly for children who may have been on treatment since birth.
- Routine monitoring of early childhood development within HIV care settings (health, education, home) is necessary.

As a World Forum Working Group, we have assigned two co-chairs — each from a different continent and AIDS-related organization for children — to handle communications efficiently within different time zones and to exemplify the cross-cultural knowledge exchange that is crucial to joining hands in the fight against a global epidemic. We believe that these administrative leadership roles should rotate frequently. However, with respect to the content of our work, we draw on a wide circle of leadership voices… those who have attended conferences in the past, those who have spoken out on behalf of children and families with HIV/AIDS around the globe, and those who want to get involved. We have no membership constraints on participation or leadership. All are welcome to join in the chorus of voices, and all of us are leaders in keeping the flame of hope alive for children and families across the globe who are living with HIV/AIDS.

**Leadership in the Context of Caring for Young Children with Special Needs**

by Anne Sivanathan, Malaysia; Deepak Raj Sapkota, Nepal; Roberta Goldberg, United States; Cynthia Haïhambo, Namibia

Children are the source of inspiration and joy for humanity, but children need quality environments and opportunities
to flourish. Efforts are being organized around the globe
to develop child-friendly laws and environments where
children can grow to their highest potentials. Geography,
context, and culture shape these environments.
Unfortunately, some create barriers, limitations, and
challenges to the welfare of children. In fact, significant
numbers of children die before they reach the age of five,
and children growing up with disabilities and special needs
are amongst the most vulnerable in many countries.

The Convention on the Rights of the Persons with
Disabilities, adopted on 13 December 2006, is an
agreement by countries around the world to ensure
that people with disabilities are treated equally. The
UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted 20
November 1989, also affirms that all children, including
those with disabilities and special needs, should be
 accorded dignified and fulfilling lives.

To protect these rights, we must foster leaders to address
the challenges children with disabilities and special needs
face. Teachers, special educators, community leaders,
policy makers, and media contributors are the major
players who must take into account the needs and current
global situations of these young children. These leaders
must be well informed and work in harmony despite
their different locations to eliminate the developmental
disparities amongst children around the world.

The World Forum Working Group on Inclusion strives
to nurture leadership in our members and respective
communities to ensure maximum development and
opportunity for children. All of the members of the
Inclusion group are leaders in their fields, in local or
national child welfare and advocacy organizations,
universities, youth centers, and communities. They adhere
to the tenants of leadership and possess the qualities of
leaders. Some members do not possess a title such as
president, CEO, director, or superintendent, but every
member behaves like a leader and assumes leadership in
their everyday actions.

They aspire to be effective leaders by knowing their
personal strengths and using them, and by being keenly
aware of the needs of their constituency, children with
special needs, whose rights are jeopardized by inequities
in obtaining opportunities for growth. They know that
leadership consists of certain fundamental qualities that
can be learned and applied by anyone. It is not so much a
matter of aptitudes as it is a matter of attitudes. They are
transformational in that they move followers to accomplish
more than they expected for the common good. “The
world looks for leaders, it looks for [individuals] who are
original, able, and practical and all I have to say to a young
[person] is simply to find out clearly all about a need in a
certain direction and then lead on to the alleviation of it”
(Gunsaulus, 1898).

The objectives, stated challenges, and planned
implementation of our Inclusion Working Group goals
reflect our understanding of these critical components
of effective leadership. We must strive to foster these
leadership skills in our group through education,
professional development, sharing ideas, building
accessible resources, empowering parents and families, the
examples of our individual work, and by advocating for the
change from pity to empathy to proactive support.
staff and families have for children? Why does the program exist?

- Leaders are passionate about the mission of the program and bring others along.
- They help everyone keep the vision in mind at all times.

- Promoting a sense of community and a core set of values for the program.
- Core values shape how people treat one another, what work gets done, and how the work gets done.
- Everyone’s role is important and needed.

- Building positive relationships with every staff member.
- Be a good listener and respond to concerns and suggestions.
- Value and recognize each person’s strengths and contributions.

- Providing ongoing support and coaching that is individualized.
- Spend time observing in classrooms.
- Identify what aspects of the curriculum are being implemented well and target support on areas where a teacher is struggling.

- Continually evaluating how well the curriculum is being implemented and if it is achieving positive results for teachers and children.

Curriculum Leadership at the Classroom Level: The Teacher’s Role

- Becoming knowledgeable about the philosophy and all components of the curriculum.
- Planning purposefully for each day.
- Observing and listening to children to learn about their interests, strengths, and needs.
- Adapting the curriculum and creating new experiences that are responsive to children.
- Learning about children’s families and involving them in curriculum planning and implementation.

Reviewed by Wil Maheia, Belize

Members of the Leadership Team for the Nature Action Collaborative for Children:
Christy Merrick, United States; Claire Warden, United Kingdom; Fiona Robbe, Australia; Gillian McAuliffe, Australia; Hadijah Nandyose, Uganda; Helle Nebelong, Denmark; Irma Allen, Swaziland; Jim Wike, United States; Marc Veekamp, The Netherlands; Martha Cecelia Fajardo, Colombia; Raed Abu Hayyaneh, Jordan; Ron Blatz, Canada; Swati Popat Vats, India; Toni Christie, New Zealand

As leaders of the Nature Action Collaborative for Children, we have committed to raising our voices to advocate for children’s right to learn with nature daily. We know that if given a chance, children will fully grasp the importance of their natural environment and benefit from its gifts and messages. With more modernization and urbanization, there can sometimes be an out-of-balance focus on children spending a majority of their time indoors with technology, instead of enjoying a healthy balance between indoors and out. When experiences happen such as the recent earthquakes in Nepal, children will quickly come to see nature as something to fear, unless daily experiences with nature’s uplifting wonder help them personally experience the other side of the story.

Connecting with nature is at the heart of developmentally appropriate education. It is our responsibility as leaders to help others understand this principle. Children in early childhood education settings deserve to be surrounded by beauty as they grow in their understanding of the world around them. All aspects of a child’s development can be strengthened if they are allowed to learn with nature as part of their regular schooling. As leaders who care deeply about this issue, we believe it is our responsibility to create many ways to help early childhood practitioners, advocates, and families fully embrace the benefits that come when children spend daily time in effective, inspiring, nature-filled spaces.

As leaders, it is also our responsibility to sometimes travel the extra mile to meet others where they are today, and to help them craft creative solutions to problems they are facing in trying to bring more nature to children’s days. We must work across professions, honor the perspectives of practitioners and families, and never forget to listen to the voices of children. Children have a deep intrinsic need to connect with the wisdom of nature, and they will do so if we don’t take them too far away from their inner knowing.