

# learning to play well with others

And other lessons in leadership I've learned along the way

by Jeny Searcy

Many years ago, someone I respected said to me, "If you were to get a kindergarten report card, it would say 'Jeny does not play well with others.'" The statement was made to show why, in this person's assessment, I could never be a good manager or leader; I was simply too independent and unconcerned about others' input. Because I respected and trusted this person, I accepted the statement and busied myself in finding support work where I never had to be in charge. After all, I did not "play well with others."



With a degree in secondary speech education, Jeny Searcy rather unexpectedly entered the field of early childhood education in the early 1990s, when she became Director/

Teacher of the Head Start Center in Tipton, Oklahoma. Since then she has worked as a Disability Specialist, Mental Health Specialist, and Literacy Specialist with Southwest Community Action Group. After a lifetime in rural southwest Oklahoma, Jeny moved to Oklahoma City in 2004. In 2006, she became Director of the Sunbeam Child Development Center. She recently began work on her Master's Degree in Early Childhood Education. In the fall of 2008, Jeny became supervisor of the Teachers of Infants, Toddlers and Two at The Children's Place at INTEGRIS Baptist Medical Center in Oklahoma City. Jeny is married with two grown children. In the past year, her family has grown to include one daughter-in-law, one son-in-law, and one grandson Geoffrey — the most perfect baby in the world!

For several years after college, I looked for and did quite well in secondary administrative positions. My attitude was "give me a task and then just get out of my way — I'll take care of it." It worked, both for me and for employers. Then — almost by accident — I entered the field of Early Childhood Education and started on a leadership journey — a journey of many steps. And with those steps, I learned some important lessons.

## Creating partnerships

My first job in Early Childhood was as Center Director/Teacher in a new Head Start Center in Tipton, Oklahoma. I was lead teacher for 20 four year olds and the 'boss' of a staff of three.

Although I knew nothing at all about young children (except my own two, who were then starting public school) or management, I plunged in. Fear and uncertainty led me to a basic principle of good leadership; I worked to make my staff and me into a team. In her book *A Great Place to Work*, Paula Jorde Bloom (1997) emphasizes the value of shared decision making and joint management. What the literature shows, we at Tipton Head Start managed to do instinctively (or through sheer terror at

making a mistake!). We were partners and we worked toward a common vision — giving our four year olds the best possible program. Playwright Henrik Ibsen wrote, "A community is like a ship; everyone has to be prepared to take the helm," and I journeyed toward leadership on this ship.

**Lesson Learned:** *Trust your instincts. Whether you are a new or seasoned director, there are some things that are just going to 'feel' right. Be attuned to your feelings and trust them.*

## Meeting needs and expanding horizons

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs begins with essential physical/body needs. Then come the "essential safety, security, protection needs." I responded to this instinctively, too. I often said, "If all I can do is keep these kids safe and warm and cared for four hours a day and make sure they have something nourishing to eat, I have accomplished something important." And I still believe that. I wanted to go beyond that, though, and give children new experiences. Working with children from low-income families in a rural Oklahoma town (population 1,117), opportunities were

limited. We found ways, however, to expand. We introduced a reading program, we took kids on a rotating basis to the library, and we took field trips. We went to the ballet, to plays, and to concerts. We had visitors come into the center to sing, read, and perform. I could have kept the kids safe and warm in the center and no one would have thought any less of me and the center, but I would have thought less of myself. And so, by pushing, expanding, and caring about the kids, I took another step on my journey.

**Lesson Learned:** *Use community resources. Whether you work in Tipton or Tulsa, there are people 'out there' who are willing to come to your program and perform, teach, and share. It can be a professional troupe, a college student, or even the neighbor who whistles. It can take some work to find these people, but the efforts are worth it.*

## Seeing the needs of the individuals

After several years, I went to work as a Literacy Specialist with another agency's Head Start program. As Literacy Specialist, my role was to train, mentor, and monitor the classroom teachers in expanding literacy in the Head Start classrooms. I coordinated a series of training workshops for the lead teachers in the classrooms — one session per month to examine one of the sections of literacy for pre-school children (reading aloud, pre-writing, language development, etc). The teachers, from a three county area, came to my site. We had a great time, and the ideas I shared with them were evident in their classrooms.

The next school year, however, I started the same program with the teacher assistants/aides. This did not work as well. The teacher assistants/aides didn't seem as interested, and I felt as if I was getting nowhere. So

I modified the program and traveled to each site once a month. There I could sit down with just the two or three teacher assistants and talk about literacy and create lessons about how their practices affected them and the children in their classrooms. It may have been my 'big picture' approach that was difficult for these teacher assistants/aides to see; perhaps they felt powerless to affect change in their classrooms. Whatever the reason, when I spent one-on-one time with them, they accepted my help. A powerful step in leadership for me: a good leader must recognize that, even when an organization has a common goal, the methods for reaching that goal can be and should be as varied as the individuals who work to achieve it.

**Lesson Learned:** *We learn in early childhood classes that each child has his/her own learning style and that we should respect that. Remember that for your staff as well. Some will speak up at staff meetings; others will not. Some like lecture-type training; others relate better to hands-on. Whatever the need or style of the staff members, learn it and provide for it.*

## Seeing beyond problems and setting common goals

In 2006 I was hired to be the Director of Sunbeam Child Development Center. Sunbeam serves 48 children between the ages of birth and five in two Early Head Start classrooms, one three-year-old classroom, and one pre-kindergarten classroom. It has a staff of 13 people. Somehow I thought I was competent to handle all of this. The first six months were beyond description. Staff members quit, the public school took three months to supply a teacher for the pre-kindergarten classroom, and there were two federal reviews. The center had always boasted that it accepted children who had been asked to leave other centers, and we had a lot of children

with behavior problems. I worked from open to close (6:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.) every day and cried, either on my way to work or on my way home — sometimes both.

Gradually, however, things began to change. As staff members quit, I was able to replace them with people who had the same goals that I had and who could complement my strengths and support my weaknesses. When the public school teacher finally came, we were able to set goals for her classroom together. We passed reviews with flying colors. And while the children's behavior didn't improve overnight, I began to see the children as individuals and not just as problems to be fixed.

**Lesson Learned:** *Some things just take time. As hard as it is for most of us to accept, most problems can't be fixed immediately. Take some time, cry a little, and hang on. It will get better.*

## Accepting support: Letting go, delegating, and trusting

At Sunbeam, I made it my goal to not only function as the 'director,' but to be willing to do whatever the staff had to do. I substituted in the classrooms, I cooked, I fixed toilets, and I planned programs. I kept an open-door policy so that the staff members and parents could visit at any time. I felt that I had to prove I was a member of the team. After six months, I was nominated by all 13 members of the CDC staff as Sunbeam's Employee of the Month. I thought I had truly arrived as a leader! After all, Roger Neugebauer wrote in *Exchange*, "The good director doesn't make people love her, but makes people love to work for her." I had accomplished that, hadn't I? I was good — or was I?

Then I attended a leadership class conducted by author Linda Dowling who had written *Mentor Manager/Mentor Parent: How to Develop Responsible People and Build Successful Relationships at Work and at Home* (Dowling & Mielenz, 2002). I thought I was on safe ground here. I believed I had proved I was a mentor leader. After all, my staff liked me and I never asked them to do anything that I wasn't willing to do myself. When I shared this with Ms. Dowling, she replied, "Jeny, you aren't being a mentor to your staff; you're being a martyr."

Whoa! All my good ideas and hard work weren't the right thing? Maybe I needed to stand back a little. At about the same time, I learned the following phrase: "Good supervision is not what happens when you are there; it is what happens when you are NOT there." Maybe my being there for the staff at all times was allowing them to *lean* and NOT allowing them to *learn*. Maybe I should step back and trust the staff. If I have hired the right people, they don't need me to do everything for them. As General George S. Patton said, "Don't tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and let them surprise you with the results."

**Lesson Learned:** *Respect and listen to your staff. Currently, I do one-on-one protected reflection time with each staff member 45 minutes each month. I love listening to the teachers' ideas, their worries, and their joys — and the children, the teachers, and I all benefit.*

### Embracing life-long learning

After I completed my first year as director, I was accepted into the Oklahoma Center for Early Childhood Professional Development's (CECPD's) Leadership Academy. One day a month for five months, I attended leadership classes. The topics ranged from com-

munication and trust to mentoring and advocacy. In a group of peers (other directors from around Oklahoma), we developed our leadership skills. For the very first time, I was actually getting leadership training! I received some wonderful books (see Resources). Through the leadership academy, I learned that there were people out there and that it was safe and helpful to network with peers.

In the midst of the Leadership Academy, I started work on my Master's degree at the University of Central Oklahoma. The theme of my first class? Leadership! As we worked our way through theories, I became more and more convinced of several principles:

- Leaders are made not born.
- Leaders have to get on the level of those around them, not lead from above.
- Leaders have to be flexible.
- Leadership is a journey, not a destination.

To be an effective leader, I must continue to grow and be willing to change. There is not one 'leadership style,' one method of leadership that is successful in any situation. I must continue to grow, to change, and to learn. Rosabeth Moss Kantor, a professor of leadership and management at Harvard University wrote, "Leaders are more powerful role models when they learn than when they teach."

**Lesson Learned:** *Never, ever stop learning or think you know it all. If you aren't willing to learn, to change, and to stretch your thinking, you wither. Go to classes, read books, talk to peers and mentors — constantly be open to opportunities to learn.*

### Conclusion

I expect that my journey will continue. I see myself moving from someone who didn't "play well with others" to someone who is a good playmate. Throughout the journey, regardless of its length, there is one essential lesson for leaders in our field: *Find joy in the journey*. Whether it is dancing with the toddlers or sharing a teacher's excitement developing a new activity, take time to savor the moments. Despite the stress, the tears, and the pressure, there is truly joy in the journey.

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