

# lifting as you climb

by Debra R. Sullivan

At our *Exchange* Panel of 300 Reception in Dallas, Texas, last November, we had very interesting conversations about leadership and several key themes emerged. This will be the first of a series of articles addressing those leadership themes and answering leadership questions presented to *Exchange* by the Panel members who attended the reception. There is an old proverb that encourages us to lift as we climb: "While you climb a mountain, you must not forget others along the way." With that in mind, it is not surprising that one of the recurring themes was mentoring. Here are some of the questions about mentoring that came up as we talked:

## ■ What is a mentor and how do we identify mentor leaders?



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- How do we grow leaders in early childhood programs?
- How do we get more people of color into leadership positions?
- How do we coordinate career development and mentoring?
- How do we support leadership in various positions within a center or program?
- What are some 'Next Steps' to growing more leadership through mentoring?

## What is a mentor and how do we identify mentor leaders?

A mentor can be many things to someone interested in developing as a leader:

- A mentor can be a teacher, a trainer, a coach, or a friendly colleague who wants someone else to be as successful as possible.
- A mentor can provide guidance, advice, and counsel.
- A mentor can be a source of strength and advocacy.
- A mentor is a leader who creates new leadership.

If you want to find a good mentor leader, look for a great teacher or administrator who works well with adults. They can be fairly easy to spot

— easier than you might think! Look for those who:

- Are patient. Patience allows you to take the time needed to mentor another who may have some catching up to do.
- Experiment with different ways to ensure that learning happens. Mentors who make sure learners learn tend to try different teaching strategies to meet diverse learning styles.
- Like working with adults. In the early childhood field, there are those who work best with children and those who work best with other adults. Mentor leaders often work well with both children and adults.
- See others' qualities and strengths. Those who can see what others bring to the leadership table are more aware of the various requirements of leadership and provide others with the opportunity to practice leadership from a place of strength.
- Want to mentor. Not everyone who is a good leader or teacher wants to mentor others. I have met many great administrators and master teachers who prefer to focus on their own work. Mentoring others may not be #1 on their list of priorities. Pay close attention to the leaders and adminis-

trators others turn to for help, advice, guidance, suggestions, and/or input. Those are your mentor leaders, even if they haven't taken on an official title. When potential mentees go to the same people time and again, you've identified a mentor leader. Make it official!

## How do we grow leaders in early childhood programs?

We often talk about 'growing our own leaders,' but this seems to be more difficult to implement than it sounds. Growing our own leaders means that current leaders need to mentor the next generation of leaders. This is difficult in many professions, but seems to be more so in early childhood. It can be difficult to intentionally create your own replacement when you've worked so hard to establish yourself. And, given the economy, job security may begin to take priority. Of course, this usually happens when we fall into the trap of what I call 'scarcity thinking.' Scarcity thinking happens when we impose limits — in this case, limits on how much leadership is needed. Scarcity thinking tells us that there's only 'room' for so much leadership so we have to hold on to what we have. Children require an abundance of leadership. 'Abundance thinking' allows us to realize that the more leadership we have, the better off we will be. Abundance thinking relieves the pressure of making sure you're indispensable now that you've finally made it to the top, because you realize that more leadership makes us more powerful and effective advocates for the children and families we serve.

Our first task is to recognize and seek out great gardeners. Gardeners thrive on the anticipation of what they can grow and what can be done with what they grow. Growing leaders in early childhood programs will be the great contribution of those who seek a bountiful harvest. To grow leaders, you must sow

seeds — leadership seeds. As teachers of young children, we have expectations that children will grow cognitively, socially, and emotionally, and develop the critical thinking and decision-making skills that will help them be successful. To grow leaders in early childhood programs, we must have similar goals for adults. In a recent training, I was asked to talk about developmental goals for children and I was struck by how much we need to focus on some of the same goals for growing leaders. As do children, our future leaders need:

- to learn about themselves
- to learn about others
- to learn about communicating, and
- to acquire and increase critical thinking skills.

We grow leaders in the field of early childhood when we provide opportunities for teachers to grow and have high expectations that they *will* grow, that they *will* become the next generation of leaders, and that there is 'room' for limitless leadership in the service of children. We just need to put on our 'gardening gloves' and start planting seeds — planting the seed of leadership development in the minds of all those who work with and serve young children.

## How do we get more people of color into leadership positions?

Historically, in the United States there have always been people of color in the early childhood profession and many of them have served as remarkable and renowned leaders. However, for most of our history, we have been unaware of the leadership provided by people of color because of the segregation that limited our experiences to people who looked like us. In present times, we are more likely to work with a diverse group of colleagues serving an increasingly diverse group of children. The time has come to rethink our definitions

and descriptions of leaders and leadership. I have met many women and men of African, Asian, Indigenous, and Latin descent who have served as leaders in other environments or who have remarkable leadership potential. Some were born in the U.S., some are immigrants, and some are refugees. Many are currently serving as instructional assistants, teacher aides, and interpreters, or have another supporting role in our early childhood classrooms.

Getting more people of color into leadership positions in the early childhood field requires increased focus on access, opportunity, and expectations. Increased access happens when more highly skilled teachers and administrators from many different cultural and racial groups are placed in leadership positions. More opportunities to practice leadership happens when we step aside or move out of the way so that others have the opportunity to demonstrate their leadership — or learn from their mistakes. Increased expectations means working on changing our perceptions of what a leader and leadership looks like. Different cultures have different expectations of who can be a leader and how leadership is demonstrated. If we truly want to get more people of color into leadership positions in early childhood, we have to recognize that leadership looks different to different people, looks different at different moments in history, and looks different in different situations around the world.

## How do we coordinate career development and mentoring?

To coordinate career development and mentoring it is very important to know where people want to go, who they want to be, and what they want to do. Often, career and professional development is provided to increase program quality, and that is a very, very good decision. However, if you also plan to match career development with mentor-

ing, it is important to understand staff members' professional development priorities. And there will always be those who aren't sure where early childhood education is leading them. A good mentor always helps others 'see the next step' in their careers.

I'm always intrigued when I'm working with a teacher who cannot see herself with an Associate of Arts degree until she finally completes the Child Development Associate Certificate. All of a sudden, she begins to think about the possibility of taking the next step. One of the challenges that I hear time and again is that if ECE classroom teachers get a degree, then they will leave the field. I think we should expect people to leave and we should be willing to let them go. If we are truly growing leaders, we should have the next generation of entry-level teachers and aides already lined up! Find out what individual staff members want to do and match them with others who do their jobs well! And make sure you have a very good evaluation process. A superb performance evaluation process includes next steps for career development and mentoring.

### **How do we support leadership in various positions within a center or program?**

A key ingredient to supporting leadership in various positions within a center or program is recognizing that everyone has leadership potential and responsibility and that leadership is needed at every level of a program or center. It is true that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, so excellence, accountability, responsible decision-making, passion, dedication, commitment, and creativity must be present at every level and must live in every individual. A mentor leader understands that leadership can happen vertically, horizontally, diagonally, and outside of any box we create. I cannot begin to count the number of times I've heard early childhood program staff dis-

count a leadership opportunity because "I'm just a cook" or "The custodian's work doesn't have anything to do with leadership." I've said it once and I'll say it again: To a young child, all grown-ups are leaders and all grown-ups have the power, resources, ability, skill, and means to do whatever they want. Children do not distinguish between roles, positions, and levels like adults do. To a three-year-old, all grown-ups have superhuman powers. A creative mentor leader makes sure everyone has an opportunity to be in charge of something and provides opportunities for every adult to be successful and shine.

### **What are some 'Next Steps' we can take to grow more leadership through mentoring?**

The answer to this question calls for a two-pronged approach: One for potential mentors and one for potential mentees.

First, potential mentors:

- Reflect on your knowledge of human development. Growing leaders takes time, much like facilitating children's social, emotional, and cognitive development.
- Remember self-care. While you are mentoring another, do not neglect your own professional development. You've heard it more than once: Put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others.
- Step aside! Let others lead. Pay attention to the leadership skills and qualities of others, and let them practice. This may mean sharing control and/or power, so start adjusting now.
- Provide opportunities for others to be in charge and do not, under any circumstances (barring physical harm and damage or extreme loss of resources), step in and take over.

On the other hand, do not set mentees up for failure. A mentor leader does

not put mentees in positions they aren't trained for or give them projects that outweigh their qualifications.

Have high expectations for your mentees and trust that you have mentored them well. I once coached a teacher who had more than 40 years of training and mentoring experience in early childhood. A few years ago she told me that she was thinking of retiring, but felt she couldn't because she didn't believe the next generation of trainers could make the right decisions for the organization. Trust in your ability to mentor and trust in your mentee's ability to lead.

For potential mentees:

- Find a leader in your center, program, or organization and ask for mentoring! So often, I meet potential leaders who have never asked for mentoring, guidance, advice, or counsel from colleagues or supervisors.
- If you are not ready to ask for a mentor, pay attention to those whose work you admire and make note of what makes that person a good leader, a good teacher, a good administrator, a good family support advocate. Focus on successful skills and qualities and start practicing!
- Pay attention to the people who others seek out for guidance, counsel, advice, suggestions, and input. That person may be your future mentor!
- Look for opportunities to be in charge of a project or shine in some area where you know you have talent. Stepping up to a leadership role will help you get noticed and find a mentor leader.
- Remember that it is your leadership that will guide children's futures, so don't wait for a mentor leader to find you — go find a mentor leader!
- Remember that you, too, have knowledge of human development, so have patience and give yourself time to grow and develop.

I have to remind myself that mentoring and growing leaders requires attention and reflections on both sides. Mentors must remember to step back and let new leadership emerge. Mentees must remember to step up and practice leadership when the opportunity presents itself. We can have a strong leadership base in early childhood education if we all do our part and lift as we climb.

Order Debra Sullivan's book  
*Learning to Lead: Effective Leadership Skills for Teachers of Young Children*  
from the Exchange web site:  
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