

UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP

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Head Start leaders come from all walks of life. They come to Head Start with various skills, knowledge, and experiences. Some come from a planning or administrative background. Others come from health-related fields. However, most Head Start leaders emerge from the ranks of the child or family services arenas, and they bring different levels of skills obtained from their many experiences to the job. Are they automatically leaders when they accept the position? Not in all cases.

When considering great leaders, you may believe that such people have certain characteristics, traits, backgrounds, or abilities not possessed by the general population. Numerous studies have attempted to isolate the key factors that make a great leader or the factors shared among leadership styles used by great leaders. However, these studies have clearly shown that no special formula, no certain set of traits or characteristics, and no predetermined style guarantees successful leadership. Anyone can become a great leader – great leaders develop their potential by practicing leadership behaviors.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE LEADERS

Continuous Learning

One outstanding quality of effective leaders is their dedication to learning; leaders meet current and future challenges by becoming lifelong learners. This continuous approach to knowledge, skill building, and self-development provides the tools required for successful leadership.

A distinction of outstanding leaders is that they are never satisfied with what they have achieved. Instead, they continue to look for ways to improve themselves and their organizations. They constantly ask the question: How can we do this better?

Creating a Shared Vision

The ability to see future possibilities is a critical element of leadership. Dynamic leaders have a unique vision of how things could be. This vision takes shape in their minds and becomes crystallized into something concrete that they can write down, draw, or express in some way.

Visionary leaders anticipate future opportunities and the challenges of change. They have a clear idea of what is important, how to achieve it and how to communicate enthusiasm to everyone about their vision. A clear vision that is shared by others creates energy, encourages creative thinking, sets a direction for the future, and provides a framework for today's activities.

Inspiring Others

Effective leaders are able to create a vision and, just as important, communicate the vision in a way that inspires others to want to be a part of it. Leaders articulate the vision into a philosophy that is easy to grasp and understand – a concept that has meaning to every staff person. They communicate this vision in a way that moves others to share the vision. This ownership gives potency and power to the vision. It produces positive results. It helps the dream become a reality.

Building Trust

Leaders know that productive relationships are built on trust. Trust is a learned behavior gained from experience. It must be earned and maintained with consistent action. Authenticity and integrity are a critical element of trust.

Leaders build trust by:

- Being a leader – Effective leadership is one of the most powerful ways to build trust.
- Being accessible – Being available to staff shows trust and a willingness to focus on concerns.
- Being positive – Leaders focus on the positive aspects of people, events, results, and the organization as a whole.
- Seeking ideas and listening – Leaders take the time to get to know staff and learn about his or her values, humor and feelings about the program. Staff feel valued and respected when leaders listen to them.
- Disclosing and sharing – By removing the mystery around what leaders feel or think staff begins to understand the leader's position, which enhances the level of trust.
- Being consistent – The way leaders go about their job communicates far more to staff about what is important.
- Being a leader and a follower – Leaders know that trust needs to be given before it is returned.

The ability to build trust within the organization is also essential to being an effective leader. Building a culture of trust that promotes positive connections with groups of diverse people within the program creates a sense of commitment to the vision. Mutual trust is a shared belief that you can depend on each other to achieve a common purpose.

Leaders promote a climate of trust by:

- Articulating a shared vision – Leaders define and communicate expectations for working together. They nurture a common identity which creates a sense of unity and strengthens trust.
- Planning activities – Leaders know that building trust takes time; it does not happen automatically. Positive interaction helps staff learn about each other, strengthen their common identity, and reduces mistrust. Leaders provide opportunities for staff to learn how to communicate better, manage conflict, or understand the skills and talents that everyone brings to the table.
- Being consistent – Leaders recognize and reward superior performance as well as confront and resolve issues of poor performance.
- Supporting the supporter – Leaders are attentive to the mental and physical wellness of staff.

Empowering Staff

Effective leaders devote substantial time to issues of attitude, morale, and motivation. Leaders inspire staff by noticing their energy, creativity, and strengths. Leaders find new and meaningful ways to show respect, appreciation, and recognition for the people who make it all happen.

Empowerment builds when people from all levels of the organization are included in the decision-making process. They are empowered to manage and answer to their own achievements, challenges, and shortcomings. They know they are an integral part of the program, and they commit themselves to achieving that purpose.

Fostering Good Communication

Leaders use communication as an effective tool for empowerment. Competent leaders recognize the importance of regular, comprehensive communication within organizations. Effective communication allows everyone to express his or her opinions, receive practical feedback, and resolve conflicts.

Effective leaders ask more questions than they answer and use this technique to develop others. Rather than showing a person how to do something, they ask the questions that lead the person to discover the solution. The leader acts as a mentor... guiding, coaching, supporting, and providing a safe environment in which others may grow.

Creating a Learning Organization

Within a learning organization, leaders serve as models for excellence by engaging in leadership behaviors that encourage continuous improvement. This process begins as leaders, who guide organizational culture, focus on empowerment, professional development, and excellence.

Exemplary leaders promote professional development, empower others toward individual learning, and support on-going opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills. This also means giving staff the time and the support to try new ideas and to learn from the mistakes that may come from experimentation.

Influencing Organizational Culture

Leaders understand that program goals and objectives are achieved only by working with and through others. Leaders can influence organizational culture. They can shape and mold the values, basic assumptions, and beliefs shared by the members of the organization.

Effective leaders use several techniques to influence positive relationships and shape culture within their programs. These techniques involve applying and integrating effective leadership behaviors throughout the program including:

- Ensuring effective communication among staff
- Motivating staff to share responsibility for quality outcomes
- Nurturing a sense of self worth and commitment to Head Start through participation in program decision-making
- Modeling lifelong learning
- Promoting and supporting professional development and recognizing mistakes as a natural step in the learning process
- Creating a team of people who feel valued
- Respecting the diversity of staff
- Creating stimulating work experiences

Managing Conflict

Leaders understand that conflicts are inherent in every organization and cannot be ignored. They are attentive to the signs and recognize the symptoms of conflict such as, increased disagreements and complaints, avoidance, and increased blaming. When considering these symptoms, leaders also know that the causes of most conflicts are:

- Misunderstandings or communication failures
- Value and goal differences
- Differing methods or approaches to work
- Conflicting job roles and responsibilities
- Lack of spirit or cooperation
- Authority issues
- Noncompliance issues or differences in the interpretation of rules, policies, or standards

By recognizing and understanding the causes of conflict, leaders can engage those involved in conflict to help analyze, identify, and implement needed changes that cause tension within the program. Leaders often make conflict work for the program by using it as an opportunity for positive change.

Taking Risks

Being a leader often requires experimentation and risk. Taking risks invites some mistakes, some degree of error, and sometimes failure. Strong leaders have experienced failure, but they have learned from their mistakes and have grown in the process.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Great leaders embody several qualities. They serve as mentors to their staff, encouraging communication and collaboration to create and sustain trusting relationships. They are clear about their program's vision and can express it so that others want to be a part of it. Leaders empower others to experiment and take the risks needed for growth. Leaders set the example of being lifelong learners and model continuous improvement. They are role models who subtly guiding others to look to them for direction. Leaders practice the behaviors that inspire others to excellence.

To sustain Head Start as a symbol of hope for a better life for children and their families, Head Start managers must be Head Start leaders.

References:

Understanding Leadership was adapted from ***Leading Head Start into the Future***

Training Guides for the Head Start Learning Community

US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Head Start Bureau

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