

spreading the wealth: leadership at all levels

by Debra R. Sullivan

In my last article (*Exchange*, March/April 2009), I explained that I would be writing a series of articles addressing the leadership themes that emerged from our Exchange Panel of 300 Reception in Dallas, Texas, last November. The first article was about mentoring and how you can grow more leadership — even as you continue to develop your own. Another theme closely related to this is the need to encourage all of our staff and help them to see their individual roles in the leadership process, regardless of their position. This article will focus on leadership at all levels within our programs.

I've said it often: To children, all grown-ups are leaders and all grown-ups are teachers. Young children do not



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make such fine distinctions between the various positions individuals hold in our programs. The lead teacher, the assistant, the custodian, the cook, the director — whatever your role, young children see all grown-ups as 'the people in charge.' It is up to us to 'spread the wealth' and pay attention to how all leadership is expected, supported, experienced, accessible, and noticed at every level and in every position.

Emerging questions about leadership

Eight questions emerged during our discussion:

- Must leaders be administrators?
- How do we delegate leadership in a way that communicates that everyone is a leader, organizational leadership is broad and deep, and people can have time away without worry?
- What characterizes a leader who can form an effective team that functions well in his/her absence?
- How do we cultivate leadership skills in our teachers who aspire to a director position?
- How do we motivate staff to grow professionally?
- How do we help teachers shift their perspective so that leadership occurs almost naturally or they come to it with

guidance, but through their own realization?

- How do we provide effective training that brings out responsibility and leadership potential in each person?
- What are some 'Next Steps' for encouraging leadership at all levels in our organizations?

Question 1: Must leaders be administrators?

My first reaction to this question is, "Absolutely not!!" To serve as a visionary and team leader, to hold responsibility for a program's long-term mission and strategic direction, a leader needs strong leadership ability at the moment administrative leadership is appointed. And most administrators develop leadership skills over time. When staff can demonstrate leadership at any level within our programs, they have opportunities to hone their special skills and abilities so that 'tried and true' leadership can emerge when they assume an administrative position. If we wait until people take on administrative positions to begin practicing leadership, we may well be setting them up for failure. Pay attention to leadership wherever it shows up and you will be surprised at how much leadership you already have available for your use.

Question 2: How do we delegate leadership in a way that communicates that everyone is a leader, organizational leadership is broad and deep, and people can have time away without worry?

When we consider delegating leadership, we must revisit the concept of abundance thinking shared in my last article on mentoring. Delegating leadership means sharing leadership — stepping aside or stepping back to leave room for someone else to step up. At what point do ‘leaders’ decide that leadership can be demonstrated by anyone ‘up and down the line’? Delegating leadership means moving to the position of follower so that another can lead. Spreading leadership broad and deep results in a more inclusive process that represents everyone and provides the leader with the opportunity to:

- 1) Not worry,
- 2) Not have to be in charge of every thing,
- 3) Not have to work alone, and (very important)
- 4) Begin to recognize, appreciate, support, and make use of the leadership potential of those who surround us.

Question 3: What characterizes a leader who can form an effective team that functions well in his/her absence?

Actually, the answer to this question is quite easy. A leader who can form an effective team is very intentional about creating replacement leadership. If I want my program to function well in my absence, I put people in place who can do whatever I can do and who can also do whatever I can’t do. This is similar to what I have said about mentoring: We have to be willing to grow our own replacements, whether they be temporary replacements to cover our absences

or permanent replacements when we move on or retire.

Question 4: How do we cultivate leadership skills in our teachers who aspire to a director position?

It is true that different skills and traits are required of teachers and directors, but that does not mean that one person cannot possess both. A popular question that arises in the leadership literature is whether leaders are born or made — and my answer is, “Both.”

All of us have leadership ability that combines innate characteristics and skills we have honed over time.

In our programs, we may well have great teachers who possess the skills needed to serve as director. Those skills and abilities may be apparent early on or they may be in an incubational stage that requires your attention, care, and support. In either event, you can best develop the skills of your great teachers by recognizing their unique and individual potential and providing opportunities for that potential to flourish, mature, and expand.

Question 5: How do we motivate staff to grow professionally?

In our discussion, one participant quoted Piaget as having said, “You don’t learn something until you see a need to know it.” The concept of motivation — extrinsic and intrinsic — fits in here. Extrinsic motivation is when individuals are motivated by the need to receive rewards or punishments to alter their behavior. Intrinsic motivation is when individual’s behavior arises from his or her own needs, not how others will respond. To motivate staff extrinsically, you need only to know what reward or punishment will make them do as you wish.

To motivate staff to grow intrinsically, as with mentoring, you must first know what individuals want for themselves

and for their future. Motivation occurs when a staff member sees a future possibility and wants to get there. We work really hard to get what we want.

If you want to grow more leadership by helping teachers see themselves as directors, then you have to let teachers know that you support the development of their leadership skills. Your cook may want to move into a teaching position. He or she will be motivated to learn more about teaching methods and child development. Lead teachers may want to closely examine their teaching skill and develop their abilities to manage the responsibilities of a master teacher. He or she will be motivated to learn more about curriculum development and implementation. Whenever you want to motivate your staff, help them get where they really want to go. You will find that motivating them to grow professionally will be surprisingly easy.

Question 6: How do we help teachers shift their perspective so that leadership occurs almost naturally or they come to it with guidance, but through their own realization?

Natural leadership occurs when people are provided with opportunities to do what they do best. It may be a two-prong matter of shifting teachers’ perspectives and the perspectives of their supervisors. To begin, all of us serve as both leaders and followers. From our positions as followers, we can benefit from reflection on our own leadership strengths and how we can contribute more to the leadership process. From our positions as leaders, we need to take a step back so that others can take advantage of leadership opportunities.

Many people may be good at what they do, but leaders do what they are good at. When we have the opportunity to do what we are good at, we realize our own leadership potential and our own role in the leadership process. All it takes is one good leadership opportunity and

the accolades will roll in. After that, just try to shift an emerging leader back to a position as follower!

Question 7: How do we provide effective training that brings out responsibility and leadership potential in each person?

The most effective training for bringing out responsibility and leadership potential begins with those who supervise others. It can be a challenge to act responsibly and engage in leadership if you are not provided the opportunity to do so. Responsibility in the workplace happens when we think we have some control over our work. Leadership potential emerges when others recognize, support, and make space for our unique gifts, strengths, and contributions to the workplace. Directors, lead teachers, mentors, and coaches must be intentional about providing others with many opportunities to learn about leadership and demonstrate responsibility. We know that children need access and exposure to an abundance of rich, stimulating experiences that include just enough disequilibrium to generate new learning. We don't lose that need just because we grow up. As adults we need these experiences and we need to provide these for others.

It's about giving up tight control and creating an environment in the workplace that empowers everyone. I visit many programs where curriculum is 'teacher-proof' and there is a strict procedure and process for every aspect of the work. These organizations create a climate where there is no need to think — just follow the highly-scripted directions. Such environments leave little room for responsibility and leadership. Effective training involves leaders stepping back, letting others step up, letting go, and letting leadership happen.

Question 8: What are some 'Next Steps' we can take to encourage leadership at all levels in our programs?

We can start by truly believing that leadership can, does, and should exist at all levels and with every person in our organizations. When we operate under the assumption that "if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself" we inevitably create environments in which few have the opportunity to demonstrate leadership and even fewer have the opportunity to participate in the leadership process. 'Hoarding' leadership never produces more leadership and can even harm our programs because it is an extremely rare individual who has the ability to run a highly successful program alone. Here are some more 'next steps':

- Leadership can emerge anywhere. Keep your eyes open!
- Provide opportunities for people to practice leadership. Don't be in charge of everything. Anytime is a good time to hone your own ability to be a good follower.
- Everyone should be in charge of at least one thing. It can be large or small, but if leadership is to live at every level, there should be a leadership opportunity at every level.
- Expect leadership from every member of your staff. People often rise to the level that is expected of them. If you do not expect leadership, you probably won't find it.
- Create a work environment where it's okay to make mistakes. Naturally, I'm not talking about costly mistakes or unsafe practices. I'm talking about allowing others to try something new. We expect children to try what is new. It's part of the learning process for adults as well.

- Learn about everyone's unique gifts, strengths, and contributions and find a place for these in the leadership process. If you don't know, find out.
- Remember that responsibility must come with a big dose of leadership. To have responsibility without the ability to influence process or product is just more work.
- Remember that you are not indispensable! We all want to be, but that is just not possible.

In conclusion

Spreading the wealth means letting go of our own version of perfection and letting another version emerge. It is about creating, supporting, and maintaining an environment in which emerging leaders can have the confidence and support necessary to demonstrate leadership and experience success.