

Balancing Act— Managing Your Role as the Director

A journey of a thousand miles begins
with a single step.

—Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

It is clear that being an effective director means skillfully striking the right balance between competing demands to keep your early childhood education program running successfully and smoothly. We would like to leave you with seven principles to guide your work.

Principle 1 Manage Your Time . . . and Appreciate Its Returns

Set concrete, realistic short- and long-term goals, both personal and professional. Write them down, review them periodically, and adjust them as needed. Whether it's your daily, quarterly, or annual to-do list, establish an order of priority and specific time limits for each task to help you avoid procrastination. Don't think of time as only an obstacle or a limitation. As time passes, you gain experience and reap the benefits of the observations, reflections, and relationships you've built.

Principle 2 Learn to Let Go

You are in this role because you know how to do many things well. You might even be a perfectionist, always willing to spend that additional hour or day or week to make that report better, improve that welcome bulletin board in the entryway, or plan for that staff meeting. But in a position with many and varied demands, an all-or-nothing mentality can be detrimental. Distinguish between *expectations* and *requirements*—these are not the same, and often your self-imposed expectations are far above what is actually needed. It's important to be able to recognize when what you've done is "good enough" for its purpose and move on to the next task rather than sink valuable time into making it flawless. In this, as with many things, you are a role model for your teachers and staff. You have the opportunity to set an example of moderation.

Another related skill of an effective leader is the ability to recognize that you can't do everything yourself. You need to know when to say "no more" and when to delegate. It can be hard to turn down a request from a teacher, a parent, or the board and feel as though you're disappointing them, but giving yourself permission to say no when you know you can't take on more is ultimately best for you and for your program. Often, it is more efficient and effective to complement your skills with your staff's. Identify staff members' strengths and share responsibilities with them wisely.

Directly from a Director

Sometimes, it's easy to focus on the challenges of being a director and forget about the joys. I try to remember that every day is a privilege where I get to help children, families, and teachers.

Principle 3 Exercise “Rotated Neglect”

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It is your responsibility to keep all the aspects of your job in focus while recognizing that you can't do everything at once. As a director, Debbie frequently found it helpful to practice *rotated neglect*—putting some tasks on the backburner while dedicating time and attention to others, making sure to switch these out occasionally. As long as the same project is not being repeatedly neglected each day, each week, each month, you can find some balance and get things accomplished. Set small, short-term goals within the scope of larger, long-term undertakings. Identify what can be done today and what will be done another day.

Principle 4 Make Time for Self-Care

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A director's job involves caring for and about others—children, families, staff, board members, the community, and other program constituents. You are so busy caring for others and putting their needs first that the most common thing you neglect is yourself. Be sure to incorporate self-care into your routine, whether that means exercising, getting some fresh air, reading a book not related to your job, or meeting a friend for lunch. Make a point to carve out time in your schedule so you can be recharged and refreshed before you tackle your work again. It's just as important to pencil in “go to the gym” or “take a five-minute music break” on your to-do list as “call the licenser” and “write the annual report.” You might feel guilty taking time to do something for yourself, but balancing work with your personal well-being and having a bit of leisure time in your waking hours is essential to managing stress and avoiding burnout. When you take care of yourself, you are better able to take care of others.

Principle **Be a Lifelong Learner**

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Being the best educator you can be means recognizing that your own growth and learning are never done. Just as it is a priority to support your staff's professional development, you also need to support your own. You always need to be extending your learning, feeding your passions and wonderings, and keeping current on the latest research, best practices, and tools in early childhood. Here are a few ways to be a more engaged, effective lifelong learner:

- › Subscribe to print or digital journals.
- › Visit and observe other early childhood programs and invite other early childhood leaders and teachers to visit your program. This is an opportunity to get feedback and share ideas.
- › Attend a lecture, webinar, or workshop on a topic that excites you—or something you know nothing about!
- › Take a course at a local community college or university, either online or face to face.
- › Attend national conferences, such as NAEYC's Annual Conference or Professional Learning Institute and the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership's Leadership Connections National Conference.

Principle **Network**

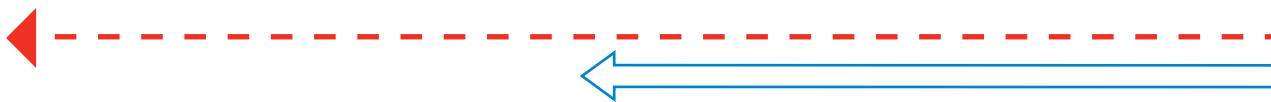
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Being a director can be a lonely job. Typically, early childhood leaders are so busy at their own center that they do not reach out to find other directors and administrators in similar roles. Networking can be one of the best ways to find support, share ideas and tips, and problem solve issues. Start small by getting together on a monthly basis with a few other program leaders in your community to share ideas. These can be directors you already know, met at a conference, or even just reached out to via an email blast to local centers to arrange a meet-up. Director groups can be self-organized or have a paid facilitator. In some communities, director groups are formed by the local community organizations, including early childhood councils, child care resource and referral agencies, or other community partnerships.

Principle **Be an Intentional Decision Maker**

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You may not always have the resources you need or want at your disposal, but you *do* have a vision, goals, and the power of your position to make decisions that move your program forward. Your decisions about curriculum, budgeting, hiring staff, and engaging families are not haphazard and neither are their outcomes. Be strategic, and always know the rationale behind the what, why, when, and how of what you do. It is easy to lose sight of the long view when you are mired in day-to-day tasks. Taking a step back from details and pausing to reflect on larger picture will help your decisions and actions be more purposeful.



With any journey, the path can seem long and the destination far, but it just takes one step to move forward. We hope that with the information and strategies in this book, your journey will be more easily navigated. Along the way, don't forget to appreciate the small steps—the impact you have every day with each child, family, and staff interaction. Your leadership does have an impact and does make a difference.