

Lessons in Leadership: Learn, Lead, and Pass it On!

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Che Che: Being a leader is an honor. You are here to inspire; you are here to light a fire. You also have to come to know that you cannot do this alone.

Ruth Kie: Good leadership occurs in an interactive environment. It's all about just having those conversations. Once you get that relationship going, the possibilities just explode.

Marlene Midget: I want people to have the joy and the happiness of working with Head Start and Early Head Start. It's like I'm on a mission; in our little corner of the world, we are going to make a difference.

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Angie Godfrey: Hello everyone, I'm Angie Godfrey, Infant and Toddler Program Specialist at the Office of Head Start. On behalf of the Office of Head Start, I would like to extend congratulations to those of you who are in new positions in your Early Head Start program. The work that you are engaged in, provides leadership and support to children and families, to staff and to early childhood providers and services throughout your community. It is amazing and challenging work. The transition to your new position comes with great opportunities and rewards, as well as ongoing challenges. I know you are committed to serving infants and toddlers and their families and that is a wonderful place to start. But then there are the Head Start Program Performance Standards, the work with community partners, the needs of families and the resources that may or may not exist for your families.

I am particularly glad to be here with you today to introduce this video. It is another example of the commitment of the Office of Head Start and the Early Head Start National Resource Center, to provide resources to support you as you engage in the daily problem solving and decision-making within your program. We are here to help and to connect you with the tools and people to support you. One of the best resources for new leaders is the opportunity to listen and share and learn from your peers in the field. They offer wisdom and experience that we all can learn from.

In this New Leaders video, we visited with some seasoned leaders in two Early Head Start programs; one in West Virginia and the other in New Mexico. They have much to offer and share; so, take the time to watch and reflect on their words as they talk about leadership. I think you will find their advice encouraging and inspirational.

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Marlene Midget: I was very fortunate to have a mentor. From the time I was a teacher assistant all the way to the position that I'm in today as the executive director. The director before me was a wonderful woman named Pat Gracey, who nurtured my ability and my passion for helping other people through this agency and also provided me with the supervisory training and guidance that I needed.

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Ruth Kie: Pueblo Laguna is one of 19 pueblos in New Mexico. We have about 8,000 tribal members with about 4,500 living here on the reservation. I was physician's assistant for 15 years, prior to working in early childhood, so I always think of that as my first life.

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Che Che Price: My first job here was as a Head Start Centerbase teacher, the first one that we had in one of counties and after about three years I knew I was ready to be doing more and more of a leadership aspect. It was frightening at first because you do have to be in the leadership position, you are the one person the people look up to and so to know that all of that is on your shoulders, that is quite...it's overwhelming at times. But the more you read, the more you learn, the more you...I'm always asking questions of other people who have supported me or who know more than me. I know that I don't know it all, so I have to get input from other people, learn from other people.

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Marlene: As a leader, you will have to be able to juggle staff issues, juggle parent concerns, as well as juggle the budget. As well as write grants in order to keep certain things and juggle the community in making sure your name is out there. So, there is a lot that you have to be accountable for.

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Jackie Bell: My day consists a lot of checking in to make sure that the program is running as well as it should be. There is a lot of days that I am in and out of classrooms, covering for the teachers, covering their breaks, the entire day if necessary. One of our biggest challenges is that we don't have any substitutes, so, we utilize my assistant who is normally out substituting somewhere in the field, or one of our office clerks who has her Infant/Toddler CDA. If neither of them are available, then I come in prepared to go into the classroom, to cover the classrooms. I always greet the staff, the parents and the kids. I think that is very important that they see my face, for nothing else, if I'm going in and substituting; they need to be comfortable with me. Especially at the ages for Early Head Start, once they hit about the six month mark, up to about two, they get that stranger danger; so, it's important that they are seeing me more on a regular basis, so, they don't have that fear when I do have to go into the classroom.

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Marlene: The core value for me is understanding that everyone brings a gift to the table, no matter what station in life they are at, they have something to offer. And that is what I like about Head Start. That is my personal, but it matches my Head State values as well, is because every day you find out something new about someone, a talent that they have or just acts of kindness that they give. That makes your day.

Ruth: My thoughts on leadership would be, you want to say "yes" to opportunities that come along. You are concerned with your best practices, but you are looking for the next practices, because if you just can say, we are doing best practices, if you do that for a couple of years, you are going to become outdated. So, you always have to be looking at the next practice, the next step that is going to take you somewhere different or be something different. So, nothing is very static in early childhood. You always have to be looking at different...how you can change things up, so that it works better. If you are doing the exact same thing that you did three years ago, you are probably outdated.

Jackie: A lot of the leadership traits and what I need to have in my position is time management, learning what is priority and what is the most important task that I need to complete today and get that done. Just because I have field staff that I'm accessible to, which is great. I'm happy to have that. At the same time, that is constant interruption. So, when I have reports that I need to get done, if I have data that I need to collect for school readiness and our assessments, that really cuts into my time. So, that is the biggest thing, is time management and prioritizing what is important and then go from there.

Marlene: A new leader has to have the patience for the job and the passion for it. And the patience comes when you are dealing with people, because everybody is not moving at the same pace that you are, so you have to slow up, go back and figure out...did I lose somebody when I was moving or in translation or communication? The passion is seeing families and staff grow and build their skills, whether they go back to school and get a degree, whether they go to training, come back and say, we really need to try this. Or watching our family say: "Guess what? I found a job today." Those little things like that is what keeps leaders going.

Teacher: Hey, has he been walking?

Marlene: That keeps you grounded, that keeps you understanding why you are here and that you want to be a leader in this agency. It's those little things.

Che Che: Push the bottom up with your thumb. Hello! How are you? You have to be a good role model. You have to be able to do what you expect your staff to do. Regardless of who they are, whether it's the teacher, the assistant.

Jackie: I try to think about how I was led in the past. How my prior supervisors -- how they were with me, that is how I strive to be. I had a very positive experience with past supervisors that I could take things that they did and implement them in my own classroom with my own staff.

Jackie: One, two, three...weeeee! Good job!

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Teacher: It's comprehensive; it's a zero five. You can start with your reactions to your children; at age zero, when the baby starts crying. It's all on how you react to your child.

Marlene: Realizing reflective supervision, in the last five years in our agency, has shown tremendous results. One of the most important outcomes is that staff is engaged in making decisions. Staff is engaged in their professional development. Reflective supervision goes from where the leader has to make all the decisions, until to where it is a partnership.

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Che Che: We're always working at being reflective. Reflective practice is very important for all early childhood practitioners.

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Teacher: Good morning everybody! Welcome the Laguna Head Start program; is everybody ready to have some fun?

Ruth: We had a great health fair today and a great engagement with parents and families, but, the thing that we're going to do tomorrow is probably get all the staff together and say, okay, what went well? What made it go well? And then is there something that we would change? Is there anything that didn't go well? Do we need to change that up? And you want to do it on a timely basis; you don't want to wait for a month to say, okay...because you want everyone's input and you want it to be when they have really good thoughts and ideas going on with that.

Che Che: Reflective supervision is something that as an agency, we had been working on to get it right and I think we are still working on it. I know I am. When I do meet with the staff person or assistant; it is talking about what it's important to them, what I saw, how it can be improved, what they want to do about it and also...here's your successes. Reflective supervision is just having input into what the solution is going to be for whatever the issue is. Reflection on how did you do it, how do you want to do it? What do you want to do better?

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Jackie: When I face challenges, I find that my biggest support group is the other managers in the program; the other content area specialists. Most of the time when I come to a challenge, it's because I'm not familiar with that field. So, if it's disabilities, well, I know that I can go to our disabilities specialist and talk to her and get her input on that. So, that helps a lot. Just utilizing the resources you have around us. Also, our director is very good; she has an open door policy; so, any time I would have a challenge I need to try to take of, or a question, I'm always very comfortable going with her and asking that. So, it's important to have those kind of tight knit group that you feel comfortable with talking to.

Marlene: If a new leader is in a state that has an association, that is a good place to go to get the support, because sometimes you think you're all alone and you find out that somebody else is facing the same issue as you are. Also find a mentor. Please find a mentor for yourself, so that it's somebody who is not judging you; yet, you can be open and honest with, and they will give you an open, honest answer; they do not have a hidden agenda. You definitely want the mentor to be in Head Start and Early Head Start, so that they can understand some of the things that you are going through. That helps because they can explain the unwritten rules, what is expected of you as a leader in an organization, and how to gauge what you're doing is appropriate and how to gauge when you need to change your action.

Jackie: Some of the resources that I found being very helpful in this leadership role is the Early Head Start tip sheets; they are like my Bible that sits on my desk. I also refer to ECLKC quite often, being that it's...I prefer the electronic format; so, that I can get on there; I can search and get an answer a lot faster than digging through the Performance Standards book. Also, another big resource is other agencies. Networking outside. There's been many times that I've called up another agency or another director, another Early Head Start manager and just ask: "Hey, how does your program do this?" And it may not always work out for our program, but at least I have a little bit of interest, you know, a little bit of research to go forward and to a decision that I may have to make.

Che Che: We had a book club that our executive director Marlene started, so that we would all read chapters, get together once a month and discuss how do we feel about that. How do I see myself doing that or what can I take away from this? So, we've had some really good readings that way. The other thing, you have to know your Head Start Act; you should know what your state's early learning objectives are. The early learning framework. Each state has them. Our state has them now from zero to three and three to five. So, it's important to know, you know, your Head Start materials. Your Head Start child development, early learning framework. You should know that. And you should always be able to explain that and also to be able to train other staff on that.

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Marlene: As a leader, you need to know your community. I have five different communities -- range from coal mine, manufacturing to business to rural farming. In the social service world, as Head Start's in, comprehensiveness, you will never have enough money to do all the things you need to do or want. So, you learn to network, resource and even then you won't have everything you need to do. So, you have to prioritize.

Che Che: Building those relationships and knowing what your community needs is a good way to get support for the community that you're in. I remember we started the very first family resource network in Hancock in Brook County. Our former executive director and I were a part of that and just the community coming together and saying: This is what we need; how can you come in; how can you help us?"

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Ruth: Head Start in the community is not the only one that has that goal of helping children and families. We have the Indian Health Service; we have WIC; we have CHR Maternity, Child, Health. So, there's a lot of people that are there; so it's almost like: Let's develop a common agenda. Who's doing what best, because I know that we're working one-on-one with children, but there might be someone there that says: We can work with parents; we have something going on with parents. Great, let's bring them in for a family health event, so that we can get that information to parents.

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Marlene: We have a lot of community people doing trainings for our parents and at some point in time, as a leader, that is where a lot of your time will be spent, is getting to know the parents and what they want, what they need and nurturing them.

Jackie: Relationships with parents are always very important. We are caring for their most precious gifts in life and we have to have a good relationship with them, so they trust us to leave their children in our care. They're trusting us to provide their basic needs by they're not there. And also, we have to have a good relationship, so that we can help them. They are in economic hardship, but they may be struggling to meet their basic needs. So, we are going...if they have that trust with us, we can really help them out a lot more than if they don't.

Teacher: Hi. Hi Brian. Hi Poppi. Good afternoon.

Che Che: So, I think that's what brings me the most satisfaction, is seeing people grow and realize their own capabilities. I mean, sometimes you can recognize it in people and they don't recognize it in themselves and all of a sudden it clicks and you can just see them just blossom.

Teacher: Good job. Two, three.

Girl: Yay.

Teacher: Yes, you did it. How about these too?

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Marlene: When you talk about school readiness goals, that is an ongoing process. That is a process that you have to clearly communicate and engage parents and specific leaders in the agency, as well as, the community to help you to develop those. Because, a lot of times, people think that it's just about learning your numbers and ABC, but you have to engage the family and the community, as well, is part of it.

Che Che: When I think of school readiness, I think of relationships and that could be relationships with our West Virginia Birth to Three partners, our relationships with the school system, of course, with the families and those bonds that are made, whether it's your first day of preschool that you make with the parent or it's that first day when you have a prenatal mom and you are supporting her. That's where that school readiness starts, is building those bonds, giving parents the resources they need at the time they need it the most and supporting the fathers and mothers.

Ruth: You need to have them start recognizing their children's education goals from the start. We have them for a very short period of time, but in that time, you have to start looking at how do you engage parents so that they take ownership of their child's school readiness goals, because we're only there for that first five years; they need to carry it on further.

Teacher: Cookie monster!

Marlene: It's been my experience that when you find yourself in a leadership position, somebody noticed it long before you did. So, and then you're like: "Can I live up to the expectations?" And as time goes on, you find out, yes you can.

Jackie: A lot of what I have learned about myself is that I have to be confident and when I'm confident, that allows my staff to have that confidence in me, that I'm able to lead them and to lead this program to bigger and better things.

Marlene: I would have you remember at all times, do not take yourself too serious. Be sure to have some laughter and provide laughter for someone else. That will help you through the rough times.

Ruth: There is times when I know I have been like, "oh!" But it's all that reflective pieces; just to come back and say: Why am I here in the first place? It's to work -- do my best for the good of the children and the family and if I can kind of keep that going, then I feel like it all works out.

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Angie Godfrey: I would like to close by thanking all of you for joining us today and thank each of you for the work you do each day with your staff and the children and families in your community. Leadership is not just the work you do each day. It is the path you forge for the future. Thank you.