



Key Messages

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As new Head Start/Early Head Start (HS/EHS) directors and managers, you come to your new roles through various pathways and with a wide range of experiences, knowledge, and needs. Whether you've been promoted from within your organization, hired from a neighboring child care or HS/EHS program, or selected because of your experience in management, you require extensive support to help transition to and be successful in your new role as a Head Start leader.

The National Center on Program Management and Fiscal Operations (PMFO) offers a set of key messages that can anchor your learning and understanding. In addition, you will continually revisit these key messages when you attend any of the *Head Start A to Z* sessions.

- 1. Successful programs are learning organizations.** Regardless of your level of training and experience, you and other staff continue to face new situations and challenges from which you can learn and grow. Learning organizations emphasize the need for directors and managers to support all staff in becoming life-long learners who embrace challenges and setbacks as opportunities for collective problem solving and innovation. Effective leadership development encourages cognitive diversity as the bedrock of learning organizations, and effective leaders are encouraged to promote their programs to be learning organizations.
- 2. Head Start is a complex and evolving organization, with extensive regulations, policies, values, and traditions.** It is impossible for you to learn everything within the first year or even the first full grant cycle of your program. Rather than trying to front-load everything that new leaders need to know in one training event or consultation, effective leadership development emphasizes the importance of continuous learning and helps directors and managers identify and connect with people and resources that can help them to find the right answers at the right time.
- 3. Mentors and coaches provide a safe environment for new leaders to learn and grow.** Coaching is one proven strategy for supporting leadership development. New directors and managers are encouraged to find a coach or mentor who can answer questions and provide support over time. If the region or

organization does not have a formal system in place to link new directors and managers with more experienced colleagues, as a new leader you will want to seek support by participating in state or regional Head Start networking activities.

4. **Leadership is a journey.** Just as you bring unique experiences to your work, you also bring your own leadership style. Leadership is a skill with competencies that develop over time. The leadership journey for directors and managers is ongoing. You should seek out opportunities to hone your leadership skills. Effective leadership development encourages a new director or a new manager to reflect on his or her own leadership style, to build upon personal strengths, and to explore leadership tools and resources that complement your personal style.

5. **Leaders in the Head Start and early childhood community hold school readiness success as a primary goal.** The most important role for new leaders is to work in partnership with program and community leaders to develop a program-wide vision for school readiness. You must also work to achieve program goals and school readiness goals that result in positive impacts for children, families, and the community. Effective leadership development encourages new leaders to stay abreast of educational developments in HS/EHS and the greater early childhood field; discuss the implications of the developments with their program’s leadership team; and actively collaborate on the program’s school readiness goals and related programming with parents, staff, governing bodies, local education agencies, and community partners.

6. **Systems thinking provides a fresh perspective and a “big-picture lens” that taps into a higher level of analyzing, problem solving, and strategizing.** As a HS/EHS leader, you are asked to be a systems thinker. You must design and implement strong management systems and continuously work to improve these systems. To do this successfully, you are obliged to understand systems thinking, view your program through a systems lens, and recognize the relationship between systems, services, and child and family outcomes. Effective leadership development efforts stress how important it is for new leaders to gain knowledge and understanding of how the Head Start management systems are integral to successful HS/EHS programming.

- 7. In order to be useful, data must be presented to decision-makers in such a way that they can relate to the data and act upon the information.** Effective leaders create a culture that supports staff at all levels to use data in their day-to-day work. Examining data is a key step in planning, assessing, and communicating information about your program. It is critical for you to gain skills in collecting, analyzing, and using data at the program level. Similarly, teachers, home visitors, family and health services workers, and other staff need to build and use the same skills in their work with individual children and families.
- 8. Relationship building is at the heart of effective leadership.** The workplace of today is about relationships. A relationship-driven leader empowers others and considers empathy essential to creating strong, productive teams. Relationship building permeates all aspects of HS/EHS, from parent, family and community engagement to working with the governing bodies, Tribal Councils and Policy Councils. Effective leadership development efforts encourage directors and managers to view decision-making through a relationship-focused lens (with a hue of strong positive communication) and to refrain from walking the path of unilateral decision-making.
- 9. Change requires positive action and buy-in from all levels of the organization.** To achieve continuous improvement, you must understand the dynamics of change. Continuous improvement is successful when all stakeholders are involved in creating the vision for the organizations and are regarded as critical to the change process. You must see yourself as a change agent and support others who respond to change in different ways.
- 10. Head Start is a vibrant and linguistically diverse organization that requires intentional and specific approaches.** Successfully serving children and families from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds requires the development of a program-wide, comprehensive plan. Effective leadership development encourages new leaders, directors and managers to be aware of the community they serve and articulate in program plans how diverse needs will be met.