



Key Messages

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 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.

- 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 you need to know in one training event or consultation, effective leadership development emphasizes the importance of continuous learning and helps you, as a new director or manager, identify and connect with people and resources that can help you find the right answers at the right time.

- 3. Mentors provide a safe environment for new leaders to learn and grow.**

As program leaders, you may or may not have access to peers with whom you can talk through issues. Effective leadership development encourages new directors and managers to find “buddies” and eventually to identify a mentor who can answer your questions and provide support over time. If your region or organization does not have a formal or informal way to link you to more experienced colleagues, you are

encouraged to seek out this type of support by participating in state or regional Head Start director/manager networking activities.

4. Leadership is a journey.

Just as you bring unique experiences, you also bring your own leadership styles. While directors and managers with a variety of leadership styles can be successful, we know that the apex of successful leadership involves the ability to shift focus from individuals to interactions—in essence, to build relationships. Effective leadership development encourages you to reflect on your own leadership style, to build upon personal strengths, and to explore leadership tools and resources that complement your personal style.

5. Leaders in the early childhood community hold school readiness success as a primary goal.

The role of every HS/EHS director and manager is to contribute to and support a program-wide vision of quality education and early childhood development services and cultural diversity. Effective leadership development encourages you to stay abreast of educational developments in HS/EHS and the greater early childhood field; discuss the implications of the developments with your 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.

HS/EHS programs are complex systems. All services in a HS/EHS program are inter-related. Changes in one service area often produce intended (or unintended) ripple effects throughout the entire program. In its wisdom, the Office of Head Start (OHS) designed the Head Start management systems to support you in delivering services in an intentional, consistent fashion. Effective leadership development efforts familiarize you with these ten systems and the ways you can use the systems to plan and monitor the quality of the services the programs provide.

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.

Examining data is a key step in planning for, assessing and communicating about the quality of services a program provides. It is critical for you to gain skills in collecting, analyzing, and using data at the program-wide 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. Effective leadership

development efforts convey the important role that directors and managers play in creating a culture that supports staff at all levels to use data in their day-to-day work.

- 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 you to view decision-making through a relationship-focused lens and refrain from walking the path of unilateral decision-making.

This product was prepared under Grant #90HC0006 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, by the National Center on Program Management and Fiscal Operations.