

You've Been Promoted to Director! Now What?

BY ROBYN KELTON

We often hear center directors describe their first few years as new administrators as a time when they were “just trying to stay afloat,” “constantly putting out fires” (the metaphorical kind, hopefully), “simply trying to keep their head above water,” and “unaware of what they were unaware of.” One of the reasons the transition to an administrative leadership position can be so challenging is that directors are often promoted from their teaching positions. A promotion is a wonderful time for celebration. Yet, to shift from being a great teacher to being a great leader requires new skills, new knowledge, new boundaries, and new supports—things that may not automatically come with the promotion. And that is how feelings of celebration can quickly change to feelings of anxiousness, frustration, and being on the brink of drowning in their new role and responsibilities.

Helping administrators navigate this duality of both the highs and lows of shifting into a new leadership role is one of the reasons the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership exists. Our founder, Dr. Paula Jorde Bloom, was once a phenomenal teacher. Her skills and abilities were recognized and she was asked to be a director. Once in the director’s role, Paula quickly learned that she was missing some critical information on how to successfully lead and manage a high-quality early childhood program. Thus, one of her life-long missions became helping new administrators gain the knowledge and skills needed to thrive. Three decades later, the McCormick Center is still proudly developing and delivering trainings, books, research, and other supports to foster the role of early childhood leaders.

Perhaps you are someone who, like Paula, has moved into an exciting new role and know that you will need guidance honing your leadership and management skills. We suggest taking time to stop and reflect on your new role, hopes, worries, potential obstacles, and plans to address those obstacles. This can go a long way toward beginning a leadership journey that focuses more on finding an Olympic-worthy backstroke rather than simply treading water. Below are some questions and resources to consider when thinking about your transition into a new leadership position. We even took the liberty of starting to answer the first one for you!

REFLECTING ON YOUR NEW LEADERSHIP POSITION

1. What will be your go-to resources in your new role? *The McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, Child Care Exchange, Child Care Aware of America, National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), your local Child Care Resource and Referral Agency, others:*
2. What implicit biases or assumptions might you be holding as you begin your new position and what are some ways to tear down the biases?
3. What type of leader do you hope to be, and how will you know if you are?
4. How will you foster trust and a sense of justice in your program?
5. How will you include staff and families in decision-making?

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6. What can you do to learn about and integrate into the community you serve (e.g., connect with local organizations that serve the community, spend time getting familiar with the area, attending community events, and meeting residents)?
 7. How might your relationships with staff members shift and how will you adapt?
 8. What are your expectations for yourself and your program staff?
 9. How will you prioritize your tasks?
 10. Where can you find training on administrative-specific topics?
 11. How do you plan to protect your work-life balance?
 12. When can you schedule structured time for self-reflection?
 13. Who are the people you can reach out to for support (e.g., other new directors, other more seasoned directors, professors/instructors, state coaches, and mentors)?

If you are a new director interested in professional development geared toward this new experience, register for Ready to Lead, a leadership academy designed for new directors (one day to five years of experience) <https://mccormickcenter.nl.edu/services/leadership-academies/#rtl>. Topics include building self-awareness, learning how to incorporate reflection into everyday routines, understanding your leadership style, shifting from peer to boss, and strategies for prioritizing. Registration opens in November 2021.

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