

Leadership Lessons: Advice to My Past Self

BY BARBARA VOLPE

In one of our Leadership Academy sessions, we engage in an activity that asks the participants to reflect on their professional journey leading up to their current role as director. Considering what they know now, what advice would they give their younger self? What would they write in a letter to themselves? I left the training reflecting on this activity and pondered what advice I would give myself when I entered my first leadership position. Resulting from that reflection is the following letter to my past self.

Dear Barb,

Congratulations on your promotion! I know you are both excited about this opportunity to step into a leadership role and terrified about the challenges, worried that you are not prepared for the tasks ahead. You want to get started on the right foot and be the best leader you can be. I want to reassure you that you are where you need to be—you are qualified in so many ways for this position! If I could be your mentor now, I would offer a few pieces of advice from my years of experience and reflection on leadership that will help you as you begin this journey.

- ***Dedicate yourself to building relationships with all of your staff.*** People management will take the largest amount of your time, so it is essential that you hone your relationship-building skills. Learn more about the art of communication, and practice tried and true skills, such as active listening, asking questions and rephrasing for understanding, and non-verbal communication. Take time to walk about and talk to each staff member individually and in small groups. Listen and learn!
- ***Devote time to engage in reflective practice.*** Reflective practice will help you increase your self-awareness, grow your observational skills, and develop a better understanding of others. Explore models of reflective practice to find one that you can use to help you become more self-aware and reflective. Write this John C. Maxwell quote in the front of your journal, “Reflective thinking turns experience into insight.” Insight will connect your head and heart knowledge to help you lead others more effectively.
- ***Gather resources to grow your knowledge in administrative leadership.*** Learn as much as you can about organizational climate, prioritizing and developing systems, goal-setting, and operational leadership tasks (budgeting, hiring, and supporting staff). Try to find a mentor who can be your critical friend; someone who can be supportive, encouraging, and provide you with honest feedback.
- ***Find a healthy balance between your personal and professional life.*** Michelle Obama says, “We need to do a better job of putting ourselves higher on our own ‘To Do’ list.” Maintaining a work-life balance is important for your mental, physical, and emotional health. It also reduces stress and will help your attention and focus at work. Build in time for creative activity; it feeds your soul. And remember to breathe!

- ***Give yourself grace, show yourself some compassion and patience.*** You do not need to have all the answers; accept that you will make mistakes. Remember, it is progress, not perfection, and no one is perfect. Focus on what you can control, do your best, and use those mistakes as learning opportunities.

All of this advice would be great if I could, in reality, pass it on to you. You will learn all of this, of course, through the years by trial and error, connecting with really great colleagues who will become your mentors and thought partners, and through your desire to continue to grow as a leader. I am so thankful that you had the courage to take that first step!

Sending hugs and love,

Barb

What advice would you give your past self? How much of this advice are you following today? How could you follow the advice better? Reflecting on your past and lessons learned can help with your current experiences. It can remind you of what is important, ensure you continue to head in the right direction, and help you be a better mentor to those you lead.

If you are interested in building your self-awareness and reflection skills, consider attending one of the McCormick Center's leadership academies: Ready to Lead, Taking Charge of Change™, or Taking the Lead. Information on all of these professional development opportunities can be found [here](#).

RESOURCES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD ADMINISTRATORS ON LEADERSHIP

Books

- *Building on Whole Leadership* by Marie Masterson, Michael Abel, Teri Talan, and Jill Bella.
- *From the Inside Out: The Power of Reflection and Self-Awareness* by Paula Jorde Bloom
- *Graceful Leadership in Early Childhood Education* by Ann McClain Terrell
- *Inspiring Early Childhood Leadership: Eight Strategies to Ignite Passion and Transform Program Quality* by Susan MacDonald
- *Leadership in Action: How Effective Directors Get Things Done* by Paula Jorde Bloom
- *The Visionary Director, Third Edition: A Handbook for Dreaming, Organizing, and Improvising in Your Center* by Margie Carter, Luz Maria Casio, et al.

Websites and Blogs

- Child Care Exchange: <https://www.childcareexchange.com/>
- Leadership Freak: <https://leadershipfreak.blog/>
- McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership: <https://mccormickcenter.nl.edu/>
- NAEYC: <https://www.naeyc.org/resources>

Barb Volpe, M.Ed., is the Leadership Academy Manager for the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University (NLU). In this role, she manages and facilitates leadership academies and quality improvement training for early childhood administrators and technical assistance providers. Barb has over 25 years of leadership and management experience. Barb enjoys developing trainings and has made

many local, statewide, and national presentations. Barb obtained her M.Ed. from NLU in early childhood administration and her B.S. in child and family development from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. Prior to her work at the McCormick Center, Barb worked in the early childhood field as an infant/toddler and preschool teacher, site director, and education coordinator for both community-based programs and Head Start. She has written articles on topics in leadership and management of early childhood programs and taught for several years as adjunct faculty at the local community college. Barb's passion is to support center and home-based administrators in making continuous quality improvement for the care and education of young children and their families.