

Up Front and Center: reflecting on leadership approaches to current cultural issues and topics

LUIS A. HERNANDEZ

Living in times of complex divisions demands that early childhood education (ECE) leaders have a clear foundation of strong principles and best practices for the children, families, and staff in our programs. Current political and cultural clashes inevitably filter into our programs – whether we like it or not. As citizens, as neighbors, and as families in our communities, we are impacted by the larger dynamics happening in our nation and world.

Considering our individual academic history and professional growth, it's time to gather all lessons learned and put them into action. Begin by focusing on your leadership skills by reaffirming the foundational principles and considerations at the core of ECE practices. These will include research, proven practices, reliable trends, and trustworthy information sources. That's a lot to take in! We want to confront uneasy situations and difficult conversations with a strong, strength-based approach.

Daily, we confront complex topics and issues. How can we address political differences in an election year? How do we respond to concerns about wars in corners of the world? How do we bridge religious differences between the families and staff? How do we best honor particular holidays and celebrations shared by the children and families? Is AI going to take over my job? All these will require knowing the emotional context of individuals, families, and the communities we live and work in.

These complex dynamics call for incredible tact, intentional strategies, understanding, and resolve. As you deliberate on a path forward, begin with open conversations with the families and the staff at the center. Be honest in your initial approach: "I need your comments and ideas on how to best address this issue and ideas for some next steps." Always start with what is best for the children, how to engage families in meaningful ways, and how to professionally uplift the staff at the center.

As with any challenging situation, know and use your strengths to address it – whether with your family members, co-workers, neighbors, folks at places of worship, etc. Each response and action will be a reflection of our persona. That complexity reflects our image, personality, attitudes, abilities, and knowledge base. Our response will be a combination of verbal communication and our physical and non-verbal language styles. As much as we try to manage our communication, our facial and body expressions tell more!

Grow a strategic backbone! As much as we try to avoid confrontations at any cost, there are many times the "me" as a leader needs to step up. Remember, EVERYONE is looking at you to resolve a difficult situation. The introvert in us may need to muster extra power to counter a loud argument. For the extrovert in us, it may mean toning down our rush of words and arm waving. In other words, step up for

introverts; step back for extroverts. Either approach requires quiet confidence, a sense of control, and a path toward a mutual resolution. Fire up the strength and will with words and actions highlighting confidence in understanding and best approaches.

As leaders, we are (mostly) in control. You can control your words and actions within your proximity. You cannot control situations outside your range. An example from the COVID epidemic was the use of masks at a supermarket: you could control wearing a mask, but you could not control others who did not wear a mask. In our ECE world, for example, you can control staff using their phones for personal calls or scrolling while supervising children during outdoor play. But you will not have control over how they react when confronted by the center's policy and the consequences of No Phones rules. A difficult conversation will ensue, but be confident you are doing the right thing based on principles, solid practices, and core values.

How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice! To strengthen that backbone when confrontations make you uneasy, rehearse disagreeing or confronting with people you trust. Because you need to feel psychologically safe, try getting comfortable by role-playing with a trusted friend: "I disagree with that," "We have standards that are mandatory in this workplace," and "That behavior is unacceptable in front of children." Practice, practice, practice. Build the muscles that a backbone requires.

Are we all on the same page? ECE leaders understand that there will be differences along with common similarities as part of a large learning community. Always affirm the organizational values of the program – a set of aspirational goals that are the common ground for all. These values are regularly affirmed as well as revisited and updated as needed. Some are at the core of a program, while others reflect current trends and research.

Discussion of values is an integral part of professional development. For example, do we all share the same beliefs about play? Are parents "always right?" Does the staff feel respected in their various roles? And much more! In tangible ways, values are vital in fostering a meaningful purpose for the work at hand and the catalyst for authentic relationships among all. We may not all be on the same page, but we all know the foundational values of our organization.

As a Leader – teacher, supervisor, director – gather a baseline of understanding and knowledge about issues and topics. Dust up a sense of curiosity and inquiry by reading, asking others, listening to a podcast, or speaking with a trusted source. In other words, as you face a difficult conversation - know your stuff! Use the many current ECE strategies on reflection, intentionality, mindfulness, and coaching to ease into a discussion by citing facts and policies along with describing emotions. And turn these discussions into "learning conversations." Most importantly – listen! Ask open-ended questions, get clarifications, do follow-up when needed, and mutually seek possible solutions.

As we ponder the times we live in, build an armor of courage and hope. With so much of our work, it is about individual relationships with others who will be similar to us as well as different from us. We don't all have to be best friends, but we can affirm civility, understanding, and kindness. Always be ready to agree and disagree. At the core of all relationships, start with respect embedded in trust. The common good of our learning communities provides hope and optimism for these times and the ones just ahead.

Luis A. Hernandez, Early Childhood Education Specialist, brings solid expertise based on his work history in Head Start, Pre-K programs, colleges and universities. His expertise includes early literacy, dual language learners, adult learning practices, and ECE management and leadership topics. As a regular presenter and keynote speaker at national, state, and local conferences, Luis is highly regarded for his motivational and energizing presentations. In addition, Luis is an author. His book, "Learning from Bumps on the Road," focuses on leadership topics and is a compilation of presentations and conversations with three fantastic leaders in the field. Mr. Hernandez is active in a number of organizations that support children and family interests.