

Research Notes

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Leadership Transitions – What Do Directors Experience?

The transition of leadership is a significant and pivotal event in the life of an early childhood organization. When done right, it can infuse vitality into a program, providing fresh ideas and new perspectives for the future. When done wrong, it can result in earthquake-like tremors throughout the center, creating instability, uncertainty, and havoc. Among the factors often cited as critical for a smooth leadership transition are well-thought-out procedures for job socialization and succession planning.

Seeking a firsthand perspective on matters pertaining to early childhood leadership transition, the Center for Early Childhood Leadership recently conducted a study of 401 directors from 21 states and the District of Columbia. The following summarizes the key findings of this study as they relate to directors' personal accounts of job socialization and their thoughts and experiences regarding leadership succession.

The Sample

The 401 respondents in this study reflect the broad diversity of the early childhood field. Their centers represented all program types and funding auspices. One-third of the programs were for-profit; the remaining two-thirds were from the nonprofit sector. Approximately one-third of the programs (31%) were accredited by NAEYC, NSACA, NACCP, or NCCA. One-third of the respondents (34%) worked in a center that was part of a larger agency or organization and one-fourth of the directors managed more than one site. Seventeen percent of respondents were owner/directors; 13% were director/teachers.

Respondents worked in the field of early childhood for an average of 17 years and in early childhood administration for an average of 11 years. More than three-fourths of the sample (83%) held at least a baccalaureate degree; 29% had gone on to achieve a master's degree or another advanced degree. Directors averaged 11 semester hours of college credit in coursework relating to business, management, accounting, marketing, group dynamics, leadership, technology, communications, or early childhood administration. Much of the coursework was taken after they had become a director. Eighteen percent of respondents were first-time directors in their positions for less than three years.

Learning the Ropes

Job socialization describes how an individual adapts to a new professional role. Directors were asked to reflect back on the first three months in their current position. Over one-half (51%) stated that the experience was overwhelming; they had to figure out things by themselves. Only 14% of the sample felt their orientation into their new role was thorough and systematic. For those respondents hired from outside the organization, only one-half (53%) felt the job description and interviewing process provided a realistic understanding of the special challenges of their new position.

In most cases, early childhood directors are promoted into their administrative positions from the ranks of teaching. While classroom experience is valuable, on its own it does not adequately prepare one for managing the range of tasks required of an effective program administrator. Not surprisingly, the survey data supported the notion that many child center directors enter their administrative roles with little or no preparation for the job. Only 55% of respondents indicated that their perceptions matched reality when they assumed their current job. Just 27% said they were well prepared for their current role.

Among the individuals who indicated that they were not prepared or only somewhat prepared for their current role (73% of the total sample), a range of factors were indicated as support mechanisms that would have helped them be more prepared. As shown in the following table, the two most frequently cited supports that would have made a difference in how prepared they felt during their first months in the directorship were mentoring from another director and more on-the-job administrative experience prior to assuming their new leadership role.

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Desired support mechanism	Percentage*
Being mentored by an experienced director	35%
More on-the-job experience in management and/or supervision	31%
More formal coursework in early childhood administration	29%
More thorough orientation to the new position	25%
More formal coursework in child development/early childhood education	8%

* respondents were asked to indicate up to two supports; thus the percentages equal more than 100%

A statistically significant relationship was found between respondents' perceived level of preparedness for their administrative role and their level of specialized training in early childhood administration and/or general business management [$\chi^2(4, N=388)=11.78, p<.01$]. Those directors who indicated they were well prepared for their role averaged 15 semester hours of specialized coursework in administration compared to 8 semester hours for directors who indicated they were not prepared for their roles.

Passing the Baton

The transfer of leadership can be disruptive to an organization because it alters lines of communication, affects decision making, and disturbs the equilibrium of daily routines. To elicit directors' perceptions about the leadership succession process at their programs, respondents were asked to consider the question: *Metaphorically speaking, if you were hit by lightning and died, what would likely occur at your center?*

Less than one-third of respondents (30%) indicated that their center's operations would continue smoothly; that people and systems were in place to ensure a smooth transition. Ten percent of the sample stated that chaos would reign, that there was no one equipped to step into their position and assume their leadership role. The remaining respondents indicated that things would be shaky, but still functional; that someone could cover their responsibilities until a formal search to find a replacement was conducted.

Directors in the study were asked if they had a formal or informal leadership succession plan in place. Leadership succession planning is premised on the tenet that transitions work best when they are supported intentionally. A leadership succession plan is a deliberate and systematic effort by an organization to ensure continuity in the directorship and other key leadership roles.

Only 40% of the sample responded affirmatively, suggesting mentoring, job shadowing, and job sharing as strategies for ensuring a smooth leadership transition. Only 12% said that their center had a formal written leadership succession plan. Those programs were more likely to be associated with a for-profit chain or a for-profit corporate-sponsored program. Chi square analysis revealed that directors of accredited programs were more confident that they had systems in place to ensure a smooth leadership transition [$\chi^2(2, N=385)=18.17, p<.01$].

Implications for the field

The results of this study revealed that comprehensive and systematic procedures to ensure a smooth transition of leadership exist in only a small number of early childhood programs. For the vast majority of centers, no formalized leadership succession plan exists at all. Job socialization activities such as mentoring, job shadowing, and job sharing are effective practices to support individuals and organizations in times of leadership transition. It is recommended these practices be routine aspects of a comprehensive succession plan.

This study also found that directors who felt most prepared for their program management roles possessed higher levels of academic coursework in general business or the administration of early childhood programs. This finding is consistent with previous research calling for increased levels of academic preparation as a means to ensuring organizational stability.

Finally, the results of this study found that accredited programs are more likely to have systems in place to facilitate a smooth transition of leadership. This finding reaffirms what other studies have demonstrated about the positive impact of program accreditation. Accrediting bodies are urged to give continued and heightened interest to matters pertaining to the transfer of leadership within early childhood organizations.

For further information about research conducted by the Center for Early Childhood Leadership, call 800-443-5522, ext. 7703. Funding for the Center's Research Notes is provided by the McCormick Tribune Foundation and the Illinois Department of Human Services. Individuals may photocopy and disseminate freely.