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# The Five Commitments of Optimistic Leaders

by Judy Jablon

Asa Hilliard inspired me years ago at a conference of teacher educators when he said, "Relationships matter more than anything else. Human beings need to be nurtured. Our job as educators is to nurture in ways that tap into the genius in each child."

I believe that hearing Dr. Hilliard that day began a journey that resulted in Leading for Children. Our mission at Leading for Children is to elevate the practitioner, to create an optimistic trajectory for each child's success in school and life.

I began the non-profit organization, Leading for Children, whose mission is to strengthen early learning systems. I believe that when we promote healthy and productive relationships within and across all roles and settings, educators can thrive. And, in so doing, children can experience the strong nurturing relationships for learning that they need to



Judy Jablon, founder and executive director of Leading for Children, has spent more than 35 years in early childhood education beginning with her work as a classroom teacher at the School for Children at the Bank Street College of Education and adjunct instructor in the graduate school. Jablon is the author of many publications and videos

including *Powerful Interactions* and *Coaching with Powerful Interactions*. Through her writing, videos and professional development experiences, Jablon encourages educators across the country to draw on their own wisdom to enhance children's learning.



## The Five Commitments of Optimistic Leadership

- 1 Think impact to make informed decisions.
- 2 Cultivate self-awareness to guide thought, emotion, and behavior.
- 3 Nurture relationships to support learning and collaboration.
- 4 Refine communication for mutual clarity and understanding.
- 5 Activate curiosity to find connections and continue learning.



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thrive. Inspired by Asa Hilliard, and so many of you, I have developed a model that I believe can improve how early learning educators engage in their work: The Five Commitments of Optimistic Leadership.

### The Foundation for Optimistic Leadership

For years our field has deeply engaged in thinking about how to achieve higher quality early learning programs for children birth to age five, and how to improve children's learning outcomes. The elements of quality programs that result in better outcomes are supported by extensive evidence. However, we currently have directors and teachers, parents and policy makers, receptionists and cooks, all working at cross purposes. We are not rowing in the same direction and neither are we ensuring that educators in each of these critical roles understand the importance of assuming a leadership stance for children. Despite

everything we know about how learning must build on strengths, we have a culture in early learning that is focused on deficits. In so many efforts to achieve higher quality programs, it appears that staff and administrative interactions are breeding distrust rather than collaboration.

In this climate, how can we possibly adhere to Hilliard's assertion that to nurture the genius in children we must nurture the genius in the adults? I believe that by adopting the Five Commitments of Optimistic Leadership, we will enhance program climate and strengthen early learning systems.

Before we discuss the five commitments, we must have a shared understanding of leadership, optimism, and commitment.

**Leadership.** Leadership means recognizing the impact you have on others and using that knowledge in productive ways. Each of us has an impact on the organization where we work.

Our actions and words impact others and contribute to the climate in a large agency, a preschool classroom, or a family child care. Regardless of our titles or roles, we are all leaders for children.

**Optimism.** Optimism is not about being positive or happy. Merely being positive doesn't help achieve quality. Instead of "thinking positive" we can focus on a path forward and have conviction that when the inevitable obstacles occur, they can be hurdled with analysis and persistence. Think of optimism as the light at the end of the tunnel, rather than a smiley face.

**Commitment.** Commitment is vital to achieving the high-quality programs children and families deserve, and in which early-learning professionals thrive. Commitment takes effort and persistence and it is more likely to become a part of the culture of programs when it is a shared endeavor.

## The Five Commitments of Optimistic Leaders

Leaders recognize their impact. Optimistic leaders focus on the path forward. Optimistic leaders are passionate about achieving a vision and will persevere even when the going gets tough. Imagine if everyone in an early learning setting embraced their roles as leaders committed to working together to enhance children's opportunities to be successful learners?

Let's examine each of the five commitments to understand how early learning educators—across roles—are changing their practices as they learn about optimistic leadership.

**1 Think impact to make informed decisions.** Everything we say and do—every one of our actions—has consequences or benefits. Research shows that educators make more than 1,500 decisions daily—that is about four decisions every minute (Good and Brophy 2008). What would it mean for children if more of us were more aware of the impact of these decisions on our professional relationships? On children's learning? On the climate in our programs?

**Action to Practice:** Before you act or speak, pause and ask:

What will happen if...?  
and perhaps more importantly,  
What do I WANT to happen if...?

### Think Impact: Reflections from the field

"This helps me realize my influence and how through my word choices, tone, stance, and perspective I can create the type of work environment that encourages or discourages."



**"A change is brought about because ordinary people do extraordinary things."**

Barack Obama

**Then:** "I was too malleable and influenced by the outcomes I perceived others wanted. I often hushed my own voice to carry out the voices of others, especially my supervisors. I sought approval and feared disappointment."

**Now:** "I feel empowered. I pause more. I am reflective of my presence, especially my non-verbal actions, my pace, my tone, my impulsivity to react and respond immediately. I am trying to think before I speak and gather more information before making decisions."

**2 Cultivate self-awareness to guide thought, emotion, and behavior.**

Self-awareness is the capacity to recognize your own feelings, behaviors, and characteristics, and to understand your cognitive, physical, and emotional self. Self-awareness allows you to monitor your emotions, thoughts, and feelings; understand your strengths and weaknesses; and know what motivates you

toward what you want out of life. When you have self-awareness, you recognize your impact on other people and adapt to be more successful in your interactions. Self-awareness is the cornerstone of emotional intelligence, and underlies all the other aspects of self motivation and emotional intelligence.

**Action to Practice:** Try to be humble rather than defensive. When you are unsettled by a situation or the actions or words of a child, a colleague, or a child's family member, take a look inside. Ask, How could I look at this another way?

### Cultivate Self-Awareness: Reflections from the field

"I have found that working toward a greater sense of how I am in a situation helps me to notice how others are."

**Then:** "I was quick to 'say and do.' I thought that in order to be highly effective, I had to think on my feet, act fast."

**Now:** "I value the practice of self-reflection which increases my self awareness. I am making more informed decisions—going from reactive to problem-solving and building partnerships. By slowing down, I can identify whether my actions will strengthen or hinder my relationships."

**3 Nurture relationships to support learning and collaboration.** Steven Covey said, "Trust is the highest form of human motivation. It brings out the very best in people." Research has consistently shown the importance of high quality, trusting relationships in achieving educational outcomes. Studies have also shown that strong collegial relationships among educators lead to higher levels of professional satisfaction, stronger organizational commitment and problem solving, a stronger organizational belief that positive student outcomes are possible, and a stronger organizational commitment to consistently prioritizing the best interest of the children served (Brewster and Railsback 2003).

**Action to Practice:** Think about relationship repair. Even the best relationships have struggles. Being the one to step forward and say, "I blundered, I apologize," goes a long way in building trust, strengthening relationships, and improving program climate.

#### Nurture Relationships: Reflections from the field

"With a view of myself as a leader for children, I set and contribute to the tone in my classroom and school. I need awareness as well as time to reflect."

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**Then:** “I was oblivious to emotional cues during interactions. I was not gauging non-verbal feedback. I realized this was driven by my fear of making mistakes.”

**Now:** “I am learning to listen to others’ ideas and taking the time to understand and evaluate to see how their ideas can be incorporated into any process.”

#### 4 Refine communication for mutual clarity and understanding.

Communication is key to maintaining positive and effective relationships. Effective leaders use conversation and dialogue rather than top-down commands. Communication includes pausing before speaking, monitoring tone, listening well, asking questions, being sensitive to cultural and linguistic diversity, and using self awareness to reflect and adjust to the person with whom you are speaking.

**Action to Practice:** Notice the give and take you have in professional conversations.

Sometimes we get caught up in what we have to say and we forget the listener, failing to see the cues the other person may give. As the talker, we miss signals that the listener wants a turn to respond or ask a question.

#### Refine Communication: Reflections from the field

“Being mindful of my spoken words and written messages makes me a more effective leader.”

**Then:** “I was unaware of my tone, or failed to adjust it. As a result, positive climate was eroded.”

**Now:** “I have cultivated a habit of pausing to compose a message or

question in my mind before writing or speaking it.”

**5 Activate curiosity to find connections and continue learning.** When we activate curiosity, we are more willing to take risks, experiment, and try things out. A curious and open mind invites learning. Rather than worrying about failure, the curious leader knows that errors can promote learning. When working with children and families, curiosity means letting go of your agenda and watching and listening to learn what matters to the child or his family. This may require a degree of holding back and watching or listening before saying or doing anything.

**Action to Practice:** Consider routine practices that drive your work on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. Think about questions you might ask to rethink ingrained protocols:

- What would happen if I...
- It might change the dynamic if...
- How could I change the impact of...

#### Activate Curiosity: Reflections from the field

“Being curious and wanting to find connections between current knowledge and new learning has supported my growth and helped me create and strengthen relationships.”

**Then:** “I noticed that I sometimes felt inadequate when I needed to ask questions about something that was unfamiliar to me.”

**Now:** “I like to place myself in situations with “great minds” so that I can engage in conversations that offer different perspectives and ideas.”

Leading for Children facilitators are working with educators around the country to examine ways to use the Five Commitments of Optimistic Leadership to strengthen early learning programs and systems. As we engage with educators across roles, the Five Commitments provide a new focus and renewed energy to build upon strengths and refine program quality.

Consider, what might it look like if everyone in your setting practiced the Five Commitments of Optimistic Leadership?

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