

Leadership for Sustainable Organizations

An interview with Julie Hanks and Liddy Wendell

by Margie Carter

“Leaders lead: they guide people from a current set of circumstances to a new situation in the future — and they lead people despite the obstacles that may occur. Leaders see possibilities, have new ideas, invite new ideas from others, envision a desirable future, and provide a needed sense of direction. Just as importantly, leaders communicate their vision in ways that inspire and motivate others to want to reach that same vision. This is very different from the role of the manager. Managers spend most of their energy being the best at current operations and less energy creating a vision for the future.”

— Dale McKee, Corelius & Associates

Leading an early childhood organization is a complex task, regardless of the size or structure. Leaders of small programs typically lack the resources and often the administrative know-how to make their jobs sustainable. They spend most of their time in survival mode. Director turnover is quite high in small-to medium-sized programs. In larger organizations bureaucratic measures are typically established to keep things from becoming unwieldy. In these situations we usually see site directors managing, rather than leading, their centers. Some get comfortable there and stick around for a long time. Others become dissatisfied and move on to something else.



Margie Carter, Julie Hanks, and Liddy Wendell regularly discover the new knowledge that comes from careful listening, provoking, and engaging with the thinking of

others. Remaining faithful to the work that must be done, they share a strong commitment to building new possibilities for the early childhood field and new forms of leadership to reconceptualize our thinking about quality. They offer deep gratitude to Julie Bisson, Carmen D'Arcangelo, and Meg McNulty for their clear demonstration of how to lead with a vision, remarkable skills, and strong emotional intelligence.

I've been following the shared service movement in early childhood (see Stoney, 2009), which seems to me one of the most promising solutions to not only financing early childhood programs for better quality, but also addressing director burnout. In an interview (Carter, 2011) Louise Stoney said,

“The more I worked on ECE finance, the more I felt that the field was setting directors up to fail. It is such a complex job and ECE directors work so hard, but they just can't do everything well. It's not humanly possible. So the tendency is to focus on what you can do, what gives you energy, and just hope that the other pieces fall into place. We all avoid doing what we don't do well; it's a survival strategy.”

The shared services model holds great potential to solve some of the management and financial issues in early childhood, and I continue to seek examples of the kind of on-the-ground leadership that moves programs forward

with the potential for long-term sustainability.

Only recently has the language of sustainability been entering our professional discourse. In fact, as late as last year when I worked with a shared services organization on clarifying their core values, an interesting debate emerged with some thinking that the term referred to the environmental movement, not early childhood. In the end they included the idea of sustainability with a lovely draft of their core values statement (see side bar on page 10).

An Interview with Julie Hanks and Liddy Wendell

I turned to Julie Hanks and Liddy Wendell for their ideas about leadership for sustainability because they have been observing early childhood directors at work in Seattle over the last five years. When I heard they were engaged in a dialogue about what they've been learning, I asked if I could be included.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF HILLTOP CHILDREN'S CENTER

MC: I'm eager to cull out of your conversations what you see as the elements in leadership that creates sustainability, not only for the organization, but the people at the helm. Obviously working with a vision and defining core values has been central to what you've seen.

JH: This year I've experienced the power of leadership that works with a vision and values-based practice to create a sustainable and thriving program. I've been working as part of an administrative team with a director who only two years ago founded a new school that already offers the depth of reflective practice, rigor, heart, and

innovation that I've only seen at seasoned centers that are decades old! I've asked myself a million times, 'How did this happen . . . and so quickly?' and the key seems to be that piece you mention about vision and clearly defined core values; but also, this director, Julie Bisson, brings incredible social-emotional intelligence to her practice.

In the field of education, teachers and administrators need to be 'relationship experts,' people whose daily work is cultivating relationships that allow for high-stakes trust and investment in ongoing learning. Leaders like Julie are able to navigate this relationship-based

field with such intelligence that they are able to cultivate the kind of high-trust relationships that build not just a school, but the foundations of a sustainable learning community.

LW: With the leadership of our former director, Meg McNulty, we went through an extensive community-wide process of defining our values. These values have been invaluable in guiding our decision-making process as an organization. However, our administrative team continued to feel stretched thin and to experience various degrees of burnout so we sought outside support to do a values exercise. The goal was to develop a set

Sound Child Care Solution Core Values ratified 11/13/2013

Engaged Learning

We value curiosity and reflection for adults and children, and we believe this leads to a journey of life-long teaching and learning.

Collaborative Relationships

We value mutual respect, reciprocity, and collaborative decision-making among children, families, staff, and educators, and we believe this builds strong and equitable communities.

Joyful Work

We value playfulness, purpose, and passion in the classroom as well as in the office, and we believe that adults can draw inspiration from children's lively minds.

Social Justice

We value cultural democracy, overcoming bias, and undoing racism, and we believe that children and adults can only thrive in a world where inequities are noticed and actively challenged.

Shared Accountability

We value transparency, individual contributions, organizational integrity, and community partnerships, and we believe this fosters a sense of being held and being responsible to each other.

Intentional Practice

We value pride in our work, innovation, and going beyond conventional ideas of quality experiences for children, and we believe that creates a sustainable quality of life for ourselves and generations to come.

Sustainable Community

We value shared services, fiscal integrity, and healthy living and believe this creates balance in our lives and longevity in and for our world.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF SOUND CHILD CARE SOLUTIONS



of values to guide our work and decision-making as the administrative team. We settled on the core values of stewardship, efficiency/effectiveness, transparency, and sustainability. These values have helped us move from a position of service to the school to one of stewardship of the school, a shift in perspective which has redefined our role. We are no longer running around in a reactive way trying to fix any issues that might come up; instead, we are working to build systems and infrastructure that will steward the organization into the future. Now, for instance, when we are making a decision, such as how to write our enrollment contract or even whether or not to say yes to a parent request for an exception, we ask ourselves whether or not it aligns with these four values. Based on that perspective, we decide whether or not to move forward.

Our core values (both the organizational and the administrative) serve as filters to help us make leadership decisions more transparently, efficiently, and effectively. In a field that is deeply relationship-based (and indeed, one of our organization's core values is Learning in Relationship), these values help us make decisions not purely based on relationship. So now we don't automatically respond, "Yes, to maintain our friendly relationship I will give you the discount you asked for this month," turning every request into a time-consuming, exceptional situation that we need to discuss. Instead, with our administrative values-based approach we ask ourselves:

- "Is it sustainable to give busy families discounts every month?"
 - No, because it will undermine our financial health as an organization.
- "Can we be transparent about this discount to all families?"
 - No, because we cannot afford to give discounts to everyone.

■ "Is this an efficient/effective decision?"

- No, because we have already asked three different administrators their opinion as to whether or not we should make an exception.

■ "Is this a healthy way to steward the organization?"

- No, because it creates unfairness in our overall relationship with families and undermines our organizational integrity.

The values lens helps us say No (and Yes) in ways that support the long-term stewardship of the organization, while giving leadership the ability to focus on more strategic issues.

JH: I love this way of thinking!

Aligning Decision Making with Values

MC: Having a decision-making process that aligns with your values is so essential. This relates to the culture that a leader nurtures, as well as the systems established that allow everyone to function effectively with these values. I'd love to hear some examples of what you've seen in these areas of organizational culture and systems that create sustainability.

JH: What stands out so clearly when you ask this question, Margie, is how a leader's dedication to values-driven practice should show up in every aspect of the organization. At our program, Epiphany Early Learning Preschool, for example, every staff meeting, new initiative, or difficult decision is navigated within the acknowledged context of shared values. Even a proposal to create a monthly newsletter was met first with "How does this support our shared values?"

Last year, I even witnessed the interim director, Carmen D'Arcangelo, at

Hilltop Children's Center where Liddy works, dismantle their lucrative annual auction event because, while it raised sufficient funds for the organization, it did not simultaneously support the values of the organization or prove sustainable. Instead, every year the auction totally drained the staff and parent community. Carmen sought out expertise to transform the funding model into a more sustainable funding infrastructure that was aligned with the center's values. Their new annual appeal model was wildly successful. This new model engaged the entire parent community and networks outside of the school into conversations about the values they hold dear about the school. And, surprisingly they raised substantially more funds than any of the prior annual auction events!

This values-based leadership is so powerful because it yields professional and organizational development that is aligned with the deepest core values of the staff's practice with children and families. Subsequently, staff insight, wisdom, and imagination fuel the growth of the center and reaffirm their deepest professional purpose. The culture becomes one of shared ownership. What this leadership has created is refreshingly transparent and regenerative in a way I'm not used to seeing in the field of Early Childhood. In place of the fragmentation that can pervade the staff in an ECE organization, there is a rigorous and joyful focus on the children and families, professional collegiality, and the values that bring everyone together at the center. Hard, purposeful work that can be sustained.

Developing Focus and Expertise

LW: Part of the reason we were able to accomplish this values-based shift in our fundraising model was because our interim director, Carmen, brought in a fundraising expert who was willing to work with us at a low, nonprofit rate. Indeed, through her extensive network in various fields, Carmen has helped shift the culture

on our administrative team to an expertise-based model. Previously, our team had worked hard to know as much about each other's jobs as possible in order to be ready and able to answer any question a parent, teacher, or licensor might ask at any time. This practice led to a feeling of being spread thin and unable to focus satisfactorily on the work before us. As we've moved from the idea of service to the idea of stewardship, we now have a different level of focus and expertise in our own jobs. We no longer set the expectation that any person in the office can answer any question. Instead, we each focus on our work so that we can become experts in whatever we're doing, whether it's supervising and supporting educators, accounting, curriculum support, enrollment, or long-term strategic planning. We have the right people in the right jobs and, when our team can't fill a need (i.e., technological or fundraising expertise), we go to our community networks to find experts who can help us. We still have an enormous amount of work to do, but our ability to hone in on the specific focus of our job has resulted in more time, space, and energy to build sustainable systems and infrastructure for the community.

MC: In order for leaders to work in this way, it seems they need to acquire a knowledge base that goes beyond management skills. I'm thinking of things like knowing how to do values clarification, understanding systems thinking, effective communication strategies, and what Julie keeps reminding us about having social-emotional intelligence in working with individuals and group dynamics.

JH: Indeed, Margie. This question brings me back to that almost nebulous skill-set that impressive leaders seem to have with what I want to call social/emotional intelligence — the ability to encompass a rich network of relationships into a vision and value set with

clarity, shared ownership, and trust. Included here is the skill of bringing clarity to communications with reflective listening and checks for understanding. Also, making specific investments in authentic relationships where there are appropriate boundaries and a commitment to having the hard conversations that build trust and accountability. I find that good leaders have an incredible social-emotional intelligence toolkit that helps them make any conversation or endeavor *personal*, where you undoubtedly feel heard and seen; but it can also be *not personal* because it's always about something bigger — a vision—that you're a part of and creating together.

LW: I've noticed that one of the most important skill-sets that Carmen has brought to our school is identifying, reinforcing, and managing that invisible infrastructure of values-based decision making, emotionally intelligent practices, and individual accountability that sets the tone for the rest of the community. Working on our emotional intelligence and communication skills as a community of adults was a priority for our past executive director, Meg. Carmen's leadership has taken the foundation of Meg's work and used it to build values-based administrative systems that we now use in handling human resources' issues or in tricky parent situations. In addition, we are continuing to hone our emotional intelligence skills as a larger community so that we can all engage in them as needed.

Continually Developing New Leadership

MC: Obviously, every early childhood program needs a leadership team to incorporate the different kinds of skill sets that programs need, including business skills, human resources skills, and pedagogical skills that focus on the teaching and learning process. This dream team doesn't just land on your doorstep. You have to be continually mentoring new leadership in the organization.

LW: To your point about capacity and mentoring new leadership, we have initiated a "Step Up Leaders Program." The intention of the Step Up program is to offer a structure for faculty who have an innovative idea and who want to take leadership in bringing that idea to fruition. It's an avenue for educators to have the opportunity to develop or hone certain skill sets, actualize projects they've been dreaming about for years, and learn about different aspects of the organization. This Step Up program contributes to a culture in which everyone can become a leader inside and out of the organization. Examples so far include a retooling of the transition process for our youngest children and their families into our center, a remodel to bring our office space into values alignment with the rest of the organization, and organizing our annual Advocacy Day.

The Step Up program allows educators (and parents they might partner with on projects) the chance to lead with their expertise, whether from working with children or additional skills and passions they might have. I think it's important to remember that within an organization there is the capacity for focused expertise from everyone on the faculty: educators and administrators alike. Leaders are at their best when they cultivate that expertise and bring it to serve the values and vision of the organization. This cultivation also requires knowing where there is a shortage of a particular expertise within an organization and being able to say, 'We don't know the best way to do this' and then bringing in resources to help you learn.

JH: What Liddy says about recognizing expertise and cultivating capacity to serve the organization seems essential in juggling this complex reality we face in early childhood. Leading a center requires an almost inhuman range of talent. You need that 'dream team,' whether in a stand-alone center or a shared services organization. When you cultivate leadership in your staff, the director can focus on the organizational leadership that is unique to his or

her job. Our director, Julie, for example, has mentored into leadership roles two teachers with tremendous expertise who, in addition to their work with a group of children, now collaboratively take the helm of pedagogical leadership in the organization. I've come to understand that when staff leadership and professional collegiality are core organizational values, you build an organization that moves beyond the realm of the day-to-day. You build the dream team that regularly catalyzes the growth of everyone in the organization, a team that can then begin to take on (and contribute to) the bigger educational perplexities that inform our work with children, like social justice or equality of educational opportunity.

Some Final Thoughts

MC: I'd like to summarize some of the important points you both have made about the elements of leadership for sustainability:

- Working with a vision, clarifying the values you want to work with.
- Creating an organizational culture and aligning decision-making systems to support your values.
- Developing a leadership team with a clear job focus and expertise for each.
- Finding outside expertise to help develop your leadership skills.
- Providing continuous leadership development opportunities for all staff.

JH: I'd like to add some thoughts from Parker Palmer that I think are relevant here:

"If we want to take on big tasks like love and mercy and justice — the tasks that we're neglecting in our democracy right now — we need another standard by which to measure our actions. And I think that standard is faithfulness. I don't mean anything high and mighty by that. I mean: am I faithful to the gifts that I possess, to the strengths and abilities that I bring to the world? Am I faithful to the needs I see around me? Am I faithful to those points at which I intersect the needs of the world and have a chance to serve?"

LW: I love that quote, Julie! It really sums up what we've been talking about, in terms of leaders staying values-focused and clear on what each of us brings to the work.

MC: So, perhaps another bullet point in my summary above is 'remaining faithful to yourself, others, and the vision you serve.' This is the kind of thinking we need to stretch ourselves into. If our early childhood organizations were led in this way, I think we'd realize not only new levels of sustainability, but the opportunity to be catalysts for larger social change in our communities.

References

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"Everything Has Changed — Helping Staff through Transition and Organizational Change"
by Meg McNulty