

A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

Photos taken at Exchange Action Forum on Early Childhood Leadership at NAEYC

You know the feeling. You have an idea and you set it in motion. But you don't always know where it will take you. That's how the Exchange Leadership Initiative began. We wanted to focus attention on identifying and supporting the leaders themselves; now we are beginning to see the impact of this Initiative unfold.

Emerging Leaders created a powerful networking, brainstorming experience in November at NAEYC that has an energy of its own. And when the Master Leaders gathered for a group photo in Orlando, they held hands. The powerful learning from these two stories is that leaders need each other — there is joy, energy, and strength in leading in community. The work of *Exchange* and the many organizations that have joined us — and others who will join us — is to build and sustain this community of leaders.

To leaders, themselves, I say:

- This is your day. Your time is now. We need each of you to see your own leadership potential and to develop your strengths.
- This is a good time for early childhood.

For a very long time there was little change, but things are happening. Candidates are talking, new initiatives are planned and in progress, people are engaged in discussions about brain research and about quality programs for young children. Ideas and actions are bubbling up, but effective, real change will take leadership.

You are needed to lead the change. Managing is about doing things right, but leadership is about doing the right things.



With all that is happening right now — money, interest, programs — determining what the right things are is the task of leadership. It's up to you!



We need leaders who . . .

- understand children and families.
- can negotiate and advocate at the local, state, national, and global levels.
- know how to involve small businesses and corporations.
- are skilled at pushing at all levels and in all roles.
- are connected at the community level where the best problem solving happens.
- understand that leadership is all about relationships.
- are asking the big questions about what children and families need here and now and how they are going to get it.
- embrace a whole-systems perspective as they tackle challenges and opportunities.
- take the time to reflect on their leadership practice and to get feedback regularly.



Representatives from the ELI Master Leaders gather for an impromptu photo at NAEYC

- hold on to humility and gratitude, acknowledging the shoulders they stand on and the many who form the community of success.

It's time for societal change. States and communities are different. But family child care, Head Start, and center care share key strengths and mission and are all adaptive to those differences. So, adaptive thinkers, advocates, leaders are needed to direct the change. We are excited to work together and to discover the hard exciting knowledge that will guide us.

We need you to accept the responsibilities that come with being recognized as a leader. We need you to be strong and we need you to make wise choices about what is important and where you are leading us.

Choose children. You have obviously chosen to make your life about children and families. Don't ever lose sight of your mission. Don't let the noise distract you from what really matters. Being a leader FOR children involves spending time WITH children. If you become too far removed from the day-to-day of being with children, you can easily lose sight of the focus and spirit of our work.

Choose integrity. You can't have integrity some of the time. Never compromise your ethics. You will know what is right and what is righteous. Let your heart guide you, take the heat of your choice, and cherish your own integrity. Remember that how we do things is as important as what we do. Put children and families first and never apologize for doing so.

Choose courage. Have you always had courage? If not, when did you become brave enough to stand up, stand for, stand with? Give voice to your principles. Playing it safe takes us in circles and never forward. Engage in the challenging conversations. Don't take the easy road. Become known by your beliefs and your actions. Reach beyond

professional boundaries to broaden and deepen the expertise of advocates for children and families.

Choose diversity. Recognize the opportunities and value the richness that lie in diversity. Seek out people who think, look, and live differently from you and engage with them. This will stretch your thinking and provoke greater understanding of the issues. As Marian Wright Edelman and Margie Carter have each counseled me: If you do not find yourself in the midst of a diverse community, go out and find it. This is where you will find your opportunity to grow.

Choose grit. We need to acknowledge that it's not always easy to be a leader. There's a heady joy to being on the front line of change, but leadership comes with times of challenge and adversity. Never give up. When the going gets tough, get tougher. Persistence, perseverance will make the difference.

Choose joy. There are great moments to celebrate when you are doing what you believe in and you are doing it the best way you can. Each day holds opportunities for joy and even little private celebrations fuel commitment.

Exchange takes pride in our work of creating a process for recognizing and developing leadership in early care and education. We are excited to see where this Initiative takes all of us and to share the future with such bold, visionary, determined advocates for children and families.

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