

Growing a Multi-site Organization

by Chad Dunkley

This article is an excerpt from the new Exchange book
The Art of Leadership — Leading Early Childhood Organizations.
 To learn more about this series, go to www.ChildCareExchange.com/aol

*“Don’t tell people how to do things.
 Tell them what to do and let them
 surprise you with their results.”*

George S. Patton

My mom opened a preschool classroom in a church in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, 45 years ago. I was an enrolled student in one of our first classrooms. I became an employee about 25 years ago. Then, I became a parent and a customer of our programs. Today, I have the privilege of leading this organization as Chief Executive Officer. Over the last 45 years, I watched our organization flourish from that classroom to over 70 child care centers, caring for nearly 10,000 children per day in multiple states. In fact, we have become the largest provider in the state of Minnesota.



Chad Dunkley
 2015 Exchange Emerging Leader
www.ChildCareExchange.com/leadership



Chad Dunkley is Chief Executive Officer for New Horizon Academy and Kinderberry Hill. He oversees operations, marketing, strategy, and finance, and drives the culture of “continuous improvement” at all New

Horizon and Kinderberry Hill locations. Chad received his J.D. from William Mitchell College of Law and his B.A. in management from Hamline University. Chad is President of the Minnesota Child Care Association (MCCA), on the governing board of The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and on the board and executive committee of The Early Care and Education Consortium (ECEC).

When you picture a large child care organization, you may see a small group of ambitious individuals sitting around a table developing plans to build an organization with a great number of locations. But the truth is, most multi-site providers grew organically because they provided outstanding child care and earned a great reputation in their community. Their programs often grew because they no longer had the capacity in one program to meet the demand for their service. This leads to the opening of another program and then as that program becomes successful, another program. That’s how we have ended up with some of the most significant multi-site providers in the country.

As with any industry, a key risk for multi-site providers is that once an organization succeeds, you must still make consistent adjustments and improvements to reflect best practices and stay on top of the current research. Multi-site organizations can quickly grow stale if staff become complacent rather than focusing on building a culture of change in the organization. We have watched many mighty providers in the field grow and thrive, and then go through a stage in which they are less successful. In fact, some

multi-site providers have actually gone out of business or been acquired by organizations with more resources.

How Managing a Multi-site Organization is Different

When you direct one program, your program can be led by your individual passion for the job and your credibility. You can personally show your commitment to your families and your staff each day during frequent interactions. Many individual centers make parents feel very much a part of the center’s family.

As you transition into multiple programs, it’s about building systems of credibility that others can execute. It’s taking management from a coach who is interacting daily with her players to someone who is a mentor and has less direct control over daily occurrences and situations. This is where delegation and empowerment come into play.

A number of years ago, because of our growth, we took on two new district managers. We selected two individuals who were terrific center directors and moved them into multi-site management positions. As they were devel-

oping in their first year and transitioning into their new roles, they had to learn how to lead in a very different way. The most important lesson they needed to learn was how to delegate responsibility to others and learn to lead by influence. They also needed to learn that each leader has a slightly different management style. Leading people who are leading others requires different skills than leading people directly. They also needed to learn to inspire and motivate at a different level. The leader needs to help people believe in the organization as a whole, not just in a handful of charismatic individuals.

Early childhood programs often have the personality of the leader on-site. When you transition to a multi-site leader, you must learn where you can allow flexibility in leadership and where you must require consistency of leadership. As a multi-site manager, you have to expect consistent program implementation, but you can certainly leave some flexibility for an individual teacher's creativity. As a multi-site manager, you certainly need to have fiscal policies as well as policies around health and safety that are consistently enforced. As you manage multiple site programs, you are often only as good as the reputation of your worst performing program. Word of mouth in the early childhood industry is still the most important way to either make a program successful or lead it to failure.

One significant role for a multi-site manager or leader is to find and build systems that can produce consistent quality and customer service. Those systems need to be able to function without the daily interaction of its owner or leader. The difficult balance is finding a way to create this quality and consistency without taking away

individual creativity by classroom teachers or center directors.

Best Practices in Multi-site Management

Over the years I have found that successful multi-site leaders exhibit certain strengths:

They articulate a vision. The leader must have a clear mission and vision for the organization, overall, and the ability to communicate that vision in an articulate and passionate manner. Everyone has to keep the same goal in mind, no matter where individual centers are located. The organization's mission and vision need to be revisited on a consistent basis, adjusted for current market conditions and relevancy, if needed, and then communicated again to everyone on the team.

They clarify expectations. The organization must have a clear understanding and a precise set of expectations regarding every aspect of center operation: curriculum implementation, health and safety policies and procedures, employee relations, and financial accounting. There must be specific practices to monitor compliance and an established training protocol to ensure consistency.

They are master communicators. Communication is absolutely essential to the success of a multi-unit organization. Employees must know whom to contact when questions arise, and it's essential that common issues and solutions be shared across the group of centers. Successful multi-unit managers also need to know (sometimes instinctively) what must be communicated on a more global basis, and what should be handled on an individual or regional basis.

They recruit talent. The ability to select strong talent is very important.

The multi-unit manager must know what skills, qualities, credentials, and experiences will most likely lead to success, both for the individual and the organization. With that said, it's also very important to add individuals with diverse strengths to the team.

They develop talent. The ability to develop and reward strong talent is equally important. There should be systems in place to help individuals grow in their profession, gain confidence with taking on new challenges, and understand the vital role they play in the overall success of the organization. A reward system should offer compensation and recognition for individual and organizational achievements.

They delegate responsibility. A multi-unit manager must be able to effectively delegate. This helps team members grow and share in the responsibility for success, and allows the multi-unit manager the ability to keep an eye on the big picture and focus on more global issues. When I've seen multi-unit managers struggle, it's often because they feel like they must solve every problem, tackle every challenge, and manage the minute details of every project. It's simply not feasible, nor does this develop strong, confident location managers.

They build alliances. Strong multi-unit managers know how to network within the profession and build alliances that will help their organization and the entire field find success. They are members of professional organizations, stay active in trade associations, and know how to use these affiliations to look objectively at the opportunities and challenges of the organization they lead.

They develop themselves. The best multi-unit managers continue to develop themselves. They seek out opportunities for professional and personal growth,

and serve as role models for the team they lead.

They connect staff. It's important to incorporate opportunities for staff to gather to build connections. If it's possible, gather as a group to talk about the shared mission and vision of your multi-site program. Also important is to create opportunities to participate together in trainings, social engagements, and service projects.

They connect with families. Multi-site programs should have good communication systems and family connections. Communication systems and family connections are especially valued when the organization faces what may be termed a 'significant event.' Anything newsworthy, both positive and negative or challenging, can affect not just the individual center, but also the entire organization.

In early childhood, just like in any business, sometimes those who start the business as entrepreneurs are stuck in the mindset that they need to control all of the details and decisions. As a company grows, you have to trust those around you and believe they are capable of making good decisions, or even better decisions than you could in certain circumstances. As you grow in an organization, you have the ability to hire specialty expertise in areas that may not be yours. Growing to multiple sites can be an exciting, but difficult challenge; but I know from my own journey that I wouldn't have it any other way.

