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what you were not taught about presiding over a board!

by Eve-Marie Arce

"And the next board president is . . ."

Hearing my name announced, I paradoxically reacted with delight and fear. *I will preside as the board president.* My immediate reaction wobbled between, "What did I get myself into?" and the essence of a quote from Eleanor Roosevelt, "You must do the thing you think you cannot do."

It is normal for us to wonder whether or not we are prepared, especially when we assume a leadership position. It is also common to question our skills, readiness, and knowledge. I most definitely questioned, "Am I prepared?" "What do I know?" "What did I learn?" and, more



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Children and as an NAEYC Affiliate Council Member. Her varied experiences began in 1967 as a Head Start teacher and include college teaching, program administration, and consultancies. She co-directed a university lab school and coordinated the implementation of nine college child development centers. A television parenting series and conference presentations offered continuing opportunities to extend community awareness about children, diversity, and professionalism. She holds a BA in Child Development, a MA in Early Childhood Education and Human/Family Development and an EdD in Organizational Leadership. She edited a reader and authored *Curriculum for Young Children: An Introduction* (Delmar, 2000).

emphatically, "What I did not learn about presiding over a board?" Formal education does not necessarily improve preparedness because, until recently, training programs had not included early childhood leadership content.

Regardless of your professional preparation for a leadership role, you actually operationalized the process when you set your career in motion. By becoming an effective professional, you cultivated capabilities such as negotiation and communication skills. You improved your ability to facilitate programs by successfully organizing services for children and their families. You influenced important programmatic and curriculum decisions everyday. And you recognized that professionally you are influencing decision makers. All are critical and meaningful components of leadership.

Association leadership encompasses a range of obligations. A board of directors is responsible for establishing the vision, mission, and goals of an organization or agency. The board president will lead the board of directors through processes to facilitate the organization's platform. The manager, or executive director, supports efforts of the president and the board of directors. The board is responsible for ensuring that program activities and

projects align with the group's foundational stand, its bylaws, and established policies. Ensuring that the board successfully meets their obligations can be a daunting responsibility for any new leader. However, applying your capabilities more broadly you will expand your scope of influence. In this way you will strengthen your leadership platform and influence the outcome of vital decisions which will in turn make your term successful.

Discussion about successful leadership often leads to topics relating to innovation. Successful organizations boast innovative cultures. They also adapt more quickly to change. Success occurs because their leaders and board of directors support and value teamwork. Daniel Levi, a professor of psychology and human development, emphasizes, "Teams improve both the efficiency and the quality of organizational performance" (2001; 266, 288). In early care and education, we are familiar with this premise. We are more efficient and productive when we work together.

The message from Jim Collins, *Good to Great and Built to Last*, applies to our association and organizational business as well. His findings outline the remarkable features of nonprofit organizations and agencies. After three years of study, the

Measures of Success Task Force identified applicable measures of success that can be useful to the early child care and education field. In fact, most early childhood programs will recognize several measures as they relate to what we routinely incorporate into our operations. Collins recommended that successful leaders build a culture that directly aligns services with the program's mission. Another measure of success, gathering and applying information, boasts a core principle of early childhood. Success requires organizations to gather, analyze, and base decisions on what they have learned. The other four measures discuss dialogue, visionary thinking, responsiveness to change, and alliance building. All the measures are compatible with our early care and education values.

The measures of success are not beyond our professional attainment even though we face increasingly more complex challenges. For example, membership is changing and so are the preferences of our membership. They request different venues for meetings and offer varied and different reasons for sustaining their affiliation. Membership enrollment numbers in many organizations change. Larger groups are not necessarily better positioned because they place an association at risk for reduced personal relationships. In contrast, demand for more rapid information with less travel increases interaction through Internet, conference calling, and virtual groups. Other challenges facing early care and education include increased program specialization, varied funding sources, and greater multiplicity of regulations. The challenges and predictable changes demand flexible and visionary leadership supporting collaboration and teamwork.

I am pleased to have served as a member of a team for my association. I only wish that experience and knowledge came with the phone call announcing election results. Regrettably it does not work that

way. Yet, I was fortunate to be pursuing studies in organizational leadership in tandem with my second year as president-elect and first year as president. Reflecting on those four years, I can identify several actions that would have more effectively facilitated my leadership as a board president. The ten tips are reflectively shared for your consideration as you preside over your board of directors.

Guiding Tip 1: *Acknowledge that presiding over a board of directors is a humbling experience.* Most of us are not prepared to assume the top position because our formal education did not include political and advocacy training. We gained information about child development and early childhood education. We have learned about assessment, curriculum and guidance, and early childhood program administration. We studied family dynamics and community related services. Even though some teacher training programs that include courses in administration and supervision, leadership coverage is often limited to staff development and interaction with parents.

Educators value training and at the same time we honor experience. Too often experience is the only method for gaining specific leadership skills. Is this enough? In my own association there was discussion about reducing the two-year term for the position of president-elect to one year. I am grateful that this change did not occur. I needed every day of the two years. I could not and will not recommend reducing the president-elect tenure.

Guiding Tip 2: *Accept responsibility for everyone and every action.* It is overwhelming to accept the responsibility for all the mistakes and problems of the association. As the leader, you must do so. You will also be the leader when actions achieve positive outcomes. Consider identifying what is really

important to you as a leader. What matters to you professionally? Another approach that may ensure that actions develop appropriately is to seek expertise. This is especially critical in business management related issues. There are association management consultants and companies whose primary purpose is to facilitate the operation of associations. Bringing in both a management consultant and an association management company may have been the most important actions I took as president. The management company offered collaborative and resource sharing strategies to deliver the services and member benefits that were important to our organization.

Guiding Tip 3: *Remain focused on the association's mission.* Again and again experts in business and intuitional management recommend that we remain intentionally focused on the mission of our associations. Too often this does not happen resulting in board

Top Ten Tips to Know About Presiding Over a Board

1. Acknowledge that presiding over a board is a humbling experience.
2. Accept responsibility for everyone and every action.
3. Remain focused on the association's mission.
4. Honor the board members and their participation.
5. Welcome opportunities for collaborative leadership.
6. Learn the fiduciary responsibilities of the board.
7. Avoid easy, quick fixes to challenges.
8. Identify a mentor for yourself and remain in contact.
9. Cultivate new and diverse leaders during your term.
10. Accept the rewards of the experience without regret.

conflict and disillusionment among members. Early care and education professionals have extraordinary core values and principles. Continue checking your focus to ensure that the activity and proposed policies align with the mission and goals.

Guiding Tip 4: *Honor the board members and their participation.* Board members are individuals with personal and interpersonal needs. It has already been noted that we are more effective when we work together. We do this successfully when group cohesiveness exists — another common characteristic of our profession. We do this well with children because we team teach, we collaborate with parents, and we interact with community agencies. Transfer these abilities to your interaction with the board of directors, honoring them with the same effective relational strategies. Encourage members of the board to connect and network. Arrange opportunities to affirm and validate their volunteer time and efforts. Understand that change may be difficult because change, although necessary and normal, may need time and rationale. Support your board of directors' participation and presentation of ideas, comments, and input.

Guiding Tip 5: *Welcome opportunities for collaborative leadership.* Approach your board of directors with an attitude filled with references to 'ours and we.' Today's management methodology promotes focus on the benefits of 'bottom-up' management. Management in this way embraces our collaborative skills. This team approach encourages communication and creates trust for the outcome of open dialogue. Give feedback to work groups and sub-committees even when their ideas are not implemented. Everyone's voice is important and, as the board president, you are in the prime seat to recognize the contributions of members and to

validate all of their voices. In turn, the members of the board will become more receptive to hearing the voices of membership.

Guiding Tip 6: *Learn the fiduciary responsibilities of the board.* Members of the board of directors, and especially the president, are entrusted by the membership to make fiscal decisions that carry out the mission, goals, and bylaws of the association. You will accomplish and meet this responsibility most effectively by keeping fiscal issues transparent and accountable. Board members make important decisions. Therefore, it is prudent as president for you to provide them with realistic and appropriate information, enabling them to act responsibly and carry out their leadership duties.

Guiding Tip 7: *Avoid easy, quick fixes to challenges.* Fast and easy decisions leave an association vulnerable for bigger problems in the future. Question what is really needed and how that need meets the mission of the organization. Strategic planning is important yet only works when an action plan is realistic and developed collaboratively with staff, management, and the board of directors. Map the future and reassess that plan periodically.

Guiding Tip 8: *Identify a mentor for yourself and remain in contact.* You need a colleague who will listen, remain supportive, and help you reflect on your actions. Ideally a person who has served in a similar position is beneficial as 'your listening colleague.' Your mentor should be able to stimulate and encourage your own growth as a leader. Learning as much as you can about association management surely will contribute to your discovering different answers to what was thought to be conventional wisdom. Collins' study did not prove or disprove previously held notions about nonprofit management. For example, it is not the size of the

board that makes the difference, rather boards that function strategically instead of operationally tended to be those rated as 'remarkable.'

Guiding Tip 9: *Cultivate new and diverse leaders during your term.* Bring new and diverse individuals to serve on your board committees. This may lead to the most influential legacy you can contribute as a board president. Positioning new and diverse leaders offers long-lasting possibilities for the association. With a 'can do' attitude welcome the energy that comes with innovative and creative ideas. You will empower your membership and advocacy because your board becomes inclusive.

Guiding Tip 10: *Accept the rewards of the experience without regret.* Remain mindful throughout your tenure that you are professionally committed with desire to positively impact the lives of children. The political and fiscal challenges are realities. Accept the challenges and changes as topics rather than consuming, chaotic problems. You will be pleased with yourself.

Look back at the *Top Ten Tips to Know About Presiding Over a Board*. Appreciate and embrace the leadership skills you employ everyday as a director or manager of an early childhood program. Apply these same skills to a leadership role on a board of directors. Explore the rationale behind your commitment as you accept responsibilities for all the board actions. Sustain the mission, vision, and goals of your association. Honor the members and individuals with confirmation and validation. Welcome ideas and input from all levels of the association. Acquire information about board fiduciary responsibilities. Avoid quick fixes to challenges. Accept support from a mentor. And, lastly cultivate diverse leaders to ensure effective leadership as the board president. Your leadership

commitment will ultimately be rewarding and allow you to admirably respond to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s statement, "Life's most urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"

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