

The Paradoxes of Leadership

by Bonnie and Roger Neugebauer

In the past 20 years, we have had the opportunity to observe hundreds upon hundreds of leaders in action in child care centers. In addition, we have had 20 years to develop our leadership on the job as we struggled, sailed, failed, and succeeded in growing **Child Care Information Exchange**. From all of these experiences, we have learned a few things about the paradoxes of leadership.

Paradox #1

You need to enjoy your work, but you can't avoid the uglies.

Pop psychologists are forever advising "if you're in a job you don't like, get out of it." Easy for them to say. For many people, finding a fun job is simply not an option — there are simply not enough Ben and Jerry's taste tester jobs to go around.

However, for nearly everyone, there are parts of one's job that are enjoyable and parts that are wretched, parts that are stimulating and parts that are boring. In a perfect world, you would be able to delegate the drudge jobs and hold on to the exciting ones.

Unfortunately, this is not a perfect world. While there are many mundane tasks you, the center director, can delegate, there are certain ugly ones that you can't give away, ignore, or avoid. If you listen to the

pop psychologists and only attend to the things you enjoy, you're setting your organization up for disaster.

If you don't fire a lousy teacher, her continuing presence will demotivate other teachers and deprive the children of the experiences they deserve. If you hate writing grant proposals, you may miss an opportunity to attract employer support for your center.

Your best bet is to get the ugly jobs out of the way right away. If you procrastinate on the uglies, even when you are working away at jobs you enjoy, this pleasure will be spoiled by the knowledge that the ugly work is still out there. So eat your cauliflower fast, then sit back and enjoy the Cherries Garcia.

Paradox #2

The more staff strive to protect you, the more they hurt you.

Many of us seem to have this need to take care of everyone. We want everyone to be happy, satisfied, productive, supported, connected. It takes a lot of time and energy to Mother Hen the world, but we do it because we need to.

So when the tables turn and staff want to take care of us, it can feel pretty good. It's certainly great to know that others are noticing when we are overburdened, that they see the magnitude of our responsibilities, that they are sensitive to the fact that a piece of

information or news might *put us over the top*.

Though done with the best of intentions (of course this could also be done with less positive motivation), this protective behavior will ultimately prove harmful. There will be information missing, holes in the big picture — and this will hinder the effectiveness of your decision making. If you don't know that two staff members are not getting along, that a parent is upset about a staff comment, that the key to the storage unit is missing, that you are running out of peanut butter, things will fall apart when these specifics would inform your decision making.

Staff need to understand that you, as director, need to know everything. Their motivations for protection can be acknowledged and appreciated, while the act of protection can be firmly, continually rejected. Perhaps staff can learn to deliver the bad news with a gentle touch or a chocolate chip cookie (or would we come to fear cookies?).

Paradox #3

When you are most discouraged, you need to be most motivated.

Art Dronen, Roger's high school track coach, had only one piece of advice for all of us would-be heroes — "Ya gotta wanna." We, of course, treated this as trite nonsense. Decades later, Roger now sees that Art was a wise man.

His wisdom is best exemplified in the world of sports where typically athletes' success will in large part be determined by their determination to succeed. We all remember the Swiss female Olympic marathoner

who stumbled into the Los Angeles Coliseum totally exhausted. She staggered wildly and painfully about the oval, waving off the assistance of her coaches. Finally, she stumbled across the finish line and fell unconscious into the arms of a race official. She had been training for ten years to complete an Olympic marathon, and when her body gave out in total exhaustion 400 yards from the finish line, her sheer determination kept her going until her mission was accomplished.

While center directors are seldom cheered on by a spirited crowd of 100,000, they do frequently demonstrate amazing feats of perseverance. In fact, it is in the very nature of the director's job to be confronted, on an almost daily basis, with daunting challenges — replacing sick teachers at 6 AM, dealing with an accusation of child abuse, juggling cash flow when reserves are depleted, finding a way to get children home from a field trip when the bus breaks down. Confronted with such frustrations, many directors throw in the towel — they either quit or quit caring.

The directors who succeed, and go on to manage the best programs, are those who don't cave in when the going gets tough, those who are determined, against all odds, to maintain a focus on delivering quality services. These directors have a "Ya gotta wanna" attitude that consistently carries them to the finish line.

Paradox #4

To accomplish the most serious results, you need to believe in the value of whimsy.

Never underestimate the value of humor. Why did laughter get the

bad rap for indicating lack of seriousness, slacking off? Our staff meetings are great fun. When an outsider overhears the tone of our meetings, he or she will usually comment with something like: "There was so much laughing going on. How do you get anything done?"

It is the laughter that binds us together, that creates an environment and a sense of teamwork that enables people to share their joys and sorrows, as well as their frustrations and needs. People who can laugh at and with each other, trust each other.

Consider the staff meeting when we were in our usual stories with laughter mode and Roger arrived a bit late and announced: "We have a lot of work to get done today, so we'll just chit chat for a few more minutes and then get down to it." Suddenly, no one had anything to say. We just sat around and ate our lunch and talked through the issues of the day. Laughter was minimized as was the amount of work accomplished.

A playful approach to life issues, whether personal or professional, fosters creative potential, reduces stress, and just makes living a whole lot better.

Paradox #5

The longer you work, the less you are appreciated.

You were hired as director when the center was in the red and struggling to survive. You slashed expenditures to the bone, cracked down on late payments, built up enrollment, and got the center on the right track. Then you steadied the course when

a disgruntled former teacher started spreading nasty false rumors; you kept the center going through a flu epidemic; and you even kept things afloat when a glitzy new center opened across the street.

Now you've been on the job 12 years and the center is running as smooth as can be. You naturally assume that, with all your heroic accomplishments in the past, you have a vast store of good will and credibility built up. Then you have to fire a popular teacher for valid reasons, but reasons you can't share with the staff. The teachers revolt and call for your resignation.

What happened to all that credibility? Since you single-handedly saved the center time and time again, why can't they give you the benefit of the doubt now?

The problem is that organizations have short memories. Given normal turnover, many of your teachers weren't even around when you were leaping tall buildings in a single bound. And those who were around, now that times are easier, tend to forget how stressful life was in the past. As a matter of fact, the longer your center sails along smoothly, the more staff may think your job has become a slam dunk, even though it is your brilliant management that is responsible for the good times.

Don't be too harsh on staff for their fickleness. Maybe you are contributing to the problem. Isn't it possible that after all those years of major stress, now you are content to settle into a mode of management that is steadying the course? Just maybe you've become a bit stodgy — reluctant to rock the boat, to try new ventures, to listen to new ideas, to tolerate parents or staff who don't fit a certain profile.

Longevity and credibility don't go hand in hand. Don't ever assume that you have so much good will built up that you can rest on your laurels. The relevant question is: "What have you done for the center and all its players lately that earns their appreciation?"

Paradox #6

Everyone's your friend when things are going well, but your true friends stand by you in the tough times.

When a crisis rears its ugly head, it is your support system that will save you. We have been rescued on many occasions by the concern and response of our friends — and that might very well include you.

Friends are not, in this case, the people who come up with all the platitudes: "This is really good for you." "Every cloud has a silver lining." "Everything works out in the end." People who say such things provide comfort and cry with you (or drive you crazy), but they don't pull you through.

Friends in crisis are the people who really put themselves into your problem, who put their minds and hearts into understanding where you are and what options you have. They are the people who say, "Have you tried . . . ?" "Why wouldn't this work . . . ?" "If other people can do this, why can't you . . . ?" "Here's an idea that might work"

These are the people who will help you see your way out. They are the people who will expand the boundaries of your thinking, who will challenge you to use the skills you

possess (which they might also remind you of). Be sure you have such friends around you. They are honest and blunt — essential and beyond value.