

A Long-Time Director Retires

by Pat Sheppard and Pamela DuVall

How I managed the transition process

Imagine a dark rainy morning, common in Oregon in January, and a tired and discouraged child care director who really didn't want to face another day at the center. I wish I could say that this was a single occurrence, but as that winter progressed the days of getting up and going to work became harder. I was burnt out, over worked, and overwhelmed with what I perceived as only problems. I had lost my spark and I was not seeing opportunities — only barriers. I was no longer providing effective leadership for the center. It was clear that something needed to change. Was it time to move on and let someone younger, fresher, and more optimistic take my place?

This was a major personal and professional decision and it deserved serious thought and time. I took a vacation to a warm sunny island for three weeks and did a lot of thinking. I made lists of pros and cons, meditated, cried, and wrote pages about my experiences and thoughts. I returned home and spent more time in discussion with my partner and close friends. With their support I decided it was time for me to make a change and leave the center. When making a major change in your life, you have to imagine the next step, to begin the process of making the change. I could imagine my life after retiring from Educational Environments, Inc. (EEI). More importantly I could see a brighter future for the center.

Managing this transition was a very large task and I needed help. I hired Peg Allison, a business consultant, who is also a longtime friend. I asked her to help me design a transition plan that would meet my goals of retiring and leaving the center in as strong a position as possible. Whether you hire a consultant or not, I strongly urge you to consult with someone outside the center who can provide objective input into the transition process and keep you focused towards your goals.

Peg began our discussion by asking, "What do I want to have happen?" The answer to this question became the overall goal for the transition. My goal was to preserve the philosophy, values, and mission of the center, to leave EEI in a financially strong position, to maintain key employees, and to carry out a smooth successful transition.

The next big decision was who would take over. There is a phenomenon called "Founders Syndrome." In small businesses when a "founder" retires, the survival of the business is at great risk. There can be many reasons for this, including loss of vision, turmoil, and uncertainty. However, if a business can hire someone from within the organization, who is qualified to move into this leadership role, the business can maximize its chance of continuing to be successful.

I identified a potential leader, Pamela DuVall. Pamela had been at EEI for 11 years, starting as a parent volunteer, and had returned to school and had become a certified teacher. She had been the Kindergarten teacher for three years at EEI. She loved EEI and was committed to its mission and core values. She and I had worked together on special projects and I had great confidence that she would make an excellent director. What I didn't know was if she would be interested in giving up teaching to become the director of EEI.

Fortunately for EEI, she agreed to be trained for this position, with the goal of becoming school director within two years. Another key employee that was essential to this transition was Leah Foy. Leah was the administrative assistant and is



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This photo is from Pat's retirement party. The bench was a gift to honor her 33 years of commitment to EEI.

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responsible for day-to-day operations and keeps the center running smoothly. She and I had worked closely together for six years, and had developed a great rapport. This change was going to be very difficult for her. It was very important that she continue in her role and essential that she accept and actively participate in the transition process.

The transition process was launched. We formed a team consisting of Peg (our business consultant), Leah, Pamela, and myself. We began meeting on a regular basis in September 2001 and created a timeline that would allow me to retire in June 2003. This timeline had three phases that focused primarily on the transfer of leadership to Pamela over the next two school years.

In October 2001 I discussed my plans with the board of directors and asked for their advice, input, and suggestions regarding the transition process. I presented the timeline and an outline of the steps that would occur during this time. The board requested that I provide progress reports every six months and that I arrange for Pamela to attend the future board meetings. With the approval and support from the board, we were ready to start the real work of implementing the following transition plan:

- Develop a timeline.
- Communicate with staff about the transition.
- Decide who is responsible for what? Develop a matrix.
- Evaluate the organization. Use the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis.
- Develop a plan to address target areas identified for improvement.

Develop a timeline. The timeline should reflect the needs of the center, the retiring director, and the new director. In this situation, Pamela wanted to continue teaching part time for another year while she began learning some of the director duties. There were several unfinished projects that I wanted to complete as well. We all agreed that giving everyone more time to adjust and think about the transition would be beneficial. The timeline had three phases:

■ Phase I — September 2001 - August 2002

Pamela becomes Education Director and part of the administrative team with Pat and Leah. Build on the strengths of the organization and work to improve targeted areas.

■ Phase II — September 2002 - May 2003

Pamela becomes school director full time and continues her training. Pat works part time and finishes the special projects.

■ Phase III — June 2003

Pat retires and continues as a consultant and mentor. Pamela assumes full duties as the school director.

We developed an organization chart to clarify lines of authority for Phases II & III since there were changes in titles and responsibilities. This chart and the proposed timeline were shared with the board of directors, the staff, and the families.

Communicate with staff about the transition. This important step continued throughout the two years. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of communication. Staff needs to know what is going on and how it will affect them. Knowing that they will have a new boss in the future is very important, however they also need to know the little things, like who does payroll or sets staffing schedules. During teacher performance reviews, I asked teachers ahead of time if it was okay for Pamela to attend and observe the process. Providing information before things happen, asking for input, and listening to staff concerns were critical to maintaining good communications during the transition.

Develop a matrix. Decide who is responsible for what. We began by identifying all of the administrative functions of the center and the current responsibilities of each of us in detail. We created a column of categories and tasks on the left, and a column for Pat, Pamela, and Leah on the right. For example, under Personnel Issues the tasks included:

■ Day to day staffing decisions —

Pamela is key person for schedules, subs, and vacations.
Pat acts as resource.

Leah needs to be informed and helps problem solve.

■ Hiring, firing, and evaluations —

Pat continues to be responsible.

Pamela participates to learn the center's procedures.

Leah needs to be informed and provide input.

We addressed each task area, made decisions regarding responsibilities, and used the matrix as a guideline for the next year. The functional categories we used were: Personnel, Operations, Classroom, Kids, Parents, Financial, Marketing, Advertising, Community Relations, and Communications. The matrix listed each function and listed tasks under each of these functions. The matrix also defined primary responsibility for each task and who would be available for back up and support. After several meetings, we were confident that we had clearly defined who was responsible for what. This information was then shared with staff.

Evaluate the center by using the (SWOT) Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats analysis. We assessed the status of the center by asking, "What are the current strengths and weaknesses of the center and future opportunities and threats?" This provided a fairly complete picture of the status of the center. This exercise also provided an excellent opportunity for the management team to work together. We rewrote EEI's values and belief statements that support the mission. These statements became the standards for making decisions and brought about a greater unity during this challenging time.

From the SWOT exercise we identified five priorities to focus on. These became the strategies for the transition plan:

- Strategy for the transfer of leadership
- Strategy for staff recruitment and training
- Strategy for money
- Strategy for marketing
- Strategy for facility

We created a detail plan for accomplishing each strategy. For example, under the transfer of leadership, Pamela would move into Pat's office June 2002. Pat would set up an office at home to work on special projects. A new organizational chart was made and again we communicated this information to staff, board, and parents.

During the past year, I continued to mentor Pamela. I worked two days a week and took several long vacations. These became opportunities for Pamela to go it alone. Pamela, Leah, and I continued to meet twice a month, and Peg provided support as needed.

What I personally learned during this transition is that humans resist change with a vengeance. "Why do you have to leave?" was a question I was often asked. I spent a great amount of time supporting individuals, addressing their concerns, and listening with an open heart. I tried to help people understand and accept the transitions that were occurring and continue to support EEI.

During this time of supporting others, my insides were in turmoil too. I could not imagine how hard it would be to say goodbye and leave. As the time grew nearer, I had huge doubts. At one point I was hoping the transition would not work so that I would have to stay and rescue the center. I was not prepared for how much my identity and ego were enmeshed in EEI. It was a lesson in humility. I found that not only could someone do my job, but they could do it even better. I was no longer the key person. I experienced fear, worry, judgment, anger, frustration, and sadness.

As the time drew near, I called Peg in a panic. She reassured me that my emotions were normal and suggested I read a book by William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the most of change* (2003, Perseus Publishing). This book describes strategies for coping with the difficult, painful, and confusing times in your life. I highly recommend this book to anyone experiencing a major transition in their life such as divorce, retirement, loss of a spouse, changing of jobs, or losing a job. The book identifies processes that are common to all transitions. Bridges talks about three stages of transition:

- **Endings.** Recognize endings as opportunities as well as losses, and even celebrate them with rituals designed to open new doors.
- **The Neutral Zone.** In this seemingly unproductive time-out, we feel disconnected from the past and emotionally unconnected to the present. The most frightening stage of transition, The Neutral Zone, is really an important time for reorientation.
- **The New Beginning.** A successful transition requires more than preserving; it means launching new priorities and understanding the external and internal signs that point the way to your future.

Reading this book helped me understand the process each person at the center was going through as well as myself. I believe that EEI has also gone through these stages. The transition is now complete and the "new beginnings" for EEI, Pamela, and myself are underway. I am ready for those signs that point the way to the future.

In summary the important steps to retirement are to: plan, gather a team, create a timeline, communicate often, support the staff and families, evaluate the strengths of the center, develop strategies to make the center even better and finally celebrate with a great party.

June 28, 2003 was my retirement party. It was a joyous passage to celebrate the ending of a successful 33 year career in child care as director of Educational Environments, Inc.

References

Bridges, W. (2003). *Managing Transitions: Making the most of change* (2nd edition). Cambridge, MA : Perseus Publishing.

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The Transition from Pamela's side

I came to EEI as a parent in 1989. After a job closure, I began attending school. I then began working at EEI, first as a teacher in their afternoon child care program, and then as their school-age teacher. It was wonderful for me; I picked up my daughter (along with the other children), was able to work afternoons and go to school in the mornings. I received a Masters Degree in Teaching in June of 1997.

I loved EEI so much that I came back to teach kindergarten, giving up the opportunity to make more money and have a retirement plan. My husband and I talked in depth about what would ultimately bring me happiness and I chose EEI!

When Pat first came to me about the possibility of taking over as director, I was not ready. I had been teaching kindergarten for three years and loved it. I also did not believe that I was qualified for the job. Time went by. Pat approached me again. She was burning out and was deeply worried about bringing in a director from outside the school. That was when it hit me. Pat wanted to leave. That scared me. I began to contemplate the idea of being director. Again, my husband and I talked. What were the pros and cons? I was dedicated, hard working, and loved EEI. I had an understanding about educating children, but was I qualified to run a business?

I went to Pat with my concerns and said that the only way that I would be able to take the job was if it was a slow transition. We came up with a plan. The first year, I began by working about 10 hours a week as the "Program Director." Pat gave me jobs to do: put together the afternoon child care schedule, the holiday breaks, and other jobs related to staffing. I learned about the process of being certified by the state. There were other issues going on that year that gave me the opportunity to learn about the process of effective communication and difficulties that can arise with staff.

What Pat realized this year also, was the need to bring the administrative assistant, Leah Foy, and I into a partnership. Leah had become Pat's right hand. The depth of her job had increased over the years. Pat hired a consultant and we began meeting monthly and worked on a variety of issues. We learned about our personality types through the Meyers-Briggs test. We developed a matrix of what our jobs were presently and what they would be in the future.

The process was difficult for the three of us. Pat was having difficulty letting go, Leah did not want Pat to leave, and I was

having difficulty *fitting in*. Through much effort and work, though, we made it through the first year of my transition toward becoming director. I learned a great deal about myself and about the job. My concern about being qualified to be a director lessened as I became more familiar with the job expectations. Through the help of the meetings, Leah and I became a team.

The second year, I worked as "Director" and no longer taught in the classroom. That was a sad event for me. Looking back, I did not have a formal farewell from the kindergarten program; I was teaching, then I was not! So began my journey as the director. Pat remained as the executive director, working only part-time on site. Pat moved out of her office and I moved in. A letter went out to the families of the school and the transition became formal. At the beginning of the year, starting with school inservice, I led the meetings. The transition with staff became more formal.

The second year was amazing. Pat was there as my guide and mentor. Actually doing the job lead to my ability to ask many questions, which I did! I had a number of lessons that year, both with staff and with parents. Leah and I continued to grow and learn about each other.

Pat officially retired in June. Then came my next big lesson. I had been completely naïve about how the staff felt about her leaving. I was so wrapped up in the process I was going through, I did not think about what those who have been at EEI for many years felt. I had not thought about their concerns, worries, sadness; I did not think about how they felt about me going from being their peer to being their boss.

In my very young and limited experience as becoming the director of an early childhood education center, I believe that building a positive rapport with staff is perhaps the greatest challenge to making a successful business remain successful. If I lose longtime staff or they become distrustful and unhappy, the school will be affected. So I have a goal for this year: to recognize and appreciate staff on a continuing basis. Pat always talked about the importance of building and continuing trust. *ank you*" is a penny in a bucket, so that when the time comes to give difficult feedback, the bucket may lose a few pennies, but it is still almost full. With that kind of trust, we can continue to build and work together to keep EEI the thriving and wonderful place it has been for 35 years.