

Effective leadership behaviors for child care administrators

Seeking quality measurement system success

by Rachel Robertson

Through the years I have had many opportunities to support programs in various stages of pursuing a quality measurement rating such as NAEYC accreditation, Environmental Rating Scales, or other tools used in Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) (collectively known throughout the remainder of this article as quality measurement systems). This privilege has allowed me insight into the strategies and approaches that programs employ to achieve these goals. The good news is that there are many ways to successfully achieve these goals. The bad news is that there is not one simple path to success. However, when reflecting on all of the programs I have worked with, across states, from urban to suburban, from small to large, there are some commonalities in how successful programs pursue a quality measurement system. When considering

these common factors, what is most noticeable — and, I propose, a contributing factor to the long-term outcomes — are the characteristics and behaviors of the administrators of successful programs.

Among quality measurement systems, there is no clear description of how administrators are expected to move through the process. This is not necessarily a fault of the systems; it is not their intention to script a program's process. Yes, there are many tasks that are logically the administrator's responsibility — important things that must get done. But there are myriad approaches for how to do this. Sometimes the administrator takes on the process almost completely on his own with staff members only having a vague notion of what the goals of the quality measurement system are. At other times, the program staff are assigned specific roles and tasks and the administrator is largely hands-off. And there are a range of options in between.

The common thread seems to be in the administrator's ability to adopt and employ leadership behaviors and characteristics to not just "get it done" but to lead her staff and program to success. Many assume that a title or position makes the administrator a leader; that along with learning how to manage the computer

systems, the food program, and creating weekly staffing schedules, leadership skills simply develop. But alas, they do not. True, administrators are more naturally inclined to use leadership behaviors, but overall leadership is a learned set of skills. And there is no time more worthwhile to ensure that the administrator of the program understands and implements these characteristics and behaviors than when the program is engaged in an important process like quality measurement and improvement. Following is a description of those leadership characteristics that are essential to this process.

Have a vision and share it

There are many reasons a program may be pursuing a quality measurement system:

- It may want to follow a certain path to high quality.
- It may be eligible for additional funding if it achieves it.
- It may desire the marketing advantage.
- It may have other reasons altogether.
- It may want to align itself with the standards of a nationally respected early childhood organization.



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Whatever their reasons, it is important that the leader can articulate these and that other stakeholders such as staff, families, and the board understand and support them as well.

Consider how pursuing a quality measurement rating fits into overall program goals. Many programs have short-term reasons for pursuing quality measurement systems such as achieving a higher level in a QRIS. This fuels their efforts to achieve the initial endorsement, but what about maintaining those standards over time? It is perfectly acceptable to have short-term goals, but the leader should also ensure that these support the long-term vision for the program. Aligning the program's current efforts with the long-term vision of the program will help staff sustain the high levels of quality achieved during the process, ultimately allowing children, staff, and families to reap the benefits for years to come.

Organization strategies

Develop systems that will support the process. This should be at the top of your to-do list from the beginning. Creating tools as you go along can hamper the process and make the effort feel disjointed. Spending time on the front end thinking through your organization's needs will pay off in the long run.

Make sure everyone knows the goals, timeline, tasks, and expectations involved. Designate a time and place to share information, expectations, and updates. Consider methods of keeping both staff and families informed.

Read the materials provided about the quality measurement system. Each system has specific structural components, paperwork expectations, deadlines, and process tools. It is important to understand all of these before diving in.

Set effective short- and long-range goals

Have high expectations. Identify what your expectations are. Write them out and be sure you understand them and have aligned them with your vision for your program. Then share them. Make sure you are very clear about what you expect from your staffing team (including yourself) and don't hesitate to tell them. From "expecting every staff person to fully participate in the quality measurement process" to "expecting everyone to accomplish their action plans on time," your expectations will set a standard and hold staff accountable.

Set small goals. Identifying how each staff member and classroom needs to improve, developing achievable and realistic goals, providing the support staff needed to achieve goals, and monitoring progress are all important aspects of the process. Breaking tasks into small achievable goals will help everyone meet your expectations and realize the vision.

Follow the SMART goal method: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound. "Clean the classroom" is not a SMART goal. Staff assigned to this task won't know what 'clean' means to the director, there is no deadline, and it may not be realistic if there is no support or time allotted for the task. "Scrub each classroom shelf and re-label shelves and bins by October 10" is a SMART goal.

Delegate. This means allowing staff the opportunity to contribute, to play a part in a collaboration, and to develop professionally. But delegation doesn't mean assigning a task and then forgetting about it — or checking it off a to-do list; a manager must still follow-up on delegated tasks as she would with any other goals.

Manage the change process

Pursuing a quality measurement system process means initiating change in some or many parts of your program. Although it is good change (based on the standards of the system), this doesn't mean it will be easy for your staff. Understanding varying perspectives and being prepared for objections to proposed changes is important. For example, changing a lesson plan may cause a teacher to feel judged, like he has been doing it wrong. As a result, he may feel offended. This is surely not the intended message, but it is a common response to change. Here are some ways to make change go more smoothly:

Involve staff in the change. Let them discover new ways to improve their teaching, increase their skills, and ensure optimal development and care for children. Choosing to change is easier than being told to change. Plus, you'll all benefit from the great ideas likely to be generated by multiple staff members.

Be enthusiastic about the process (hard work and all). Being a champion and cheerleader on both easy days and hard days is an often overlooked priority for program leaders. It seems simple, but it is very important. If the administrator can remain positive and committed, the staff will follow her lead.

Prioritize professional development for staff

Consider the proverb "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach him to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." Leaders need to allow staff to grow, develop, evolve, try, fail, and try again. Any boss can tell people what to do. Leaders support the professionals they work with and encourage them to reach their potential and meet their own goals, as well as those of the program. Leaders celebrate both successes and

challenges, keeping the big picture and long-term vision in focus at all times.

One way to help engage staff is to develop individual professional development plans for all staff members. Whether required by the quality measurement system or not, this is an important practice. Setting goals and focusing on the professional growth of each individual staff member will ensure every person receives the attention they need to flourish and the training or education that best meets their needs. Focus on training *and* education. With the increased focus, and in some cases requirements, on staff educational qualifications in the past few years, many are equating professional development with “going back to school.” For some staff this may be a worthwhile and realistic goal, for others it may not be. Either way, professional development includes training, classroom mentoring, coaching, and more. As a leader, it is essential to tailor all professional development to the needs of individual staff members and not focus solely on one type or activity.

While other leadership characteristics are effective, these leadership characteristics and behaviors are essential to success. They will surely increase a program’s odds as they pursue a quality measurement system, and will also contribute to the growth and development of the program and staff overall.

Maintain your achievement

Programs typically spend one year or more pursuing a quality measurement system. Once they achieve this important goal and no longer have a visit or assessment looming in the future, they are often unsure of what to focus on next. But the truth is the work has only just begun. The most challenging part of quality measurement systems is maintaining the standards over time. Luckily, the same leadership characteristics that allowed you to achieve quality measure-

ment system success will also prove useful in the following years as you commit to maintaining or increasing the level of high quality your program has achieved. It is easy to slip back into old behaviors once the pressure is off. However, it is essential not to make this mistake. Take time to celebrate your achievement and then begin the next round of goal-setting, professional development planning, and quality improvement.

Adopting these leadership skills takes effort, but they will no doubt make you a leader others want to follow and learn from, and ensure that your program is truly one of the best, offering experiences for children that will impact them for a lifetime.

Resource

You can read more about effective leadership characteristics, professional development, change management, and other essential tips and tools for quality measurement system success in *Prove It! Achieving Recognition for Your Early Childhood Program* by Rachel Robertson and Miriam Dressler (Redleaf Press, 2009).