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Chapter 2

The job of directing

an early childhood program has many faces. Whatever your intentions on any given day, the ebb and flow of events at your program places consistent demands on your time. Consider how your time has been spent over the last few weeks and place a check in the box below that most closely represents how it has felt.

Currently, most of my time at work is spent as:

- an air traffic controller
- a welcome wagon hostess with the mostest
- a midwife
- Mary Poppins
-

(place your images here)

When you begin the work of directing an early childhood program you may have a strong sense of purpose and be clear about your vision. Perhaps the first chapter of this book has sparked some new awareness for you and your mind is full of ideas. But consider this scene, which is no doubt a familiar one for you:

On the way to work this morning you've been thinking about the growing vision you have of your program becoming a caring and learning community for all involved. There are signs that many of your teachers are

understanding the significance of their work in the larger context of changing the culture of consumerism and violence that surrounds us. Parents, too, are beginning to recognize the contrast between how vibrant it feels at your center and the environments where they live and work. They see how much people at the center seem to enjoy each other's company and help each other out. You feel inspired and resolve to work on behalf of this vision, knowing that it will make a difference in the lives of the children and adults.

Walking in the door you learn that one of your teachers has called in sick and no substitute has been found. A parent approaches, impatient to speak with you before she heads off to work. In the back of your mind you notice the payroll accounting begging for attention so checks can be cut by the end of the day. On your desk you find a long "to do" list that must be accomplished before your board meeting this evening. The glow of your morning thoughts fades as you face the pressing issues of the day.

In scenes like this, how do you keep hold of your dreams as you move through your day? Do you have strategies that keep your head above water, your mind focused, your eyes clear and bright? The work life of directors and supervisors is so encompassing, so filled with squeaky wheels and daily crises, that it's easy to lose sight of where you want to be going. Building and sustaining your vision takes more than your imagination or a head full of dreams. You need a structure and systems to help you organize the tasks that lead to your vision, one that keeps you intentional in your planning and responses. Directing with a vision requires a conceptual framework and a practical grasp of effective tools to meet the multiple demands of this complex work.

Looking for Tips and Techniques

When you seek out resources to help you in your work, what is usually on your mind? Are you looking to acquire particular skills such as budget development, time management, or delegation of tasks? This know-how is obviously important for program managers and there are a number of other competen-

cies you need to be an effective supervisor. For example, recruiting, orienting, supervising, and evaluating staff; marketing and advocating for your program with parents, potential funders, and policy makers; writing handbooks, correspondence, and newsletters; maintaining contracts, policies, and documentation; solving problems, managing conflict, and accessing resources. The good news is that there are now some management books and resources designed to assist you with the day-to-day activities of your job. You can find these within and outside of the early childhood field, and we have listed related ones at the end of each chapter of this book.

As well as management tips, however, directors are seeking ideas to cultivate their leadership skills. As we discussed in the first chapter, learning to lead as well as manage is what makes it possible to bring a vision to life. If you are a leader, you work with a larger framework for thinking and responding. At any given time you intentionally choose which of your management roles is most likely to bring you closer to your vision. Directors need an approach, a presence of mind, that keeps their attention on the process of nourishing the vision they're after. This obviously involves more than checklists, good software, and management techniques. While you work to uphold standards, you translate them into meaningful concepts to guide the everyday activities in your program. Human development and making connections are as central to your thinking about quality as are those rating scales and component checklists. With each situation they encounter, leaders find a way to frame their thoughts, tasks, and decision-making process in the service of their visions. When you organize your work with attention to a vision, you find yourself moving forward, not spinning your wheels. Your spirit is awakened rather than drained.

What framework makes sense to guide the work of early childhood program directors as they seek to lead with a vision? Without funds for an ever-expanding administrative staff, how can you fulfill your multifaceted responsibilities? The ideas and inspiration a leader needs are often found outside of the typical early childhood publishing house. You might try visiting a magic shop, becoming an understudy to the Sorcerer's Apprentices, or perhaps contacting a laboratory specializing in clones. Keeping a sense of humor is essential to maintaining your sanity. Equally important is finding a way to think of the many aspects of your job. You need a framework

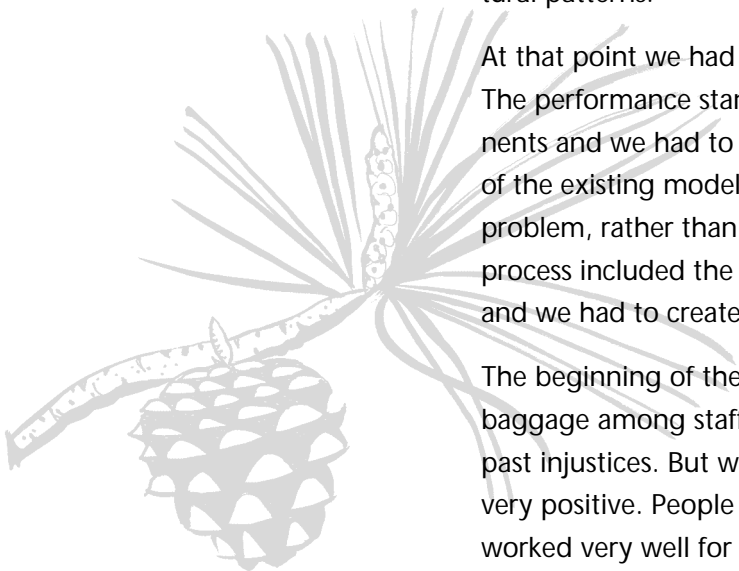
that gives you a picture of your leadership tasks, one that keeps your work in a balanced perspective as you take on the discrepancies between how things are and how you envision they could be.

In recent years our Head Start has grown exponentially. Like every other Head Start program, we had a hierarchical structure. This worked fine when the problems were simpler and only required limited intervention, like speech services. What started to change was the growing needs of children and families. The numbers of families needing intervention grew and their problems became more involved and complex. I remember very clearly a defining moment during a staffing where we assigned eight to ten program people to intervene and address the problems in one family's life. I remember thinking, "This is stupid. This is the most fractured family, and this approach will disrupt their lives enormously." As a director, you have to stop blaming and listening to excuses and start assessing what change is needed. You must learn to discern the difference between idiosyncratic blips and problematic structural patterns.

At that point we had to redefine how we wanted to deliver services. The performance standards were segmented into many components and we had to find a more holistic way. We had to back out of the existing model and reorganize ourselves from the family's problem, rather than from the institution's structure. This change process included the entire staff. We were committed to this vision and we had to create an organizational structure to support it.

The beginning of the process was very hard. There was old baggage among staff members, and they were unable to let go of past injustices. But we stayed with it, and the outcome has been very positive. People were able to create a new structure that has worked very well for us. They believed in it, they owned it, they developed better working relationships. They had experienced a crisis, worked through it, and saw they could come through with good results.

As a result of this experience, I tried to build into our system more opportunities for collaborative planning, reflection, and problem solving. This involved restructuring our staff scheduling to create more paid time away from children. We ran up against a number of barriers, and we are still working to bring them down. There are



no easy solutions to limited funds, time, and know-how, but we are determined to create a way out of no way.

—Dana

One of the definitions Webster offers for the word *framework* is “the larger branches of a tree that determines its shape.” There are any number of management frameworks designed to help you make the current shape of your organization work better. What we are suggesting is that a new shape be considered for early childhood programs, one that nurtures the growth of individuals and a community in a way that transforms business as usual in the wider world. A framework like this infuses everyday tasks with opportunities for collaboration, reflection, and the discovery of other perspectives on children and families. Developing this kind of framework will most likely require you to shift some old habits and ways of thinking. To get off the typical treadmill of directing from crisis to crisis, it is helpful to step outside the early childhood field for some fresh ideas. We recommend turning to sources that may not have occurred to you, ones that offer you a new way to conceive of what you need to do. For instance, consider this concept of balance which is so critical to your thinking and functioning.

Learning about Balance

Learning to effectively juggle all the aspects of your work requires some understanding about the notion of balance. What will keep things from spinning out of control or, conversely, prevent your spirit or your program from shriveling up and dying from inertia? How do you balance sanity in your life with expediting quality in your program?

Balance is more than an abstract idea of how to lead one’s life. When the dictionary defines balance as the relationship between debit and credit, we know this refers to both money *and* energy. Webster says balance involves comparing, prioritizing, decision making—a daily way of life for early childhood program directors. The demands and details are so plentiful that you find it hard not to be in a continual reactive state. Taking time to compare and prioritize may seem like a luxury, given all those fires to be put out. On the other hand, balance is certainly a key factor in staying healthy and effec-

tive as a director. We need models who have mastered the practice of balance, who have strategies we can adapt for our work. Where can we find those with examples for us? Take heart! There are people whose lives depend on a precise understanding of balance and they have lessons to share.

Expand your mind's eye and consider the work of jugglers, figure skaters, whirling dervishes, and gymnasts. Perhaps this suggestion makes you chuckle but here's what jugglers tell us about their art. The trick to keeping all those balls in the air is to find one spot to focus on as all the balls are tossed in a path. If your eyes shift, trying to follow the individual balls, all that dispersing movement will cause you to lose concentration. You'll drop the ball. (Ever had this experience during your days of directing?) Figure skaters offer us a similar message. They say they are able to keep their balance while doing those amazing twirls and spins by focusing on one spot. They train their eyes to immediately find this spot as they make each whirl and turn.

Are you familiar with the religious order of Sufism, whose members are called whirling dervishes? As they dance into a trancelike state, they too follow this approach. When you watch dervishes dancing, you see them simultaneously whirling in individual circles while moving as a group around a big circle. They do this for up to an hour without ever losing their balance. Dervishes explain this practice as one of complete abandonment to their spiritual focus.

During one of the Olympic games we heard a gold medal gymnast describe her success as more than a matter of skills and techniques. She said the most important thing to do is to get an image in your mind of what you want to achieve. She asks herself, "What does it look and feel like, going up in the air, over the bar, and landing on your feet?" Similarly, directors can create specific images in their minds of what their center might look, feel, smell, and sound like when their vision is accomplished. The images will guide you as you master the techniques to get there.

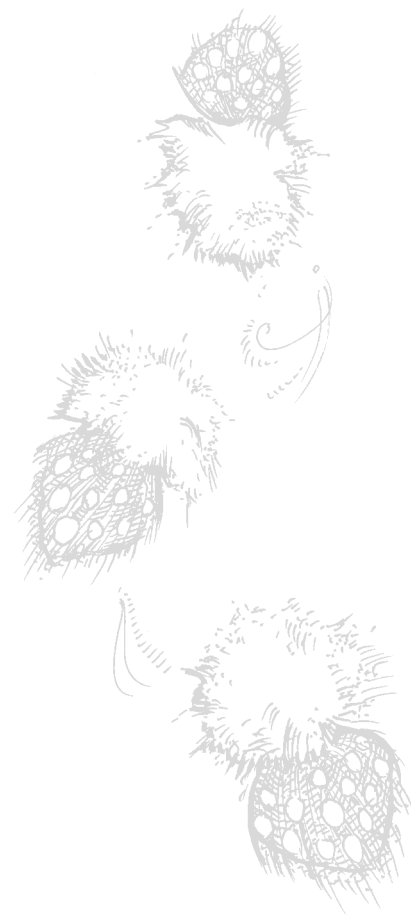
Try asking yogi masters how they manage to keep a sense of balance while stretching their bodies into seemingly unimaginable positions. Their response will start to sound familiar. Yogis say one strategy for maintaining balance is to find a spot on the ground to focus on as you begin to position your body. They stress that this approach to physical balance helps to empty our minds of clutter so that we can find an

internal place of balance. As we store a physical sense of balance in our brain's memory, it helps nourish this balance in our mental, emotional, and spiritual lives.

The lessons from all these folks have a common thread. There is a relationship between our ability to use our imaginations, find a focus, and keep ourselves in balance. A program director using these notions of balance is attentive to what nourishes people, not just whether they are meeting the requirements. More than learning the skills of long-distance running or doing triple toe loops, one has to develop an internal sense of strength and ability to stay focused and clear about where you want to be. Furthermore, our bodies can teach our minds about balance. Translating this to the work of an early childhood program director suggests two things: it is essential to find a focus and return to it again and again, and we need to give attention to our bodies as well as our minds.

Mary Catherine Bateson, author of *Composing a Life* (1990), suggests that we explore the concept of balance by looking at a tightrope walker. Many of us use the term “walking a thin line” to refer to some aspect of our work, but have we ever watched closely to study how those on a high wire do this? The tightrope walker usually carries a thin rod and continually moves this rod while walking along the high wire, changing the angle to maintain balance. This rod is equivalent to the framework we use to keep ourselves balanced in our work. A conceptual framework is something we can continually hold on to as we move through our daily tasks. It helps us know what shifts and adjustments we need to make to stay on track.

Finally, Bateson also suggests we consider music composition and visual arts for insights into composing a life of balance. Musicians and artists are skilled at finding a way to fit things together—different movements, forms, and colors—into a composition that is balanced, pleasing, and nourishing to the listener or viewer. Learning how they think and approach their compositions might be useful for directors who face parallel challenges of combining disparate elements into an engaging work of art. Directing really is a creative process, a pulling together of different elements to create a tapestry. You can approach your work not as a dot-to-dot ditto of meeting requirements, but rather as an ever changing, growing canvas on which you make bold strokes all the while paying attention to details and the creative process.



We recommend that you continue to explore insights in the worlds of the physical, spiritual, and visual arts. You are likely to always find metaphorical, if not practical, ideas that will help you shape an approach to your work. Metaphors are actually very useful in learning to shift your thinking and discover new insights. They help you access a different part of your brain. With metaphors you can find personal meaning and connections with something outside your normal frame of reference. For instance, if you begin to think of the work of a director as similar to that of a gymnast, inventor, or landscape architect, your mind begins to reorganize understandings and possibilities. Metaphors are useful in creating new emotional as well as cognitive associations. They help us redefine the familiar and make sense out of the unfamiliar. You can find new ideas for your work by exploring new words to describe what you do.


Searching for ideas in unusual places isn't just a wild idea from Deb and Margie. You find recommendations like this in established icons like *Fortune* magazine. For instance, in the December 29, 1997, issue there was an interview with business consultant guru Tom Peters who said, "The point is that in any business it's a matter of breaking completely out of familiar ways of thinking, of not limiting yourself to what is comfortable or comprehensible to you." He goes on to suggest that it's critical to find places where you experience a different kind of learning, like going dogsledding at the North Pole, rather than attending a management seminar. For early childhood folks, this suggestion might actually sound more appealing than exploring the business strategies of transnational corporations. We like to play, express our creativity, and take new field trips!

Taking Bright Ideas from the Business World

Because their overall world is so different from ours, perhaps it hasn't occurred to you to seek out ideas from the big business corporate sector of our society. Certainly they have resources far beyond ours, and goals that are often antithetical to our values and priorities. How surprising, then, to discover the familiar concepts and language of human development in their literature and seminars.

As the early childhood profession has been growing and changing over the past twenty-five to thirty years, so has the approach to corporate business management. So-called inno-





vators in the business world continually speak of whole systems thinking, and what was once called the personnel department is now referred to as human resources. The literature for corporate managers is filled with charts illustrating various conceptual frameworks for all roles, functions, human dimensions, and processes that must be considered in effectively leading an organization. Managers are encouraged to focus on team building and diversity training, to be risk takers and visionaries. There is an emphasis on eliminating hierarchies and bureaucracy, strengthening the imaginations and autonomy of employees, and creating permanent flexibility. Much of their talk is what we would expect to find in early childhood management literature because these are the values that seem inherent in our work with children. For some reason this hasn't been translated in our professional literature about teacher education. Few of our professional resources offer a comparable set of guidelines with a conceptual framework, and strategies for building a vision and organizational culture that reflects those values. Sadly, we've found that most corporate management books and seminars offer far more inspiration and motivation for moving beyond the status quo than their counterparts in the early childhood field.

If you browse the business management shelves of your local library or bookstore you are likely to find books by Peter Block, Steven Covey, Tom Peters, and Peter Senge, all highly regarded business management consultants. Consider what they have to offer us. For instance, in his book *The Empowered Manager*, Peter Block stresses that all management structures and systems reflect a framework for the distribution of power. This is the foundation for an organization's culture. Block describes how managers can use their power to advance an organization to one where employees are pleased to be spending the best days of their lives. He presents the fundamental choices managers must make as those between maintenance and greatness, caution and courage, dependency and autonomy. Block's discussion of the kinds of mentalities that hold managers back from greatness, that have leaders slip into bureaucratic and narrow thinking systems, matches much of what we see in large early childhood programs. We see directors more focused on maintenance than greatness, cautious about stepping out and trying to reach for something currently beyond their reach, and often waiting for someone else to address the larger economic and political constraints that

surround us. With the overwhelming forces marshaled to discourage and drain us, early childhood directors would do well to heed Block's reminder that creating a vision of greatness is the first step toward empowerment. He hits the nail on the head when he says, "The struggle to create a vision is the struggle with hope."

In most early childhood programs our paperwork has grown faster than our vision or our capacity to design systems that respond to the real lives of children, families, and our employees. Taking some cues from innovators in the large world of business, we need a conceptual framework for organizing our thoughts, roles, and tasks so that we can steadily build and sustain a vision for our programs. Keeping in mind the ideas about balance discussed earlier, it is useful to conceptualize the work of early childhood directors in terms of a triangle.

The programs I see that are in trouble are ones where directors are not willing to be unpopular and make hard choices. Someone has to make hard choices. It's not fair to leave that to be resolved by the group. When you are a leader you have to learn to live with discomfort. It's easy to lead when things are going well. What's not so easy is to make hard decisions to push forward change.

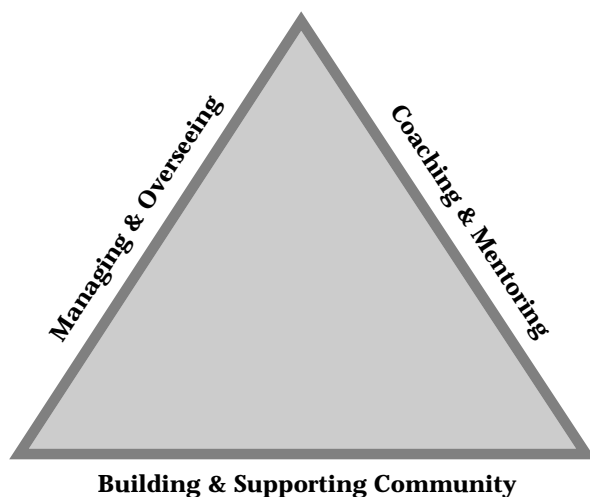
Change involves a dynamic process that people have to go through. Unless things become uncomfortable, nothing changes. If directors insulate themselves, they can become too complacent. When you are complacent you aren't moved to see any discomfort there might be in your program, let alone get beyond it. Discomfort is fertile ground for change. Allowing yourself to be uncomfortable is where vision comes from.

—Dana

Considering a Triangle Framework

A number of years ago while consulting with a Migrant Head Start program, we worked with our colleague, Gloria Trinidad, to draw on the image of a triangle as a simple framework for conceptualizing the work of program supervisors and directors. Our experiences as a child care director, bookkeeper, and Head Start education coordinator, along with our understandings about cultural diversity, group dynamics, and pedagogy for adults, led us to the idea of an equilateral triangle, with three

sides equally balanced and focused on our vision of early childhood programs as learning communities for children, families, and staff. Each side of the triangle (managing and overseeing, coaching and mentoring, and building and supporting community) is integral to the whole, and incorporates our values of inclusion and anti-bias practices.



The image of a triangle to represent this framework works well because we believe that each side of our management work is of equal importance. Keep in mind the notion of balance. If attention isn't given equally to the roles on each side of the triangle, it becomes lopsided. At that point, both director and program are in danger of collapsing. What follows is an overview of this triangle framework as it pertains to your human resources work. We conclude this chapter with an opportunity to practice applying this framework to your current work as a director or supervisor. The next three chapters will explore each side of the triangle in depth, offering strategies to build and sustain the vision of early childhood programs as caring, learning communities.

The Roles of Managing and Overseeing

All you have to do is look around your office for concrete representations of this side of the triangle. Perhaps you'll find the *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (DAP) book, accreditation criteria from the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Head Start performance standards, or your state's child care licensing requirements. Your particular

program probably has a handbook of policies and procedures, and no doubt there are personnel files in your cabinets and computer. Maybe you've been working on your current staffing patterns, drafting a caregiver's performance evaluation, or processing a teacher's request for supplies from an early childhood catalog. The managing and overseeing side of the triangle involves many of these kinds of tasks. For staff supervision it especially includes things like the following:

- clarifying professional standards and expectations,
- developing a salary scale,
- arranging staffing patterns and schedules,
- establishing effective communication systems,
- organizing training options and meetings, and
- conducting performance reviews and evaluations.

The numerous activities related to managing and overseeing are critical to the functioning and well being of your organization. If you do not have clear standards and effective systems to guide your program, it is on very shaky ground. Any dreams you have of creating a learning community will be undermined if you aren't well organized and guiding your program with a strategic planning system and policies that reflect this vision.

As a director or supervisor, you are probably most familiar with the work on this side of the triangle. Because they are so very demanding and tangibly lend themselves to a check off list, these tasks define the primary way most administrators approach their jobs. If you are mainly operating from this side of the triangle, you find yourself constantly dealing with paperwork, as well as assessing, reminding, evaluating, and reporting. These are important management tasks, but in and of themselves they don't lead to a program where the children and staff are learning and thriving. Your managing and overseeing role has limitations when it comes to applying what we know about adult learning theory and effective staff development work. Just because they've read your manual or attended some early childhood classes, caregivers and teachers don't necessarily understand how to genuinely meet children's needs. Effective staff development requires a different mind-set and a different set of behaviors than managing and doing performance reviews. We think the tasks of helping teachers learn and grow belong on another side of the triangle.