

Leading by Example: Unlocking the Potential of Collaboration

By Melissa Casteel

Collaboration is a current buzzword in the field of education and many administrators are committed to teacher collaboration. However, I often wonder if there are wide-ranging examples of effective collaboration among educational leaders.

For me, in my past role as the leader of a school district-administered Head Start program, collaborating with other administrators did not occur naturally. I often felt like I was conducting an orchestra on an isolated island. Sure, the teachers developed a professional learning community, but I was missing a sense of community and support with other administrators that I needed. When I joined the organization, although my program was part of a larger school district, there seemed to be a disconnect from the larger district or even the other early childhood programs within it. My Head Start program was essentially operating without the support and resources that surrounded it.

In this role I knew it was time to get off the island and collaborate in the sandbox of early childhood leadership. I loved working with young children; however, I found collaboration to be challenging because it involved working with other adults.

The authors of [Inspiring Peak Performance](#) refer to collaboration as the “we’re-in-this-together” factor. My problem was that I was used to being in my sandbox alone. My sandbox was safe, relevant, and contributed to my learning and the growth of my organization. Over time, I realized that in order to gain access to the support and resources vital to the success of my program, I would have to invite others into my sandbox. And, I would need to accept the invitations of others. It was not a seamless process, but I now see how a collaborative community can be empowering for individuals, organizations, and the larger early childhood community.

I experienced a number of benefits when collaborating and building community. I noticed that within these collaborations we...

- Constructed new knowledge with those outside our immediate circles
- Expanded the reach of our programs
- Shared resources and leveraged combined expertise to jointly apply for funding opportunities
- Combined forces that helped advocate for shared values and beliefs

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- Expanded support systems to include members of my community
- Played together—rather than against— to reach for and maintain high quality for children and families

“In these troubled, uncertain times, we don’t need more command and control; we need better means to engage everyone’s intelligence in solving challenges and crises as they arise.”

– Margaret Wheatley

Unfortunately, true collaboration doesn’t result from wishful thinking. Effective collaboration requires intentional planning. When inviting others to play in your sandbox, consider these tips that continue to guide my collaborative efforts. Some of the tips are more appropriate for formal collaborations and others can be helpful in a variety of relationships.

Relationships Matter

“In organizations, real power and energy is generated through relationships. The patterns of relationships and the capacities to form them are more important than tasks, functions, roles, and positions.”

– Margaret Wheatley

Take time for the members of the collaboration to get to know each other beyond their title and organization. Because time is so limited we often get right down to the business agenda without creating a collegial foundation.

Be approachable

“Openness is the willingness to entertain a variety of alternative perspectives. Be receptive to contributions from everyone regardless of previous attainment or current status, and create dialogic open spaces.”

– Stephen Preskill and Stephen Brookfield

Take care not to enter collaboration holding a big sign declaring your leadership role and title. As a leader in your organization, it might initially be difficult to be your authentic self with strangers, but remember, you are all in this process together!

Be open to new thoughts and ideals

“When we practice openness, we try to hold in temporary abeyance our own assumptions and preconceptions so that we can consider fully what others want to contribute.”

– Stephen Preskill and Stephen Brookfield

Be willing to let go, and don’t assume that your way is always the right way. Even if you consider yourself an expert in a topic, plan to learn from others! Collaboration frees you up to construct knowledge with your colleagues. Value the experiences of all even when they don’t match your expectations.

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Begin on common ground

Establish a vision for the collaboration based on shared values and commitments. A shared vision builds trust and answers the question: Why are we collaborating in the first place? This vision will help serve as the foundation for creating a clear plan for the outcomes of the collaboration.

Be aware of organizational and cultural norms

“Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.”

– Winston Churchill

Don't assume your intent or process is understood by others. Clear and open communication is vital. There will be times when being open feels challenging because you are worried about ruffling feathers. However, if the person you are communicating with knows that you are coming from a place of respect, understanding can be achieved.

Expect bumps in the road to collaboration

“Honest differences are often a healthy sign of progress.”

– Mahatma Gandhi

Just as children and teachers move in and out of stages of development, so will groups of early childhood leaders. [Bruce Tuckman](#), a recognized leader in group dynamics, describes a path through four stages of group development: forming, storming, norming, and performing. Moving through some of these stages will be easier than others. Remember to trust the process that is being created by your collaboration.

When you hit a bump, revisit the established vision. A reminder about why you are collaborating and the benefits to those inside and outside your organization can provide a needed jumpstart toward forward progress.

Look beyond early childhood organizations

Consider collaborating with organizations that value or benefit from quality early childhood care and education but don't specialize in providing those services.

Playing in the sandbox with administrators might not always feel like fun, but together we can reap the rewards of building collective capacity and improving programs and systems.

If you're interested in exploring more about collaboration, check out these additional resources:

- [Inspiring Peak Performance: Competence, Commitment, and Collaboration](#) by Paula Jorde Bloom, Ann Hentschel, and Jill Bella
- [Developmental Sequence in Small Groups](#) by Bruce W. Tuckman
- [Better Together – Tuckman's Stages of Group Development](#) by Mark Horton
- [Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning](#)

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- [Learning as a Way of Leading: Lessons from the Struggle of Social Justice](#) by Stephen Preskill and Stephen Brookfield

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