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What Is Reflective Leadership?



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Learn what reflective supervision is and how it is the key for creating a relationship-based organization.

Think for a moment about the words or phrases you might use to describe an effective leader. Chances are, the characteristics are not specific to the infant-family field but encompass more general qualities, such as “open to new ideas,” “thoughtful,” and “compassionate.” The leadership traits listed below, which were generated by a group of early intervention professionals, represent the skills and abilities that most people believe leaders should possess.

Did any of these qualities appear on your list?

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- Communicates a shared vision
- Is confident
- Exhibits a can-do attitude
- Facilitates and compromises; looks for “win-win” solutions
- Involves staff; uses a team-based approach
- Is flexible, adaptive
- Listens attentively
- Motivates staff
- Provides support and encouragement
- Respects staff and their thoughts, opinions, and feedback
- Sets clear goals
- Shares achievements
- Trusts employees
- Uses humor

Almost all of the qualities above refer to how effective the leader is at managing her interactions with others. Simply put, we lead through relationships. How we lead is important: How we treat others, how we interact, how we resolve conflict, and how we provide feedback all directly influence our staff members’ experience of the work.

Although effectiveness as a leader is often measured in quantitative outcomes—increasing school readiness, decreasing incidences of abuse and neglect, increasing vaccination rates—it is our ability to reflect on, and optimize, our relationships that makes these goals achievable. It is our skill in connecting with others, guiding and mentoring them, that makes good numbers a natural outgrowth of good relationships. In other words, our accomplishments are a reflection of what our relationships have allowed us to achieve. That fundamental truth inspired this publication: Leadership takes place in the context of relationships, and quality relationships are crucial to good outcomes.

Reflective Leadership in Infant-Family Programs

Leaders in the infant-family field hope that their program is one in which quality relationships characterized by trust, support, and growth exist among supervisors, staff, parents, and children. These relationships form the foundation for all the work that is done. Workplaces based on these beliefs and values can be thought of as relationship-based organizations.

Reflective leadership is the key to creating a relationship-based organization. It is characterized by three important skills: self-awareness, careful observation, and flexible response.

Self-awareness refers to a leader’s ability to know herself, her strengths, and her limitations. It implies that a leader is interested in, and committed to, examining her own reactions, thoughts, and feelings about the work.

Careful observation means that leaders are skilled at deciphering the meaning of what they are seeing and hearing. Leaders wonder about the meaning of their own and others’ behavior, tones of voice, body language, or reactions. They ask themselves, “Why might this be happening?” and solicit more information.

Flexible responses require that leaders know their staff—what their personal styles are, how they work best, what motivates them. Leaders can then approach each professional in a way that reflects that particular staff member’s needs, strengths, and areas for development. Flexible responses are the most basic—and sometimes most difficult—expression of mutual respect in our relationships with staff members.

Excerpted from Parlakian, R. & Seibel, N. (2001). Being in charge: Reflective leadership in infant-family programs. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE

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