

Leadership Essentials: Taking Steps Toward Positive Impact

By: Marie Masterson

Essentials are items or attributes absolutely necessary or extremely important to your needs and goals. What are essentials for you? Car keys? Cream in your morning coffee? An umbrella for a rainy day? Time at the gym after work? Essential things have significant impact.

Leadership essentials create positive impact in your program. What qualities motivate and engage staff? How will you respond to a difficult email when someone's feelings are on the line? How can you mediate a disagreement or resolve a conflict?

When a situation is complex and requires more than a few lines or a decision is at stake, it is always better to meet in person or chat by phone. If video conferencing is an option, that's a perfect way to establish a connection and brainstorm solutions. When someone's feelings are on the line, it's always better to pick up the phone and have a conversation. What you say can be clarified, revised, or explained; whereas, what is written may not come across as intended. Personal communication provides important cues to what is really going on.

With a priority on saving time and responding quickly, you may be tempted to write instead of call. It will pay off to consider the best means of responding. An email works to clarify plans, restate mutual decisions, or share information. When it comes to solving problems, personal connections work best. Successful outcomes are dependent on your ability to inspire growth, cooperation, and commitment in others.

[Leadership essentials](#) cultivate a healthy and productive program. Staff feel safe, understand their value, and work toward shared goals. Traits for effective leadership include self-efficacy, empathy, creativity, authenticity, humility, transparency, adaptability, and ongoing learning. These qualities are strengthened through tools of communication, team-building, awareness of self and others, cultural competence, ethical conduct, intentionality, the ability to motivate others, and a deep knowledge of the profession. Essentials are the foundation blocks for effective leadership practice. This kind of skilled leadership is critical to [high-quality practices](#) for child development and early learning.

Making leadership essentials a priority will move you forward to new milestones in your leadership journey. The following action steps will help you apply leadership essentials in practical ways.

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1. **Determine your strengths.** What areas of your work are a snap and feel enjoyable? List your “snaps” and the reasons you feel good about this area of your work.
2. **Identify at least one challenge.** What is it about this situation that is complex? How will applying a leadership essential make a difference?
3. **Create a weekly action step.** Purposeful action steps move you from thinking mode to action mode and impact your professional growth. “Today, I will read one chapter of the leadership book I bought a month ago.” “Today, I will connect with a staff member to strengthen our relationship.” “Today, I will practice empathy (or another leadership essential) in my relationships with families.”
4. **Post the leadership essentials.** Establish leadership essentials as anchors for your program norms and practices. Invite staff to share their thoughts about these important ingredients of success. Explore the [whole leadership framework](#) as a way to clarify your goals, communicate the importance of your work, and help your staff understand their influential contribution to your program.
5. **Find a mentor and be a mentor.** Identify a professional colleague with traits you admire. Make a phone call and ask, “May I have coffee with you? I would like to ask about your work.” Set a regular meeting time to learn how they strengthen their work with leadership essentials. Offer to be a mentor to share your strengths with others.

Dream big! Check out new resources for growth at the [McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership](#). Today is a great time to give yourself the gift of leadership inspiration by participating in [Leadership Academies](#) or [eLearning experiences](#). In addition to changing your own life, you will create a more meaningful community of growth for staff, families, and children.

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