

# Culture and Leadership

by Patty Hnatiuk and Hanna Gebretensae

As we look ahead toward the World Forum in May, we consider the exciting prospects of coming together with international, multilingual leaders in early care and education. We asked, what are some ways to stimulate thinking and share cross-cultural perspectives on the topic of *Culture and Leadership*? With encouragement and support from Bonnie Neugebauer and the World Forum leaders, we crafted a pre-Forum survey about culture and leadership to hear and learn from past delegates and those planning to come to Montreal. We thank the respondents for their thoughtful and provocative answers to these six questions. This article is a first step in the process of dialogues about the ideas, realities, and perspectives from the first core group of respondents.

To begin the dialogues, in this piece we present compilations of the findings to each question and provide some analyses. We interpret general implications and convey questions that emerge from across the spectrum of responses. And finally, we will pose some additional questions derived from the findings to be addressed by attendees and invited guests in a session on Culture and Leadership in the Educators/Trainers Track at the World Forum in May. Of course, we hope that the findings and questions will stimulate lively discussion and debates in communities elsewhere as well. It is our hope that the dialogues will engage people in reflective exercises that result in *transformational* leadership: cross-cultural strategies and actions for change.

**Note:** Seventeen responses from eleven countries were received. Individual responses do not represent entire cultures or communities. The participants are: Lina Ashar, India; Boh Boon Chiang, Malaysia; Roslyn A. Duffy, U.S.; Selena Fox, New Zealand; Manani Henry Kemoli, Kenya; Susan Koehler, U.S.; Eva Lilla Lampert, Hungary; Antoinette le Marchant, Australia; Dr. Vijaya Murthy, India; Judi Pack, U.S.; Karen Stephens, U.S.; Anne Stonehouse, Australia; Diana Suskind, U.S.; Jana Treier, Estonia; Unaisi Vasu Tuivaga, Fiji; Susan Whitaker, Singapore; Widarmi D. Wijana, Indonesia.

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Exchanging perspectives about *Culture and Leadership* in early care and education circles from around the world are manifold and enables us as early childhood professionals to:

- raise awareness and explore differences and similarities
- reflect on meanings, ask questions, engage in dialogues and debates
- reach out to build strategic alliances and address inequities
- support leadership development in cultural community contexts
- transform the field for global justice through cross-cultural understanding, unity and activity.

## How does a person become a leader?

Below is an amalgam (mixture) of a response:

*One becomes a leader through a passion, desire, interest, or belief in an issue. The passion drives the leader to develop (usually*

*with others) and share a vision for change. The vision can inspire willingness and commitment from others to be vocal and actively engage in affecting change. They may choose to refine the vision collectively. When leaders strive and succeed to involve others in the processes and a cause, the vision becomes shared and new leaders emerge.*  
— Patty Hnatiuk (author)

Other responses include:

*A person becomes a leader because he or she —*

- *is charismatic and deliberately sets out to become a leader*
- *is educated, and has knowledge and expertise in the field*
- *gains entitlement chiefly through birth or fortune*
- *is elected democratically and possesses leadership qualities*
- *has seniority, which is valued and respected*

- is able to connect, convince, and work with others as a team
- supports the leadership of others
- is thrust into positions of leadership through nominations or appointments
- has ethics, openness to learn, and is accepting of diverse perspectives
- grows into the role, learning from previous mistakes and experiences
- meets the societal or cultural expectations underlying who should be expected or accepted as a leader.

Anne Stonehouse, Manani Henry Kemoli, Jana Treier, and Susan Whitaker suggest that circumstances also produce leaders. Socio-political contexts, including adversities caused by poverty, war, and other circumstances, call for leaders to emerge who affect change in real life situations.

*Good leaders develop through a never ending process of self study, education, training, and experience.*

— Lina Ashar, India

There were some opposing views about whether leaders are “born” or “made” (learn to lead). One view is that leaders are born with qualities they naturally possess. Born leaders develop and grow into leadership positions gaining respect, love, trust, and support with little effort. Another view is that leaders are made through experiences and education. Still another view holds that leaders emerge somewhere in between being born and being made.

***Are leaders born to lead or do they learn to lead? What is your perspective on the question?***

Each person, across all roles and domains, in the early care and education field possesses leadership traits and abilities. They are already leading in day-to-day activities in their families or programs, or are poised to become leaders. However, there needs to be more opportunity and preparation to exercise leadership in the field. For instance, in

the U.S., an increasingly diverse society, traditional leadership roles are frequently not made up of people from linguistic minority groups or communities of color — groups that are represented widely in early education and care programs and in the workforce itself. Is this an issue elsewhere?

Responses raise many challenging questions for dialogue:

- Are leaders born or made?
- Do leaders learn and acquire leadership skills or is it a natural gift?
- What are the factors that entitle some to become leaders?
- What matters more — individual character/personality and motivation or ability to communicate and connect with others?
- Is there equity among roles?
- What opportunities and types of preparation are available to those who seek to become leaders?
- Can one be thrust into a position and grow to become a leader? How?
- Do leaders emerge in response to socio-political contexts?
- How do societal or cultural expectations determine who is chosen to become a leader?

## How do you define leadership?

Many perspectives on the definition of leadership were presented. Notably, individual skills, societal values, the multicultural nature of communities resulting in diverse perspectives, as well as hierarchy determine our leadership realities and influence the definitions.

*Leadership is the process of influencing the activities of an individual or group for achievement of goals in a given situation. It is also a way of guiding activities in a given community.*

— Manani Henry Kemoli, Kenya

Roslyn A. Duffy and Dr. Lily Wong suggest a theory that could be relevant to the topic of Culture and Leadership and how it is defined. The theory postu-

lates that there are basic characteristics that point out the differences between how Eastern and Western cultural expectations differ:

**In western cultures the four key values that are promoted are:**

- independence (go it alone)
- individualism (be unique)
- competition (go for the gold)
- involvement (them and us thinking)

**In eastern cultures the four key values that are promoted are:**

- interdependence (all together)
- collectivism (blend in)
- collaboration (team first)
- partnership (we and ours thinking)

Duffy and Wong add that the above defining qualities affect all aspects of life and what each culture would want and expect or accept from its leaders.

Other response highlights include:

Leadership is —

- the ability to communicate and bring others on a collective venture through shared vision and decision-making
- achieving goals in the collaboration, development, and journey of teams
- giving guidance and direction to others through shared leadership
- being able to move people’s hearts and minds and maximize their passion for a cause, issue, or vision
- showing and giving direction to others, moving people’s heads and hearts (and bodies!) in making a difference
- having a clear sense of purpose and clarity of thought in defining a vision
- recognizing and building on individual perspectives and efforts to create shared vision and team spirit
- defined by societal and cultural values

*Transformational Leadership: Changing, motivating, and elevating both the leaders and the followers in ways that improve society and create an environment that prepares children and adults*

*to participate in the leadership process.*

— Debra Ren-Etta Sullivan, p. 14

Communicating one's vision with others, guiding and connecting, team approaches, and shared leadership were recurrent themes in the definitions offered.

- Is shared leadership prevalent in our field?
- How do different cultural and social realities and contexts influence the definition of leadership?
- Can there be one definition?
- How are one culture's values honored and maintained in cross-cultural leadership building?

### What are some characteristics of leaders?

This question elicited many clusters of one word responses.

#### Some of the common characteristics.

Leaders are —

- creative
- passionate
- courageous
- communicators
- honest
- tolerant
- charismatic
- respected and respectful
- listeners
- decisive
- confident
- determined
- enthusiastic
- intelligent
- helpful
- organizers
- inspiring
- role models
- mentors

#### Among the unique or uncommon responses:

Leaders —

- have personal and professional integrity
- are critical thinkers

- possess a sense of purpose
- are eager to learn

#### From Manani Henry Kemoli in Kenya:

Leaders —

- achieve group goals and mission
- relate to followers
- are the center of group control and direction
- lead in a continuous process, without end
- are experienced
- influence others

#### From Boh Boon Chiang in Malaysia:

Leaders are —

- fair
- “walk the talk”
- caring
- loyal
- mentally tough

#### From Karen Stephens in the U.S.:

Leaders —

- are accountable
- share credit for success
- help others shine
- stand committed in the face of resistance
- are willing to take risks and fail

#### From Eva Lilla Lampert in Hungary:

Leaders are —

- imaginative
- confident in the future
- sympathetic to the environment and others
- able to think in connections and systems
- cheerful, humorous, and able to be happy

#### From Anne Stonehouse in Australia:

Assumption: “If leadership varies, then leaders' characteristics vary.”

Leaders —

- are willing to understand opposing views
- are able to commit to finding a way through
- hold strong beliefs and convictions

It would seem, as one respondent suggests, that all of these characteristics add up to a leader who would need to be superhuman! Yet they are truly human characteristics. There is consensus that we know a leader when we see one. No mention of socio-economic class, race, age, or gender emerged.

*What are the implications about Culture and Leadership across age gender in our field? What characteristics stand out for you?*

### How are young and emerging leaders encouraged to grow and exercise their leadership?

Respondents offered many suggestions to support the development of young leaders. The preponderance of ideas involved someone in a higher position assigning additional responsibilities to less experienced staff such as:

- Give responsibilities early — through small committees, before larger ones.
- Give extra tasks.
- Put them in situations where they will be stretched.
- Provide opportunities for them to practice roles of collaboration, community building, networking, and advocacy.
- Some are emerging through nomination of management.
- Ask them to take responsibility in order to gain/have competence.

Others offered suggestions to *existing* leaders about what they need to do:

- listen to the younger ones
- tell them that they have leadership qualities

- trust them
- be empathetic
- encourage initiative
- give recognition for activism
- don't "over-boss" or overburden them
- be honest and supportive
- let them focus on interests that they care about
- urge them to get degrees
- recognize their good work

Some general supportive comments include:

- Let them know that it is alright to make mistakes — we learn from mistakes.
- Use one-on-one mentoring, coaching, and peer mentoring strategies.
- Emphasize the value of authentic friendships.

*Friendships go a long way to sustaining energy levels and commitment — especially when times look grim or hopeless.*

— Karen Stephens, United States

Admittedly, the survey question asked how young and emerging leaders are encouraged to exercise their leadership. Yet there was not acknowledgement in the responses about how younger people *already possess leadership qualities*. Many of the responses imply a traditional model of empowerment — where another person "bestows power" on another. Perhaps in our field there is an expectation that older leaders should nurture young leaders, as we might nurture young children. We see some problems with these approaches. What do you think?

Judi Pack admitted that there is little emphasis in her community on "grooming" young leaders. We wonder if this factor is prevalent elsewhere. Is it true in your community?

## What knowledge and skills do leaders need as they prepare to become advocates?

Probably the most common response to this question was that leaders need strong communication and interpersonal skills to become effective advocates. They need the ability to listen and learn, to speak out and be articulate and to be knowledgeable about the subjects they are addressing. Additional skills noted were understanding group dynamics and facilitation, possessing technical and administrative capacities, and having abilities around conflict-resolution, goal-setting and achievement, organizing and network building. Personal attributes for advocates included being idealistic, humane, self-confident, and demonstrating respect for others. Working with others, not against. Avoiding burnout and balancing home, family, and spiritual life were priorities to Karen Stephens. Anne Stonehouse said that advocates need courage — "just take a deep breath and jump in, on or off!"

For several respondents, the line between leader and advocate was quite thin. Advocates, like leaders, need to believe in what they are doing, possess strong convictions and be willing to take risks. Vijaya Murthy reminded us that becoming an advocate is a process. Like change, it happens over time and is not a single moment or event.

## What are some examples of collaboration, organizing, shared leadership, and group efforts to build leadership and achieve goals? What has been successful? What are some of the obstacles?

Here are some common examples of successes and barriers:

## Successes

### Collaborations work successfully when:

- there is a shared commitment to address an opportunity or a problem
- work is shared equitably together
- they are well organized
- programs (e.g., leadership development) are intentional
- opportunities are created for the growth of potential or emerging leaders through mentoring
- staff are paid and have time and energy to put into them
- professional development experiences and opportunities are accessible to share knowledge and experiences
- parent and community education bring about shared vision
- they recognize and build on the strengths of communities
- staff are involved in planning and in decision-making
- barriers are addressed through teamwork and appropriate conflict resolution

### Collaborative experiences suggest these points:

- Some collaborations are mandated by law — make the best of them!
- There is a need to work together on tasks to get the job done.
- Developing partnerships can leverage funds.
- Collaborations provide opportunities for shared leadership and community awareness about the benefits of collaborations needs to be strengthened.

*What do we learn from these experiences? What are our success stories? Do we have similar or different experiences? Does collaboration need to be intentional or can it grow through a shared interest/issue or a relationship built through working on tasks together? What is the role of communities in building collaboration?*



*Promote authentic leadership: Vision and facilitation that comes from the heart of the community in which the work is based. Leaders who know a cultural context intimately are needed to help community members experience meaningful change, professional development, and personal empowerment.*

— Cecelia Alvarado, p. 38

## Obstacles

### Obstacles to collaboration include:

- The field is internally divided and unable to look at major or global issues.
- There is lack of understanding vision and goals to forge collaborations.
- There is lack of awareness, education, and readiness to take on responsibilities.
- Traditional leadership and hierarchy present limitations that can prevent involvement of nontraditional leaders.
- There isn't enough time, due to personal and professional responsibilities.
- Low pay, work schedule requirements, and lack of job flexibility make it difficult for practitioners to exercise leadership outside of programs.
- Language barriers lessen participation of English language learners.
- Poverty, literacy issues, and socio-political challenges hold back opportunities for growth.
- Scarce staff and resources impede collaboration.

Respondents raised critical points and issues that deter collaborations and hinder shared leadership. They emphasized the importance of building awareness and readiness for creating a common vision in collaborations. Naturally, the following questions emerge in reference to the obstacles presented. They may appear daunting, but they are not insurmountable!

- Are we yet determined to help shape shared vision in our communities?
- How do we create a shared vision?
- What are the strategies needed to build awareness, reflection, and action?
- How do we address the limitations of hierarchy in our systems?
- How do we integrate collaborations into our busy work lives?
- How do we address social and economic issues such as poverty, illiteracy, and other barriers that impede growth and opportunity?
- How do we navigate socio-political issues in building partnerships across institutions serving children and families?

- How do we identify and maximize the strengths in communities?

If our field seeks to facilitate the identification, development, and support of new leaders within and across cultures and roles, more dialogue and debate is needed at this stage. Global alliances can be forged that achieve shared understandings about effective ways to create equity in leadership development and opportunities. We urge that awareness-building exchanges and the creating of vision continue to be made in and among cultural communities. There is much to teach and learn as we keep our focus on a better world for children, families, and those who work with and cherish them.

## References

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