

Superdirector! “All Things to All People,” But One

I just want to make everyone happy. I want to be there 100% for my staff, children, parents, and community. I don't dare get sick; who else would work 12-hour days. Of course, I want to be there for my family, too.” —Anonymous Center Director

The Myth. Ask any child care Director from Poughkeepsie to Phoenix to describe what the job entails. You are likely to hear: Teacher, counselor, mediator, organizer, confessor, therapist, cleaner, futurist, comforter, cook, cheerleader, coach, crisis interventionist, bus driver, computer software expert, clown, messenger, financial officer, mother, father, sibling, advocate, child development specialist, paralegal, publicist, public speaker, jester and plumber. Directors often feel they must be “All things to all people” with one exception, themselves.

Directors as leaders are called upon to challenge unexamined assumptions. Diane Fassel, in *Working Ourselves to Death* (1990), defines myth as a: “Powerful belief that often goes unexamined by the majority of society. Myths are internalized and become part of the way things are) (p.7). Does the myth about being “all things to all people” mean that boundaries and caregiving are mutually exclusive? Have Directors internalized an impossible expectation? Perhaps the “Way things are” is not the only way things can be.

The myth of being all things to all brings to mind other unwritten commands. “Never put off ‘til tomorrow, what you can do today” and, “If you want something done well, do it yourself,” represent powerful beliefs internalized by many of us. Ask any child care Director from Tampa to Tempe to name the characteristics of a “good woman.” You will hear, as I have heard: Nurturing, ladylike, never angry or complaining, polite, unconditionally loving, patient, friendly, sweet, perfect, immaculate, generous. Perfection is the mythological standard to which women are traditionally held (Woodman, 1982). Is anyone surprised: “A woman’s work is never done?”

Notice the similar expectations to which “good women” and Directors are held: Be perfect, competent at every task, never tire, take care of everyone but yourself. Despite access of both genders to leadership positions in caregiving professions, a myth prevails that the traits of a good woman define caregiving. Traits central to caregivers, even as leaders, are to be needless, wantless, and selfless (Pia Mellody, 1989). Tellingly, Mellody identifies being needless and wantless as symptoms of codependency. SuperDirectors are excellent candidates for codependency.

Codependency often begins with overwork, progresses to losing touch with what nourishes us, and can culminate in loss of identity. Well-intended Directors’ selflessness, putting needs of others ahead of their own, can ironically distance Directors from their own reality. Frequent illness of child care professionals is not only due to overexposure to sneezing babies, but to overextension as well.

Challenging the Myth. Just as e-mail replaces “snail” mail, and the movie hero in *As Good as It Gets* accepts his need for psychotropic medication (picturing John Wayne in Melvin’s role), so too do we need to let go of archaic and unproductive expectations for Directors. The quest to be the Perfect Director, although laudable, sets leaders up for burnout, disillusionment and loneliness. The quest to be real, honest and healthy exemplifies nurturing. Directors need to care for themselves as attentively as they care for their children and staff.

“Burnout” is defined by Webster (1995, p.148) as “Physical or emotional exhaustion, especially as a result of long-term stress.” Realistic, life-affirming professional standards recharge Directors rather than burn them out. Few would argue that quality education and care for children is unimportant to those children, their families and communities. However, our children will not learn how to care for themselves until they observe us attending to our own needs. Sleep-deprived, hungry, overworked and overwhelmed Directors are not free to use their gifts.

An authentic vision for leadership in our “educaring” profession demands a sustaining model of self-care. Directors have the right to:

- Set healthy boundaries
- Be professional, not perfect

SET HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

Giving and receiving. Vigilant attention to the well being of children, families, staff and diverse communities is requisite to quality care. Professionals selflessly provide this care without expecting their “customers” to respond with equal zeal. In practice, a toddler’s smile or a parent’s note of appreciation are welcome, but unexpected returns of energy. This outward flow of energy empties the caregiver, unless that energy is replenished. Educator and theologian Matthew Fox postulates: “Your work can be your spiritual path, a sacred activity” (1997). Not all spiritual paths lead to martyrdom. SuperDirectors “martyr out” when they give so much of themselves, they burn out into frazzled crisps.

Human being vs. human “doing.” Directors as people have physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual needs, as do their staffs and customers. A Director with self-sustaining, healthy boundaries listens and attends to her/his own needs for nurturing: Wade into a cool lake, step outside into a leafy summer day, work out, play the harmonica however badly, dance. All are as essential as rest and nutritious food. Sharing in a deep and emotionally freeing way with a trusted person is essential. Time for reflection, prayer or meditation brings healing perspective. Playing, laughing, celebrating as a human “being” rather than a human “doing” is crucial. Taking time for themselves in any of these ways can feel traitorous to SuperDirectors.

One small step. Alleviating the burned-out SuperDirector pattern of “all work, no play” begins best with one small step. When you make the list of today’s “to-do’s,” highlight two tasks that are most difficult for you. Maybe you feel uneasy about confronting the cook, or wish you did not have to meet with the dad whose daughter has been bitten twice by the same child. Schedule the most difficult tasks for as early in the day as possible. Now comes the change: once you have completed that difficult task, allow yourself at least 10 minutes to do something you love. Head to the infant room to sing to a gorgeous baby; to her, you will be Aretha Franklin. E-mail a colleague in your directors’ support group. Walk outside to see the light filter through the trees.

A self-sustaining Director acknowledges each person's inherent worth, including her/his own. Lorraine in Poughkeepsie, who leaves work to enjoy time with her family, sets a powerful example of self-care. Maryjo, a Director in Atlanta, gives herself an hour each day to work out; in Boston, Marina revels in her clay and meditation class; in Las Cruces, Lou's roughhousing with his nephew, Tinker, releases the worries of the day. Give yourself a free moment today to commit to caring for yourself in just one specific, doable way. Then, as the ad urges: "Just do it."

BE PROFESSIONAL, NOT PERFECT

"I have the right to do less than is humanly possible." If this recovering perfectionist's affirmation feels blasphemous to you, you are not alone. Perfectionists strive to achieve goals beyond any mortal, then measure their self-worth by their ability to attain these goals. Perfectionist Directors define moderation as mediocrity, compromise as copping out, balance as being derailed from goals. SuperDirector's myth is: "If I work harder, I can keep everything in control: myself, my staff, the Board, all the outcomes, especially law suits." Directors are prone to perfectionism because they feel they cannot afford mistakes in their work. Work addiction, the helpmate of perfectionism, is America's one applauded addiction. SuperDirectors are prone to workaholism.

Before going further in this analysis of leadership and perfectionism, we need to address an underlying issue: Does being professional require being perfect? High standards are attainable and admirable; perfectionist standards are not. Karen Talley and James Robertson (1998), while exploring concepts of professionalism in *Leadership Quest*, promote high, not unattainable, standards for professional development. A's are commendable; however, not every A must be an A+. On professionalism and the future of early childhood education, Gwen Morgan (1998) speculates: "Rather than trying to adapt to incompatible ideas from the past, it is entirely likely that we should be asserting our own concepts as strengths, and celebrating ways in which we have always been ahead of the curve" (p.4). One such strength is the holistic view this profession takes on care and education.

Note also that even the most traditional of professional disciples do not expect perfection. The legal profession, for example, has long upheld the "reasonable person" standard. Judges expect us to make a "good faith," not superhuman, effort. Similarly, to avoid being negligent, we must exercise "due care," not impeccable care. More recently, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) sets a standard of "reasonable accommodation" in adapting to the needs of an employee with a handicap. Case law has clarified "reasonable" as that which does not lead to "undue hardship" such as bankruptcy.

In the end, moderation may be more professional than "all or nothing" perfectionism (Bruno, 1996). I have yet to meet the perfect attorney.

Aiming for excellence as Directors does not mean setting ourselves up for human impossibility. Check below any SuperDirector's traits that describe you:

- When I accomplish something, I minimize it by thinking, "Anyone could do it."
- Confuse doing my best in a chosen situation with doing the best all the time.

- Chronically deprive myself of leisure time.
- Think in extremes, “all or nothing” approach.
- Inner pressure to use every second productively.
- Set myself up not to truly succeed.
- Guardedness about being “found out” as less than perfect, unworthy.
- Seek absolute self-control.
- Exquisitely attuned to unspoken societal expectations.

Freeing SuperDirectors from perfectionism. Directors can use their professional acumen to lighten up unrealistic demands on themselves. Consider if any of these practices might work for you:

1. **Just say “no,”** “I don’t know”; “I made a mistake”; “I won’t/cannot do that today”; “What the hey, Rome wasn’t built in a day.” The leader who models continuous improvement, encourages staff to do the same. “I’ll get back to you when I find out the answer,” is more effective than fretting over not having all the answers. Delegating eases the “Thou shalt be all things to all people” burden.”
2. **Distinguish between tasks,** those I will do with excellence as opposed to those I will do “well enough.” When Directors are asked to name just one task that can be done “well,” not “perfectly,” the most usual response is “making my bed?” or “organizing my desk.” Start small. Your staff will appreciate your humanity.
3. **Acknowledge the voice of the inner saboteur, while declining to accept the message.** “Thanks, but no thanks.” Directors can be excruciatingly hard on themselves, berating themselves internally, rather than crediting themselves on work well done. My son, Nick, at age 5, used to say: “Silly me!” when he made a mistake. Image replacing “Stupid me” with “Silly me.” Celebrate an accomplishment before racing to the next task.
4. **Schedule finite and less time to work on tasks.** Break the task into “doable” steps. Give yourself an hour to complete the task. At the end of the hour, put the task aside. You will be surprised at what you can accomplish.

“Progress, not perfection,” a 12 Step program adage, captures the important distinction between high and impossible standards. In a profession that honors developmentally appropriate practices, leaders can apply similar compassion to their own ongoing development.

Myths die out slowly. *Simone de Beauvoir in Second Sex (1992)*, acknowledges women can never be authorities as long as we wait for society to anoint us. External demands that Directors be tireless, superhuman leaders are outdated. By setting healthy boundaries and embodying moderation, ECE leaders are not only reinventing the profession, but redefining meaningful work for all. Meaningful work helps people grow, enriches understanding, invites the future, and enhances the soul. An effective Director models self-care and continuous learning for all to see and, one day, emulate.

“Changing our ways includes changing the way we define work...compensate work...create work, and the way we let go of work and infuse it with play and ritual (Fox, p.5). When SuperDirector burns out, what legacy is left in the ashes for the children? You as a Director in the new millennium can choose to advocate for quality care for all, including yourself, as a model for others. The secret is in finding yourself as worthy of care as any other human being. Need a daily reminder? Look behind you: a spaghetti-sauced, beaming toddler approaches, arms wide as angel wings, to offer you a hug.

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