

Inspiring Professional Growth

Empowering Strategies to Lead, Motivate, and
Engage Early Childhood Teachers



Susan MacDonald, MEd

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Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without the insights that I have gained through my work with so many dedicated leaders of early childhood programs. Their willingness to openly share the challenges they face has allowed me to see and better understand the strategies that would support them as they worked to strengthen their leadership skills. I am especially grateful to “Karen,” the director who allowed me to share vignettes from her professional-development work throughout this book.

The opportunity to collaborate with Andy Fleming, Claire Lee, and Allison Rowland from Way to Grow, INC, to pilot the Growth Culture Indicator® assessment tool with a group of early childhood leaders provided me with valuable insights and data. I am deeply thankful for the time, energy, and expertise they so willingly shared to guide me in building my understanding of the concept of growth culture and deliberately developmental practices.

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Introduction



The degree to which I can create relationships which facilitate the growth of others as separate persons is a measure of the growth I have achieved in myself.

—Carl Rogers, psychologist

Creating a school culture in which each teacher is deeply valued for her strengths and provided with relevant and engaging professional-development opportunities is essential for enhancing the quality of early childhood programs. School leaders must be willing to bravely step forward to create a school culture in which accepting mediocrity is replaced with a full commitment to helping every educator reach her full potential. Without a clear focus on the intentional and consistent growth of every individual in the program, leaders will face ongoing challenges that inhibit any substantial progress in improving their programs. It is time for leaders to develop new strengths-based approaches for continually supporting educators in setting and achieving professional goals so they can positively affect and enhance the quality of care they provide for children and their families.

Over the past decade, new research has led to the development of standards to address the urgent need to increase the quality of early childhood programs. These standards provide the specific details for what is required to achieve high quality in early childhood programs. What leaders need are skills and strategies on how to inspire and guide their staff to bring these quality-enhancing practices into their daily work.

The transition from simply going through the motions of checking off all the boxes of the new requirements and standards to living an empowering system for supporting positive growth and change is a major shift for leaders. For many leaders, these new standards and requirements are overwhelming, leaving them unsure of the best way to motivate and engage staff in their own professional growth. Even when leaders take steps to bring about positive changes, they often fall back into the old, established, and comfortable patterns of leadership. Fear of change, and often



Question: What would you change about the program?

- “Tolerating long-term employees who are lazy, entitled, not understanding of rules and feel expectations don’t apply to them. We have lost great teachers because of this problem. This has to be addressed or we cannot (and frankly have not) move forward to better ourselves as teachers.”
- “We cannot give the children our best if we do not care to learn as much as we teach.”
- “We all need to be team players. We are all educators here and we are only as strong as our weakest teacher. We can’t coast by doing the minimum any longer.”
- “We need to work on professionalism, higher education standards for teachers, new training topics focused on the individuals. “

These responses all expressed the staff’s desire to work in a program that values and supports their professional growth and holds every staff member accountable to the same standards. This desire for a leader who supports and facilitates these goals is not unique to Karen’s program; it is a battle cry from early childhood educators across the field, and one that requires a strong response.

The survey results made it crystal clear to Karen that she needed to fully step into her leadership role and find new ways to build her skills. Throughout this book, I will share stories of Karen’s journey to develop her leadership competencies, utilize new strategies to support her staff, and transform the culture of her program to one that focuses on the growth and development of teachers.

How This Book Is Organized

This book lays out nine powerful components and strategies that shape a leader’s ability to create a growth culture in their early childhood programs.

- Building a growth culture
- Establishing professional accountability
- Honing your leadership skills
- Being deliberately developmental
- Understanding adults as learners
- Creating meaningful and measurable goals

- Observing and providing feedback
- Facilitating effective professional development
- Fostering collaborative relationships

Each chapter will contain the following:

 • **Karen's Story:** Karen's story is based on an ongoing coaching relationship with a school leader who has been consistently working on building her leadership skills to improve the quality of the child care program she is directing. (The names and specific identifying details have been changed to maintain confidentiality.)

 • **CONNECT!** These text boxes provide links to relevant standards and research.

 • **Taking Action:** Each chapter ends with practical, hands-on ideas for leaders to use the new information provided.

 • **Digging Deeper:** Relevant and engaging resources to continue your learning on the specific topics addressed in each chapter.

My overarching goal in writing this book is to inspire and guide leaders in creating a vital shift from a school culture that accepts mediocrity to a growth culture that will create the momentum needed to improve the quality of early childhood programs. This book presents the strategies, resources, and practical tools that will support leaders in becoming deliberately developmental in all aspects of their work with teachers. I developed these strategies based on my professional experiences working as a leadership coach, speaker, director of a Reggio-inspired preschool, and early childhood licensing supervisor. The strategies are informed by my passion for research and lifelong learning. I hope that the resources provided will inspire you to engage with new resources to guide your leadership journey.

CHAPTER ONE:



Defining Professional Accountability as a Fundamental Value

Professional accountability is a good thing. Without it, excellence is merely a pipe dream and even average performance isn't a realistic expectation.

—Leon Ellis, retired U.S. Air Force colonel, author, and consultant

Creating a school culture that is committed to the ongoing professional growth of every individual requires leaders to fully embrace the importance of professional accountability. A clear understanding of professional accountability that is shared by all members of the school community is an essential starting point. A simple definition of professional accountability is the ability and willingness of each individual to take full ownership of achieving desired outcomes. Leaders own the responsibility for establishing norms and protocols that hold every individual accountable for his attitude, behavior, and choice of actions related to his own professional growth.

Developing a school culture based on professional accountability can be challenging because it typically requires giving up certain behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes. Defense mechanisms, such as blaming others, making excuses, ignoring difficult situations, or playing the victim, often need to be shifted for accountability to exist.



Key Components of Professional Accountability

In the early childhood field, a lack of systemic accountability contributes to ineffective teaching practices, barriers to achieving quality, loss of employees, and inconsistent leadership behaviors. The following ten components form the foundation of a school culture where the expectation of professional accountability can thrive.

- Professional relationships built on trust
- Clear vision
- Specific goals
- Timelines
- Observation and feedback
- Reliable data
- Empowerment
- Engagement
- Leadership support
- Cultural alignment

PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS BUILT ON TRUST

Gaining and maintaining a teacher’s trust is vital for establishing professional accountability. When trust is low, you see dissent, blame, and passing the buck. Everyone hides personal weaknesses and information that could highlight the strengths of others. Building trust takes time, and leaders need to be intentional about taking the time to build trust with every member of their staff. An essential first step is for leaders to create a safe space for open and honest dialogues to occur. Consistently modeling and encouraging respectful engagement will help to develop trusting relationships. Trust will be established only when teachers have confidence that the leader has the skills, knowledge, and integrity necessary to lead.

CLEAR VISION

A compelling vision statement is essential for providing a direction for your program. For teachers to be accountable, they need one hundred percent clarity on where the program is headed and what is expected of them. The vision should paint a vibrant picture of the program operating at its highest level of success. Every individual needs goals that help him to obtain the skills and disposition needed to bring the vision to life. When goals are fully aligned with the vision, the transformative journey of growth can begin. The power and importance of having a vision statement cannot be overstated. It is a critical step in building a growth culture.

SPECIFIC GOALS

Once the vision is clear, specific measurable goals can be developed for every member of the organization. The goals need to reflect each staff member’s individual areas of growth as well as areas of growth related to achieving the program-wide vision. When goals are linked to the vision, they provide a direct connection between the individual’s professional growth and the quality of the program. Engaging staff in meaningful discussions about their individual strengths and areas for improvement will build trust and open communication that is necessary for powerful and meaningful growth to occur. staff in

meaningful discussions about their individual strengths and areas for improvement will build trust and open communication that is necessary for powerful and meaningful growth to occur.

TIMELINES

Developing a specific timeline for each goal supports goal achievement. Goals that lack timelines are often rewritten year after year without any significant progress being made, and staff soon lose motivation to make changes. It is the leader's role to work with teachers to establish timelines that are both relevant and realistic. Scheduling regular check-in meetings to discuss the status of each goal helps to keep the momentum needed to fully achieve those goals.

OBSERVATION AND FEEDBACK

Using the goals to focus observation and feedback is another significant way to increase professional accountability. It is important for teachers to see that you are intentionally using your time and resources to support them in making consistent progress. Offering strengths-based feedback on the positive changes you observe will build confidence and help teachers to continue the work necessary to fully achieve their goals.

RELIABLE DATA

When possible, use tools that help you measure what needs to change. For example, if a teacher is struggling to create a positive emotional climate in his classroom, have a *Classroom Assessment and Scoring System* (CLASS) assessment done to obtain reliable data on the climate, and then repeat the CLASS after a specified time frame to see what growth and change has occurred. The early childhood field has many assessment tools that will provide reliable data to track professional growth and change.

EMPOWERMENT

The relationship between accountability and empowerment is symbiotic. It is very challenging for teachers to be accountable for their professional growth if they don't feel empowered to make meaningful decisions and choices in their roles as educators. Creating conditions in which educators can try out innovative ideas, discuss differing perspectives, and make reasonable accommodations in their classrooms encourages teachers to find unique ways to strengthen their professional skills and achieve their goals. Empower teachers by allowing them to contribute to their professional-development plans and to generate creative ideas for reaching their goals. Let the teachers know you believe in them and have confidence in their abilities by consistently highlighting what they are doing well. Once teachers see that you truly value them, they will develop the confidence needed to grow and develop.

ENGAGEMENT

Focusing on professional accountability is futile if teachers are not fully engaged in their roles as educators. Teachers who are disengaged often simply go through the motions required to get through their workdays; they do not demonstrate professionalism and have little motivation to improve their teaching practices. “Five Ways to Improve Employee Engagement Now,” Robyn Reilly’s 2018 article on the Gallup Business Journal website, identifies three types of employees:

- 1. Engaged:** Employees work with passion and feel a profound connection to their company. They drive innovation and move their organization forward.
- 2. Not Engaged:** Employees are essentially “checked out.” They’re sleepwalking through their workdays, putting time—but not energy or passion—into their work.
- 3. Actively Disengaged:** Employees aren’t just unhappy at work; they are acting out their unhappiness. Every day, these workers undermine what their engaged coworkers accomplish.

Leaders need to consistently observe their staff and address decreasing engagement as soon as it appears to make it clear to everyone that full engagement is a foundational expectation for their work. Leaders who take a strengths-based approach for increasing staff engagement will see positive changes in professional growth. The Gallup organization has done extensive research on employee engagement. In her 2014 article on the Gallup Business Journal website, Susan Sorenson states that Gallup has found that “building employees’ strengths is a far more effective approach to improving performance than trying to improve weaknesses. When employees know and use their strengths, they are more engaged, perform better, and are less likely to leave the company.”

Creating a work environment where everyone is clear on their expectations, challenges are discussed in a timely manner, and teachers are acknowledged and validated for their unique strengths is a key component for building engagement.

LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

Modeling accountability is essential for leaders who are committed to creating a growth culture. Consistently connecting professional-development goals to the mission, vision, and core values of the program will support teachers in understanding the relationship between their actions and the quality of the program. Taking time to let teachers know that they are valued and that they have the support they need to achieve their goals will inspire them to be vested in their own professional growth. Providing the resources that teachers need, such as training, course stipends, and materials, also demonstrates that the leader is supportive of goal achievement.

CULTURAL ALIGNMENT

The culture of your program sets the tone for professional accountability. A cultural norm of low engagement, not achieving goals, and avoiding difficult conversations makes it extremely challenging to expect individuals to feel accountable for their professional growth. When the culture of the school focuses on setting and achieving high expectations and is aligned with established standards and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) code of ethics, accountability will be recognized and understood as a guiding component for everyone who works in the program.



CONNECT! NAEYC Code of Ethics

Inspiration for establishing professional accountability as a fundamental practice in all aspects of your early childhood program can be found in the *NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment*. The following excerpts are examples of the many ways that the core values, ideals, principles, and statement of commitment stated in the code of ethics guide and support professional accountability:

- **Core Values:**

- Respect the dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each individual (child, family member, and colleague).
- Respect diversity in children, families, and colleagues.
- Recognize that children and adults achieve their full potential in the context of relationships that are based on trust and respect.

- **Ideals:**

- To establish and maintain relationships of respect, trust, confidentiality, collaboration, and cooperation with coworkers
- To share resources with coworkers, collaborating to ensure that the best possible early childhood care and education program is provided
- To support coworkers in meeting their professional needs and in their professional development
- To accord coworkers due recognition of professional achievement
- To assist the program in providing the highest quality of service
- To work through education, research, and advocacy toward a society in which all young children have access to high-quality early care and education programs

- **Principles:**

- We shall recognize the contributions of colleagues to our program and not participate in practices that diminish their reputations or impair their effectiveness in working with children and families.
- We shall apply for, accept, and work in positions for which we are personally well-suited and professionally qualified. We shall not offer services that we do not have the competence, qualifications, or resources to provide.

- **Statement of Commitment:**

To the best of my ability I will:

- stay informed of and maintain high standards of professional conduct.
- engage in an ongoing process of self-reflection, realizing that personal characteristics, biases, and beliefs have an impact on children and families.
- be open to new ideas and be willing to learn from the suggestions of others.
- continue to learn, grow, and contribute as a professional.

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Provide a Clear and Consistent Message

Professional accountability needs to be addressed from the beginning of the hiring process right through the exit-interview process. The importance of every educator’s being fully committed to his professional growth should be reflected in job postings, interview questions, orientation procedures, establishing professional-development plans, yearly performance reviews, and any disciplinary-action protocols. Leaders may find it necessary to revise their staff handbooks and any relevant hiring and employment materials to convey a clear message about the expectations for professional accountability in the workplace.

Karen’s Story

Bringing these ten elements for increasing professional accountability into your program will require consistent, focused time and effort. Every leader will have a unique journey that is reflective of the specific issues and needs of his program. For Karen, who was facing a myriad of challenges including low morale, negative (sometimes hostile) communication between staff members, and an overall lack of confidence in her ability to lead her program, the choice of a first step for rebuilding the school’s culture required careful reflection. After thoughtful consideration, Karen decided to focus on establishing a collaborative vision that would become the guiding light for the necessary changes;

she would also set up a process for creating an individual professional-development plan (IPDP) for each of her staff to build awareness of the goals they needed to achieve to bring the vision to life.

To move forward with her plans to increase professional accountability, Karen needed to develop a clear action plan for each of the two elements she had identified. The specific action steps she developed are laid out for you to reference as you begin your journey. Remember: to ensure that teachers accomplish their goals, leaders must consistently evaluate progress and look ahead to the next step. Once Karen had a vision in place and meaningful IPDPs established with each educator, she realized her staff handbook was not aligned with her new ways of supporting professional accountability. Her journey continued with revising the handbook, job descriptions, and hiring protocols. The strategies, resources, and action plans laid out in this book are designed to guide you through your own process for establishing a growth culture in your program.

Taking Action

To create a school culture that is focused on professional accountability, you need to create a shared vision that becomes the driving force that guides and inspires everyone's actions and interactions. Creating a collaborative vision statement is a process that requires focus, planning, and open communication. Here is an overview of this empowering process:

Step 1. Clarify the focus.

What are the key areas you would like to focus on to enhance the quality of your program? What is the positive effect you want to make in the lives of children, teachers, and families?

Step 2. Use reflective practices to identify the core values of your program.

Select a series of reflective exercises to work through as a group to identify the core values of your program. Clarifying the core values provides the foundation for writing a vision statement that honors strengths and longstanding ideals of the program.

- **Example: Create Vision Boards**

It is important that teachers become fully engaged in creating a shared vision for the future of the program. You can create these vision boards during a staff meeting or ask the staff to bring to the meeting vision boards they have already created. Here is a sample description of what you would like them to create:

To create your vision board, you need to imagine that it is (insert date one year into the future), and the (name of your program) is a vibrant, energized, and amazing place for children and teachers to live in and learn together. Using an 8" x 10" piece of paper, illustrate exactly what is happening in your vision. You can use magazine cutouts, words, cartoons, drawings, or photographs to illustrate your vision. Your vision boards will form the foundation of our work together at our next staff meeting.

At the meeting, divide the staff into groups of four or five people, and have them do the following:

- Share their vision boards.
- Summarize the key points of the group’s visions on a flip-chart page.
- Share their key points with the larger group.

After the meeting, type up a summary of the key points from all the groups, and develop a plan to begin to bring their visions to life.

• **Example: Hopes and Dreams**

This is, by far, one of the simplest ways to learn about teachers’ aspirations for the future of your program:

1. Set the stage. Discuss with the group that you would like to get a shared perspective on their hopes and dreams for your school or program. This exercise can be very broad or specific. For a broad perspective on overall expectations for your program, ask for their hopes and dreams for their program in the next year or two years.
2. Distribute index cards. Ask each participant to write his hopes and dreams on an index card, one idea or thought per card.
3. Collect the cards.
4. Read the statements back to the group. People are often reluctant to share and read their own cards, so create opportunities for all the cards to be read without having individuals read their own. You can ask for volunteers to come up and read the cards back to the group with you. Or distribute the cards back to the group, and ask everyone to read one—again, ensuring that nobody reads his own card.
5. Debrief. After all the cards have been read, ask the group, “What are the common themes? How do the hopes and dreams relate to the continued growth of the program?” Collect all the discussion points on a flip chart.
6. Create a Hopes and Dreams list. Type up all thoughts on the index cards and the notes from the debrief. Share them with participants, and use them as guide points for creating your vision statement.

Step 3. Use Appreciative Inquiry to tap into all that is possible. (Note: We will discuss the Appreciative Inquiry approach in more detail on pages 15–18.)

Facilitate meaningful discussions around these questions:

- If you had three wishes to transform this program, what would they be?
- If we could look into a crystal ball and see this program operating at its very best, what would we see? What would you be doing? What would the children be doing? What would be the most exciting thing you would notice?

Step 4. Synthesize all your reflections—key words, themes, and messages.

Create word lists and summary statements that reflect all the key messages gathered from your reflective activities and appreciative-inquiry exercises.

Step 5. Write draft vision statements.

Select a committee of staff members that reflects the diversity of your program. Be sure to include new and longtime staff and a mix of teachers and administrators. Some programs involve members of their boards and/or parent representatives. Work together to review your notes and keyword lists from all the activities. Then create two or three draft vision statements to share with the entire staff. Strive to create drafts that are clear, compelling, empowering, and motivational.

Step 6. Gather your community, and revise and redraft.

Choose a time to reflect on the vision statements. Discuss wording preferences, likes, and dislikes. Also, find ways for people to give candid and confidential feedback. Distribute note cards at the meeting or have them complete a short survey, either on paper or online.

Step 7. Share your vision.

Make the vision statement visible in all aspects of the program. Create visually appealing posters with the vision statement, and place them in the entranceway, classrooms, and teacher spaces. Select photos that capture the essence of the vision statement, and create a photo board display of the vision in action. Change the photos frequently to keep the board appealing and interesting. Use the vision statement on your website and in newsletters, blogs, job postings, and marketing materials. Read the vision statement at parent nights, staff meetings, and board meetings.

Step 8. Live the vision.

Create the momentum needed for the vision to come to life by finding ways to incorporate the vision’s key message in your daily work with children, teachers, and families. Use the vision as the

foundation for creating meaningful and relevant professional-development goals and learning experiences for teachers, administrators, and the program. Successfully weaving the vision into the daily life of the program will build a renewed sense of purpose and increase engagement.



Digging Deeper: Resources

Vision Statements and Reflective Activities

MacDonald, Susan. 2016. *Inspiring Early Childhood Leadership: Eight Strategies to Ignite Passion and Transform Program Quality*. Lewisville, NC: Gryphon House.

NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/ethical-conduct>

A growth culture starts with you.

You've probably seen it: frustration builds, teacher turnover rises, staff meetings become insufferable, indifference breeds throughout the school. The solution? Exploring new ways to engage and motivate teachers.

When your staff feels supported and empowered to grow and develop their skills, your program and the children will thrive. Implementing key concepts—collaboration, individualized professional-development plans, and team goals—can completely revolutionize your program.

In this follow-up to her book *Inspiring Early Childhood Leadership*, author Susan MacDonald, MEd, addresses the need for offering nurturing, encouraging, and empowering professional development. Featuring easy-to-use tips, research-based strategies, leadership vignettes, and interactive and reflective exercises, *Inspiring Professional Growth* provides leaders a framework to create a system that supports teachers throughout their careers.

Learn how to:

- Acquire new leadership skills
- Gain confidence in your leadership role
- Establish a growth culture
- Work with and nurture even challenging staff members
- Cultivate collaboration and collective goal setting
- Facilitate meaningful professional development

Inspiring Professional Growth will guide you to experience firsthand the many benefits, from better child outcomes to increased teacher retention, of creating a nurturing and empowering workplace.



Susan MacDonald, MEd, is the founder of Inspiring New Perspectives, a consultancy focused on empowering educational leaders to create programs that deeply respect and nurture the possibilities that lie within each child, parent, and teacher. She has been developing and delivering inspirational courses and workshops for more than 25 years. She has served as director of a Reggio-inspired preschool program, adjunct faculty at Lesley University and Wheelock College, and a Commonwealth of Massachusetts licensing supervisor. She holds a master's degree in instructional design and several professional coaching certifications.

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