

Leading Healthy Change in Early Childhood Education

Practical Strategies for Directors

Healthy change in early childhood education programs does not happen by accident. It requires thoughtful preparation, strong relationships, clear communication, and ongoing reflection.

Modifications to programming affect not only policies and procedures but also morale, identity, and the daily experiences of teachers, families, and children. When leaders approach changes intentionally, they strengthen both program quality and workplace culture.

Organizational health depends on a program's ability to adapt while maintaining trust, engagement, and a sense of shared purpose. When alterations and revisions are approached as a collaborative process rather than a single event, programs build resilience, deepen partnerships, and create environments where staff and families feel valued.

Start with Organizational Health

Organizational health is a program's ability to adapt to shifts and reforms while sustaining a strong, high-performing workplace culture. Because organizations are made up of people, healthy change depends on staff well-being, engagement, and a supportive environment that values diverse voices.

Practical Strategies

- Prioritize staff morale and emotional well-being during times of change.
- Create space for honest conversations about concerns and uncertainty.
- Build trust before introducing significant shifts in practice.

Prepare for Change Thoughtfully

Successful change begins long before an announcement is made. Leaders must clarify the "why," gather input, and identify who will be affected.

Practical Strategies

- Identify the program's core values before planning changes.
- Gather data through observation, surveys, and conversations.
- Develop a clear rationale: Why this change? Why now?
- Identify all stakeholders – teachers, families, children, board members, and community partners.
- Draft a realistic timeline and identify the resources, training, and support needed.

Ensure Buy-In Through Communication and Listening

Buy-in develops when people understand the purpose of change and feel heard throughout the process. Healthy leaders use humble inquiry and authentic listening.

Practical Strategies

- Clearly communicate benefits, potential drawbacks, and what stays the same.
- Invite feedback in staff and team meetings, as well as in one-on-one conversations.
- Ask: What might we lose? What concerns do you have?
- Be transparent about costs, timelines, and expectations.

Move Forward with Clarity and Support

After gathering input, leaders must move the process forward while maintaining clarity and momentum.

Practical Strategies

- Assign roles and set clear deadlines.
- Provide professional development aligned with the change.
- Follow up regularly using multiple communication methods.
- Acknowledge progress and celebrate small wins.
- Model the values and behaviors expected during the change process.

Sustain the Change

Change is not complete once implemented. Sustaining alterations requires evaluation, reflection, and adjustment.

Practical Strategies

- Create systems for ongoing feedback from staff and families.
- Schedule regular reflection meetings to assess progress.
- Adjust plans when new information emerges.
- Continue celebrating milestones and recognizing staff growth.

Develop the Personal Qualities that Support Healthy Change

Healthy change also requires internal leadership work. Strong leadership emphasizes the importance of willingness to unlearn, confident humility, flexibility, and a growth mindset.

Practical Strategies

- Practice “confident humility” – recognize what you do not know while remaining open to learning.

- Expect that some loss will accompany change.
- Avoid assuming staff will respond in the same way or at the same pace.
- View change as a process.
- Resist the urge to move too quickly; take time to research and understand the impact of change.

Avoid Common Pitfalls

Unhealthy change often occurs when leaders move too fast, avoid unnecessary conversations, or make decisions without collaboration.

Practical Strategies

- Do not avoid needed change out of fear of resistance.
- Avoid top-down decision-making without stakeholder input.
- Recognize that defensiveness and grief are normal reactions to change.
- Build relationships before introducing major structural shifts.

Additional Resources

[What Leaders Need to Know About Change](#)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EvkGX_Ir1A

[McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership Survey](#)

<https://mccormickcenter.nl.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2018/04/PAS-ECWES-Crosswalk.pdf>

Content contributed to by: Gail Solit

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