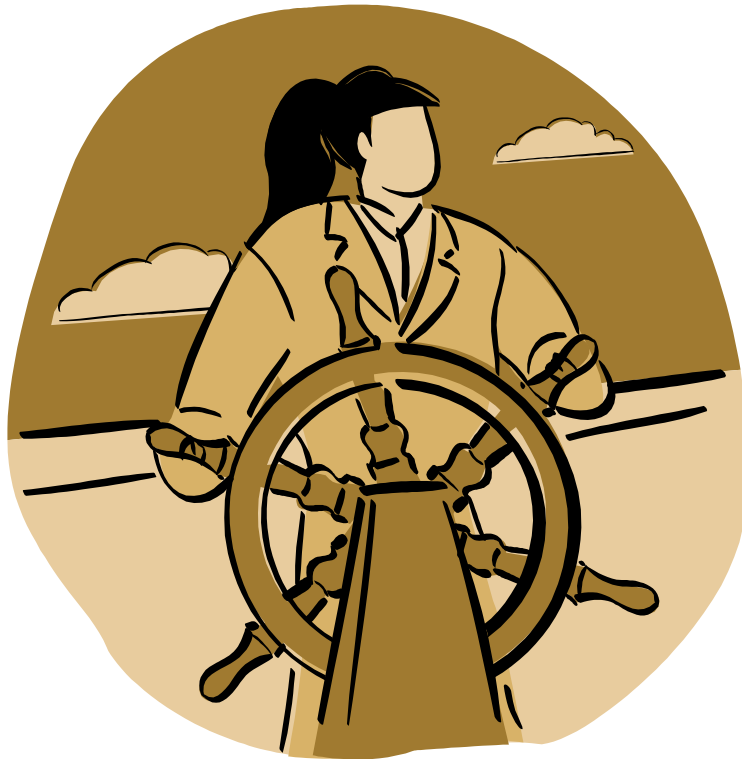


# CHAPTER 8



## LEADERSHIP AND MENTORSHIP



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# **BECOMING A LEADER COURTESY OF NACAC**

Adoptive, foster, and kinship parents have established and organized parent groups for years. Many motivated parents have started a group with a clear and focused mission in mind. Others simply wanted to help parents connect. Whatever level you may be at, you should think of yourself as a leader.

## **Recognizing Your Leadership Potential**

Have you ever:

- organized a birthday party for your child?
- participated in a political campaign by collecting signatures, registering voters, or distributing campaign literature?
- organized a bake sale, rummage sale, special event, or fundraiser for your place of worship, social club, book club, block club, or another organization?
- chaired a committee or held an office in high school, college, or in an organization?
- served as the captain of a team sport?
- organized a neighbourhood carpool?

If you can answer "yes" to any of these questions, or have taken on similar activities, you possess leadership skills. You don't have to be the president of a company, own your own business, or be a well-known spokesperson for an organization. All you need is the ability to envision a desirable future and get people to support that vision. As a parent, you do this every day with your children. Whether or not you have realized it before, you are a leader. The exercise below will help you identify your leadership qualities and those that you think are necessary for a parent group leader to have.



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### **Exercise: Identifying Your Strengths as a Leader**

This exercise will help you identify the skills and characteristics that make you a leader. Take a minute to make a list of your strengths—including both personality traits and abilities that will help you as a leader.

Are you:

- honest?
- organized?
- friendly?
- inspiring?
- funny?

Are you good at:

- focusing on the big picture?
- identifying strengths in others?
- communicating with diverse audiences?
- convincing others of your vision?
- supporting others through difficult times?

Then, make a second list of the skills and qualities you think a good parent group leader should possess. Compare your lists with the leadership characteristics we've identified throughout this chapter and the abilities in the box at the bottom of this page. Use our suggestions to expand both of your lists.

Next, compare the two lists you have made. Obviously you have many strengths that will make you a successful parent group leader. Are there some items in the second list that you don't have or would like to work on? Highlight any of the items in the second list that you want to develop in yourself.

These lists will help you realize the strengths you can rely on as you lead others, and identify the areas you need to work on to become the type of leader you aspire to be. If you highlighted any of the skills or characteristics in the second list, concentrate on developing them. For example, if you need to enhance your ability to focus on the future, think about and write down where you see yourself in the future: in three months, six months, one year, and three years. Then list one or two steps you can realistically take to reach those goals. Be creative and come back to this list periodically to check your progress.

## **Developing Leadership Characteristics**

A strong group needs good leadership to accomplish its goals. Strong leaders should have the best interests of the group in mind as they help guide the direction and carry out the mission of the group. Many of the most effective leaders are the ones who can listen to advice and input from others.

The following eight characteristics are often found in effective leaders. Think of leaders you admire and consider whether they are confident, assertive, hospitable, receptive, goal oriented, flexible, enthusiastic, or humorous. It is rare to possess all of these characteristics and certainly not necessary or required of you as a leader. Rather than possess each one of these qualities, a leader:

- appreciates and values the characteristics
- knows when and how to use them
- draws these qualities out in others

Think about the strengths you have now, the ones you want to develop, and the characteristics others might have that could complement your leadership style. Many parent group leaders share the leadership responsibilities and take advantage of the combined qualities of their team of leaders.

### **Confident**

If you don't already have it, one quality that is important to develop is confidence. Pure and simple, you must believe in yourself. There will be times when you will feel scared while facing difficulties, but it will be important for you to project confidence to others. In other words, act as if you feel confident until it becomes a quality you carry with you and can draw from even when tasks are challenging. Throughout your years as a leader, you will face multiple challenges, and come up against roadblocks and obstacles. People will make demands on your time and on your patience. Because parent group leaders often deal with difficult issues, accomplishing goals won't always be easy. Confidence will be one key to your ability to overcome these obstacles.

Part of gaining confidence is your own willingness to take risks and actively pursue projects and activities that feature your strengths, and then to let yourself expand to try new things. As you and your group experience successes, your confidence will grow and give you the courage to take on even greater challenges.

### **Assertive**

Assertiveness goes hand in hand with confidence. People who are assertive exude confidence and are forthright. They stand up for their rights and beliefs as well as the

rights and beliefs of others. Assertive people state what they need from others and respectfully listen when others express their needs. Assertive people take the time to understand themselves, are clear about what their expectations and needs are, and directly express those feelings and desires to others around them.

For many people, assertiveness is a tough thing to master. People who are aggressive rather than assertive are too forceful or pushy. They often annoy others because of their tendency to push their agenda and because of their inability to listen to others. On the other end of the spectrum, passive people often have trouble expressing themselves or taking action. Passive leaders either can't get anything done because they won't speak up or are easily manipulated because they defer to everyone.

Assertive leaders:

- are clear about their position on an issue
- seek more information if something seems undefined, unfocused, or confusing
- express their viewpoint
- hear and process the viewpoints of others
- discuss differences with an open mind
- factor in differing view points when making a decision

Look for a book or take a course on assertiveness if this is a skill you need to strengthen. As a leader, you will need to assert yourself, your position, and your cause often.

## **Hospitable**

It is important for you to be hospitable so you can welcome and attract new members to your group as well as keep them coming. Hospitality is exhibited to others in what you do, what you say, and even how you set up your meeting environment. It is important to be warm, congenial, and friendly; to smile, shake hands, and make direct eye contact. Think about your meeting as if you are welcoming guests into your home—Will members feel comfortable? Are there refreshments? Will group members sit on equal ground? Will they be able to see each other? Is there time set aside for introductions? Is the meeting room accessible to people with disabilities? Is there a place and staffing for child care? Think about meetings you have attended: What made a particular meeting enjoyable or what made another one uncomfortable? Providing hospitality doesn't just happen. It takes planning and a conscious effort to provide a welcoming environment.

## **Receptive**

An effective leader is receptive to other group members. Most people expect a leader to lead, but leading doesn't mean dominating. Groups—especially adults—are usually much

more effective when all members are valued as intelligent contributors and welcomed to share their knowledge and experience.

If members believe that you are only willing to push your own agenda, they will lose interest, feel discounted, and maybe even drop out. It is good to know you have a lot to share with the group, but if you are not receptive to the gifts of other group members, your leadership will feel like a dictatorship to them.

The following are ways to show that you are a receptive leader:

- let others voice their opinions before you voice yours
- brainstorm ideas with the entire group
- set group goals (not your goals)
- allow the talents and gifts of others to be revealed
- publicly acknowledge those gifts and value them
- encourage group members to use their talents by serving as officers or taking a leadership role on a group project or subcommittee

Receptive leaders are comfortable with their strengths and abilities but know they are not the only one who can teach the group; they also listen and learn from others.

### **Goal Oriented**

It is helpful for a group leader to be focused, particularly when the group is planning how to achieve its goals. One way to hold your focus as a leader is to prioritize. The group may have many worthy goals, but only a few of them will be attainable within the first year. Choose two or three, or if the goal is a big one, choose only one. Then think of how you might break the goal(s) down into smaller, more manageable steps.

A good leader also needs to be able to look ahead and plan for where the group will be in 3 months, 6 months, and 12 months and what it will take to get there. Thinking of those three time increments can help you to plan for what is realistic to accomplish.

### **Flexible**

Flexibility is not just a good skill; it is a survival tool. Many things can happen in a group that will be out of your control. The more you are able to see new possibilities, and develop another plan of action when roadblocks present themselves, the more successful and effective you will be as a leader. If you try to control everything, you will likely drive people away and frustrate yourself. It is impossible to control everything, and rigidity can lead to missed opportunities. When you are flexible, you are open to the potential of viewing or doing something in more than one way. When a project comes to a standstill, for example, remaining flexible allows you to consider a new plan of action. A leader

who is flexible is better able to listen to input from other group members and incorporate their best ideas into a solid strategy.

### **Enthusiastic**

When you are enthusiastic about what you are doing, your energy and excitement will spread to others and engage them to join you. If a leader is enthused about the group, new people will want to join and share their energy and talents. When talents flourish and the enthusiasm grows beyond the group, members from the community may take notice and even help the group attain its goals.

### **Humorous**

Last but not least, it is fun to be around a parent leader who enjoys humour and laughter. Like your role as a parent, your job as a leader can be rewarding but also stressful. Leaders who know how to laugh at themselves and at situations can reduce their stress and the stress of others. Research shows that laughter may reduce your physical pain and improve your emotional well-being. Laughter can help you live through any unpleasant situation. It can even promote clear thinking when ideas seem blocked. Learn to find humour in the ups and downs of leadership.

While being a parent is a stressful job, most parents have funny stories to tell about their parenting experiences. Finding humour in everyday living brings people together. Some of the stories we tell weren't so funny when they happened, but with perspective we can see the humorous side to them, and sometimes what we learned can help others.

As a group leader, encouraging laughter can help you:

- keep your cool in stressful situations
- reduce tension
- avert explosive situations when communicating with those who oppose you
- grab and keep your audience's attention
- communicate an unpopular message in a manner that deflects antagonism
- give you ammunition that can disarm the most powerful opponent
- find common ground with others in order to bring about a win-win agreement

Watch for situations where humour is not appropriate. For example, if a parent relays personal information needing serious attention from the group, follow the parent's lead. Let him choose if humour is appropriate for a situation. Don't decide for someone else whether a situation is funny.

In general, be open to laughter. The people around you will appreciate your spirit and will enjoy their work more. If you can infuse humour into the group, you will attract and maintain members, be more effective in your work, and have fun while you're at it.

### **Networking and Finding a Mentor**

As you take steps toward leadership, remember that you don't have to do this alone. Contact other parent groups in your area to see what they are doing well. Think about why certain groups are successful. Learn from those around you to develop new ideas of your own. Discuss your desire to start a new parent group with the other group leaders and members and ask for their support.

A good first step in becoming a leader is to find a mentor. When you identify someone who you think would be a good match, ask if he or she is willing to be your mentor. Ideally, you will find a person who has had experience leading a parent group or another kind of support group. Your mentor can guide and advise you as your leadership skills grow and mature. If you can't find a mentor from an established parent group, maybe there is a community leader—a volunteer coordinator, parent/teacher organization president, or religious leader—who has the qualities and skills you want to develop within yourself. Ask someone you respect if he or she would be willing to give you advice, answer questions, and provide moral support as you begin your parent group. Choose a person who seems to best fit your personality and understands your goals. Remember to make use of your mentor, especially when your confidence seems to fade or problems arise.

Remember that you have talents to offer too. A measure of a successful mentoring relationship is that the two of you build on each other's strengths. Many mentors have said that what makes a mentorship rewarding for them is how much they learn from the person they advise.

If there isn't the right mentor in your community, it is possible to find a parent group leader from almost anywhere in North America using the Internet. The use of e-mail has made it much easier for group leaders to communicate even across great distances.

### **Sharing Leadership**

Even if you are a confident leader and feel ready to start a parent group, it is a good idea to gather others around you to share the leadership responsibilities. Leading a group is a time- and energy-consuming undertaking and one way to ensure that you sustain your enthusiasm, drive, and commitment is to find others to help you. Calling together a leadership circle—others who share your vision and want to help you lead—not only divides responsibilities but can be fun.

## **Finding Other Leaders**

Most groups form because the members have something in common. For example, parents who have adopted older children from the foster care system will most likely benefit from being in a group with others who are living through similar experiences. Those who have adopted internationally may want to be with other families whose children are making adjustments to family life versus orphanage life, as well as a new culture and language. Older kinship parents might want practical tips from contemporaries for how to pace themselves as they parent the second time around.

Think of people you know who have adopted, or are foster or kinship care providers. Maybe there are people who attended training sessions at the same time you did who would like to be a member of your leadership circle and help get the group started. Tell local public and private agencies that you are looking for interested people to help lead your group.

If you don't know any potential foster, kinship, or adoptive parent leaders in your area, you can post signs in local clinics, churches, and grocery stores to try to find potential members of your leadership circle. You can also advertise in newspapers or on the Internet. If you live in a rural location and know there are no other adoptive, foster, or kinship families in your immediate area, you will have to make a broader publicity effort to find leaders who can commit to traveling to a central location. Doing all the work alone may seem easier now, but in the long run you will be glad you took the time to find other people to help form the group and develop the plan to get it started.

## **Organizing the Leadership Circle**

### *Selecting a Co-Leader*

As a founding member of the group, you may choose to be a primary leader even within a larger leadership circle. On the other hand, you may choose a co-leader who shares your vision and goals. This could be a longtime friend, spouse, or partner, or another parent you have met. Make sure it is someone who shares your enthusiasm, drive, and vision for a parent group.

If you think you have found a co-leader, make sure you clearly discuss your vision for a group with this person. Before taking on leadership together, it is also a good idea to talk about how you will share the role and try to determine whether your leadership styles will complement each other. Maybe you are someone who can see the big picture and is not afraid to set challenging goals. Maybe your partner is more detail-oriented and knows how to achieve outcomes by breaking goals down into smaller steps. Maybe one of you is the more dynamic personality and the other would rather work quietly in the background.

No matter what type of style you have, it is a good idea to discuss how you will approach the job of co-leading a group.

### *Dividing Roles*

Your leadership circle will need to identify how it will share responsibilities. Some groups organize their leadership by committee or general task. For example, one leader could chair the membership committee, another the finance committee, another the outreach committee, etc. If your group later decides to become a non-profit organization (as outlined in chapter 6), you will need to name group officers. In this case you may want to choose a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. Co-leaders may wish to keep their role as equals, but would benefit from having some other positions specified, such as treasurer.

Some groups organize their leadership circle by tasks that need to be done. For example, in the early months of your group, one person could develop strategies for recruiting members, another could scout out and secure a free meeting site, a third person could plan publicity, a fourth person could find volunteers for child care and arrange for food, and two members could plan the first meeting. It is important for the leaders of a group to play to members' strengths and to encourage all members to use their talents to enhance the effectiveness of the group. It makes sense to have your computer whiz design your group's web site, your writer compose your newsletter, and your accountant help with finances.

However the workload is shared—whether it works for your group to hold static positions with office titles, or whether your group wants to allow for more fluidity and let leaders step forward when their talents match a task—dividing the work makes sense in the long run. Whatever way your group decides to organize itself, forming a strong leadership circle is a healthy step in the right direction.



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**A good leader:**

- focuses on mission
- delegates tasks
- displays self-confidence
- provides guidance
- serves as a resource to members
- protects the best interests of the group (rather than personal agendas)
- concentrates on the needs of the group
- supports others
- makes action plans
- prioritizes work
- evaluates the group's work
- focuses on the future
- accepts responsibility for successes and failures
- shares success with others
- demonstrates good time management
- listens to suggestions and constructive criticism
- knows when to say "no"



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## SOME THOUGHTS ON LEADERSHIP

- Things get done because people are moved by leaders. Leaders create change. Leadership is the translation of skills and needs into action.
- It's a process. Leaders get followers to act on shared goals. Good leaders know that strategies for success require the combined talents and efforts of many people.
- Leadership is about getting people to consistently give their best and motivating them to work toward a common good.
- Leaders have the ability to conceptualize, to see changes coming and to prepare for them. They see many sides of an issue and are open-minded. They are able to learn from experiences and build on successes.
- Leaders are able to communicate with a variety of people and in a variety of styles. They understand what is said and respond appropriately and with dignity. They are able to control their anger.
- Leaders are efficient, structured, always focused on the common goal, and understand their power of influence. They see power as a shared resource; they're enthusiastic about ideas, are able to reach outside for help, and are able to form coalitions for action.
- Leadership is NOT about being a super hero. Leaders are sometimes quiet, and reflective. Leaders cannot do all things well and shouldn't be expected to achieve perfection.
- Effective leaders are respected and respectful.
- Leaders are not always popular. Change sometimes hurts -- and strength and conviction may irritate some people.
- Leaders are persistent and understand that everything we want for kids won't happen at once. They are able to remain on the cutting edge and pick their battles carefully.
- Leaders get strong help and good help. People like to be led, not driven. Leaders make sure decisions are made and implemented. They know that when there are two opinions on an issue, one is not necessarily wrong.
- Goals must be reached, not merely set. Process cannot substitute for product. Leaders win more often than they lose.
- Good strategy lies in ordering events in the right sequence, and leaders are able to define this "critical path." They help determine what can be done that will be most catalytic in order to achieve goals. They are thoughtful, prepared, and flexible.
- Compromise is difficult, but sometimes essential. Good leaders find multiple possible paths to the ultimate goal and understand "tactical options."

*Judith Anderson/January 2000*



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## PHRASES OF GREAT LEADERSHIP

- “Here’s one way to do it.”
- “That looks great!”
- “We’ll get ‘em next time.”
- “What do you need from me?”
- “How am I doing?”
- “Watch me.”
- “I’d like to ask you to help me on this.”
- “What’s your idea?”
- “Tell me about yourself.”
- “I was wrong.”
- “We’re in this together.”
- “Let’s be the best parent support group in the province”

