Developing Leadership
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As the profession of lactation consulting grows and matures, I’ve come to realize how important leadership is to our profession. As a lactation consultant, you may not think of yourself as a leader, yet each of you leads others in some capacity. If you are determined enough to tackle the challenging field of lactation consulting, then you are already a leader.

Being a leader does not mean you are the most knowledgeable, most technically skilled, or even the most powerful among your peers. As Margaret Thatcher, former prime minister of the United Kingdom, said, “Being in power is like being a lady. If you have to remind people you are, you aren’t.” Power does not define leadership.

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Think of someone in your life who was a leader. What kind of character traits did he or she have? Did the leader order you around, tell you what to do, or did he or she encourage you to use your skills and knowledge to accomplish your goals? Good leaders influence people to work enthusiastically toward common goals. Lactation consultants help mothers and families reach their goals everyday. There are other characteristics that are common among good leaders, characteristics that can be nurtured in all of us.

Characteristics of Leaders

Leaders build trust. Leading others and building healthy relationships require trust. In order to develop an effective team, you have to have healthy relationships. These relationships are essential to any leader’s success. Often the first step in establishing a good relationship is trust. Trust is not a given; it is not endowed by virtue of a particular position or title. Trust must be earned through action and integrity.

Leaders serve others. This doesn’t mean that the leader should do all the work, although in order to build trust, most leaders have to demonstrate they are willing to make some sacrifices for the team. Serving others means identifying and meeting the needs, not necessarily the “wants,” of team members. If you are a leader at work, perhaps in a supervisory role, your job is to identify what your team members need to do their jobs effectively: supplies, equipment, or more staff. They may all want to have every weekend off, but that would not meet the needs of the unit.

Leaders are kind. Kindness means offering your undivided attention and encouragement and using active listening skills. It may be easy to be kind to someone we know or like, but what if we must interact with someone we don’t particularly like or don’t know very well? Good leaders put those feelings aside and make every effort to give attention and encouragement to all members of the team. Active listening is especially hard in today’s multitasking society. Will Rogers, the cowboy philosopher from Oklahoma, said “If we didn’t know it was our turn to speak next, nobody would listen!” How often are you fully present while listening to your coworkers, your family, or your patients?

Leaders demonstrate humility and are authentic without pretense or arrogance. Humility does not involve...
thinking less of yourself because you don’t know everything. Good leaders recognize the more you know, the more you realize you don’t know. Humility requires thinking of yourself less and putting others first. As was stated at the first US Breastfeeding Committee meeting of state coalitions, you can accomplish a lot if you don’t care who gets the credit. It’s not about you; it’s about the team, the goals, and the shared vision.

Leaders are respectful, and they treat others with dignity, because good leaders realize that everyone is important. We often have preconceived notions about other people, even our own teammates. Good leaders continually work to ensure that everyone on the team feels valuable and respected. Two years ago, we had a retreat at my hospital with our lactation team to discuss improving our service for the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). We learned that many NICU nurses perceived that they were frequently “scolded” by the lactation consultants. We learned to be more respectful and to work to better understand the challenges that the nurses face in caring for breastfeeding patients.

Leaders are forgiving. Forgiving someone does not mean acknowledging others are not to blame. It means giving up the resentment you feel when you’ve been wronged. This is often hard to do. We must remember that lactation consulting is a small, young profession. We need all of our leaders if we are to continue to grow and gain the credibility that we seek in the health care arena. It has been one of the surprises since I’ve been on the ILCA Board to discover how much resentment exists within our membership. Forgiveness may be an important part of our maturation as a society and as a profession.

Leaders are honest. Honesty means being free from deception, both with others and with yourself. Honesty is often reported as what people want most in their leaders. Team members can trust an honest leader even if they don’t always agree with them. Being honest may be the hardest leadership trait to acquire because it requires holding people consistently accountable. That is not easy to do, especially for lactation consultants who often want to make everyone happy. Have you ever had a manager at work who would not hold an employee accountable for poor job performance? How did the manager’s inaction impact the team? How well does your committee, your affiliate, or your breastfeeding coalition function if members don’t follow through with their assignments? Volunteer organizations are especially vulnerable to poor morale, and even collapse, when leaders are not honest with everyone on the team. Those of us who are parents often need to hold our children accountable. We need to practice this skill at work, in our community organizations, and in our professional organizations. An honest leader will find a respectful way to hold others accountable. The old adage “praise in public, correct in private” is a good rule of thumb.

Finally, leaders are willing and able to commit and to see things through. Commitment takes effort and hard work. Lactation consultants are good at commitment because we never give up on breastfeeding mothers and babies. Commitment means that we must make change happen rather than waiting for someone else to change. Good intentions are meaningless if we take no action. When a leader says he or she will do something, the team knows it will be done. A good leader will also inspire others to act on their promises.
All of these leadership traits can be nurtured and developed. It takes practice, and sometimes it takes looking at things from a new perspective. All lactation consultants are leaders, and we must continue to encourage leadership in our profession at all levels. We so often tell the breastfeeding mothers we are helping to take it one day at a time, one feeding at a time. We must do the same with leadership, take it one step at a time, one day at a time, one issue at a time, never giving up our common goals. With good leadership, we can accomplish our goals and make a difference in the world, one breastfed baby at a time.

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References  