



What Kind of Leader Do You Want to Be?

BY ANN HENTSCHEL

Take a moment and ask yourself a simple question:

What kind of leader do you want to be?

Not what families expect.

Not what your licensing specialist expects.

Not what your board expects.

Not even what your staff expects.

What kind of leader do *you* want to be?

For many early childhood leaders, that question is surprisingly difficult to answer—not because they lack passion or commitment, but because they rarely have the opportunity to stop long enough to reflect.

Most days begin before you even walk through the door.

A teacher calls in sick, leaving you scrambling to cover a classroom. A family desperately needs child care, but your waiting list is already a year long. A child is struggling with challenging behavior, and the teacher needs your support. Before lunch, you've been a coach, counselor, substitute teacher, cook, bus driver, plumber, mediator, and crisis manager. Meanwhile, emails, text messages, licensing requirements, payroll, and paperwork continue to pile up.

The demands never seem to stop.

In a profession built around caring for others, leaders often become so focused on responding to everyone's needs that they lose sight of themselves.

Reflection begins to feel like a luxury.

In truth, it is one of the most important leadership practices we have.

LEADERSHIP BEGINS FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Years ago, early childhood leadership expert Paula Jorde Bloom challenged program directors to think differently about leadership. Rather than focusing only on management skills or organizational systems, she emphasized that effective leadership begins with knowing yourself.

That idea became the foundation for [*From the Inside Out: The Power of Reflection and Self-Awareness*](#).

The premise is beautifully simple:

You cannot consistently lead others beyond the level of your own self-awareness.

When leaders understand what drives their decisions, recognize how they respond under stress, and intentionally align their actions with their values, they create healthier workplaces, stronger relationships, and more resilient organizations.

The work starts on the inside before it shows up on the outside.

THREE PRACTICES THAT STRENGTHEN LEADERSHIP

Exceptional leadership includes three interconnected practices that cultivate clarity, connection, and courage.

- **Clarity begins with values.**

Every leader is guided by values, whether consciously or unconsciously. When our daily decisions align with what matters most to us, leadership feels purposeful and authentic. When our values conflict with the realities of our work, tension and burnout often follow. Taking time to clarify your leadership values helps you recognize both your strengths and the places where you may need to make intentional changes.

- **Connection grows through deep listening.**

Many of us listen while preparing our response. We rush to solve problems, fill silence, or offer advice before fully understanding another person's experience.

Deep listening asks something different. It invites us to become fully present—not to fix, but to understand. When leaders listen with curiosity and empathy, trust grows, relationships deepen, and teams become more willing to collaborate because people know their voices matter.

- **Courage develops through shared leadership.**

No director can—or should—carry the entire organization alone. The strongest programs intentionally develop leadership throughout the organization. Teachers take initiative, staff members contribute ideas and solutions, and colleagues support one another's growth. Shared leadership not only strengthens the organization today but also prepares the next generation of leaders for tomorrow.

REFLECTION IS NOT A PAUSE FROM LEADERSHIP—IT IS LEADERSHIP

Many directors tell me they don't have time for reflection.

I understand.

I've lived that reality.

But I've also learned that the leaders who consistently make the greatest difference aren't necessarily the ones who work the hardest or stay the latest.

They're the ones who intentionally create moments to step back, ask meaningful questions, and reconnect with who they are as leaders.

Reflection doesn't slow leadership down.

It makes leadership more intentional.

It helps us respond instead of react.

It reminds us why we chose this work in the first place.

JOIN US

If you've been moving from one urgent situation to the next and haven't had the opportunity to reconnect with your own leadership, I hope you'll join me for **From the Inside Out: Leading with Clarity, Connection, and Courage** on **Wednesday, August 19, 2026, from 1:00–2:00 PM Central**. [Click here to register](#).

Together, we'll explore practical tools for clarifying your leadership values, strengthening your listening skills, and building leadership capacity throughout your organization. More importantly, we'll create space to reflect on the leader you want to become.

Because the future of early childhood education doesn't depend only on what leaders do.

It depends on who those leaders choose to be.

Ann Hentschel is a nationally recognized author, consultant, and advocate for early childhood leadership. With over four decades of experience in the field, she brings deep insight into the practice and policy of early learning. Ann began her career at Stanford University's Bing Nursery School and later served as executive director of two campus child care programs.

A seasoned leader in both state and national early childhood initiatives, Ann served for over a decade as Director of Quality Assessment at the McCormick Institute for Early Childhood, where she had the privilege of working closely with—and being mentored by- Paula Jorde Bloom, a pioneer in Early Childhood Leadership.

Paula Jorde Bloom invited Ann to co-author A Great Place to Work and Inspiring Peak Performance, collaborating alongside her colleague Jill Bella. Ann has since authored updated editions of Paula's seminal works — Leadership in Action (3rd ed., 2025), From the Inside Out (2nd ed., 2025), and Inspiring Peak Performance (2nd ed., 2026) — and her newest book, Using FCCERS to Improve Program Quality: A Guide for Family Child Care Providers, is forthcoming from Teachers College Press in November 2026.