The Five Commitments of Optimistic Leaders
Judy Jablon

Asa Hilliard inspired me years ago at a conference of teacher educators when he said: Relationships matter more than anything else. Human beings need to be nurtured. Our job as educators is to nurture in ways that tap into the genius in each child.

He added: Our job as teacher leaders is to nurture the genius in each teacher.

I believe that hearing Dr. Hilliard that day began a journey that resulted in Leading for Children. Our mission at Leading for Children is to elevate the practitioner, to create an optimistic trajectory for each child's success in school and life.

I began Leading for Children to strengthen early learning systems. I believe that if we promote healthy and productive relationships within and across all roles and settings, educators can thrive. And, in so doing, children can experience the strong nurturing relationships for learning that they need to thrive. Inspired by Asa Hilliard, and so many of you, I've developed a model that I believe can improve how early learning educators engage in their work: The Five Commitments of Optimistic Leadership.

The Foundation for Optimistic Leadership

For years our field has deeply engaged in thinking about how to achieve higher quality early learning programs for children birth to age five, and how to improve children’s learning outcomes. The elements of quality programs that result in better outcomes are supported by extensive evidence. However, we currently have directors and teachers, parents and policy makers, receptionists and cooks, all working at cross purposes. We are not rowing in the same direction and neither are we assuring that educators in each of these critical roles understand the importance of assuming a leadership stance for children. Despite everything we know about how learning must build on strengths, we have a culture

The Five Commitments of Optimistic Leadership:

- **Think Impact** – to make informed decisions.
- **Cultivate Self-Awareness** – to guide thought, emotion, and behavior.
- **Nurture Relationships** – to support learning and collaboration.
- **Refine Communication** – for mutual clarity and understanding.
- **Activate Curiosity** – to find connections and continue learning.
in early learning that is focused on deficits. In so many efforts to achieve higher quality programs, staff and administrative interactions are breeding distrust rather than collaboration.

In this climate, how can we possibly adhere to Asa Hilliard’s assertion that to nurture the genius in children we must nurture the genius in the adults? I believe that by adopting the Five Commitments of Optimistic Leadership, we will enhance program climate and strengthen early learning systems.

Before we discuss the five commitments, we must have a shared understanding of leadership, optimism, and commitment.

**Leadership.** Leadership means recognizing the impact you have on others and using that knowledge in productive ways. Each of us has an impact on the organization where we work. Our actions and words impact others and contribute to the climate in a large agency, a preschool classroom, or a family childcare home. Regardless of our titles or roles, we are all leaders for children; and children deserve leaders who learn.

**Optimism.** Optimism is not about being positive or happy. Merely being positive doesn’t help achieve quality. Instead of “thinking positive” we can focus on a path forward and have conviction that when the inevitable obstacles occur, they can be hurdled with analysis and persistence. Think of optimism as the light at the of the tunnel, rather than the smiley face.

**Commitment.** Commitment is vital to achieving the high-quality programs children and families deserve, and in which early learning professionals thrive. Commitment takes effort and persistence and it is more likely to become a part of the culture of programs when it is a shared endeavor.
The Five Commitments of Optimistic Leaders

Leaders recognize their impact. Optimistic Leaders focus on the path forward. Optimistic leaders are passionate about achieving a vision and will persevere even when the going gets tough. Imagine if everyone in an early learning setting embraced their roles as leaders committed to working together to enhance children's opportunities to be successful learners?

Let's examine each of the five commitments to understand how early learning educators — across roles — are changing their practices based on their learning about optimistic leadership.

1. Think Impact to make informed decisions. Everything we do and say — all of our actions — have consequences or benefits. Research shows that educators make more than 1,500 decisions daily — that's about four decisions every minute (Good and Brophy 2008). What would it mean for children if more of us were more aware of the impact of these decisions on our professional relationships? On children's learning? On the climate in our programs?

Think Impact: Reflections from the field

“This helps me realize my influence and how through my word choices, tone, stance, and perspective I can create the type of work environment that encourages or discourages.

Before: I was too malleable and influenced by the outcomes I perceived others wanted. I often hushed my own voice to carry out the voices of others, especially my supervisors. I sought approval and feared disappointment.

Now: I feel empowered. I pause more. I am reflective of my presence, especially my non-verbal actions, my pace, my tone, my impulsivity to react and respond immediately. I am trying to think before I speak and gather more information before making decisions.”

2. Cultivate Self-Awareness to guide thought, emotion, and behavior. Self-awareness is the capacity to recognize your own feelings, behaviors and characteristics, and to understand your cognitive, physical and emotional self. Self awareness allows you to monitor your emotions, thoughts, and feelings; understand your strengths and weaknesses; and know what motivates you toward what you want out of life. When you have self-awareness, you recognize your impact on other people and adapt to be more successful in your interactions. Self awareness is the cornerstone of emotional intelligence, and underlies all the other aspects of self motivation and emotional intelligence.
Cultivate Self-Awareness: Reflections from the field

“I have found that working toward a greater sense of how I am in a situation helps me to notice how others are.

Then: I was quick to “say and do”. I thought that in order to be highly effective, I had to think on my feet, act fast.

Now: I value the practice of self-reflection which increases my self-awareness. I’m making more informed decisions – going from reactive to problem-solving and building partnerships. By slowing down, I can identify whether my actions will or strengthen or hinder my relationships.”

3. Nurture Relationships to support learning and collaboration.
Steven Covey said: Trust is the highest form of human motivation. It brings out the very best in people. Research has consistently shown the importance of high quality, trusting relationships in achieving educational outcomes. Studies have also shown that strong collegial relationships among educators lead to higher levels of professional satisfaction, stronger organizational commitment and problem solving, a stronger organizational belief that positive student outcomes are possible, and a stronger organizational commitment to consistently prioritizing the best interest of the children served (Brewster and Railsback 2003).

Nurture Relationships: Reflections from the field

“With a view of myself as a leader for children, I set and contribute to the tone in my classroom and school. I need awareness as well as time to reflect.

Then: I was oblivious to emotional cues during interactions. I wasn’t gauging the non-verbal feedback. I realized this was driven by my fear of making mistakes.

Now: I am learning to listen to others’ ideas and taking the time to understand and evaluate to see how their ideas can be incorporated into any process.”

4. Refine Communication for mutual clarity and understanding.
Communication is key to maintaining positive and effective relationships. Effective leaders use conversation and dialogue rather than top-down commands. Communication includes pausing before speaking, monitoring tone, listening well, asking questions, being sensitive to cultural and linguistic diversity, and using self-awareness to reflect and adjust to the person with whom you are speaking.
Refine communication: Reflections from the field

“Being mindful of my spoken words and written messages makes me a more effective leader.

**Before:** I was unaware of my tone, or failed to adjust it. As a result, positive climate was eroded.

**Now:** I have cultivated a habit of pausing to compose a message or question in my mind before writing or speaking it.”

5. **Activate Curiosity to find connections and continue learning.**

When we activate curiosity, we are more willing to take risks, experiment, and try things out. A curious and open mind invites learning. Rather than worrying about failure, the curious leader knows that errors can promote learning. When working with children and families, curiosity means letting go of your agenda and watching and listening to learn what matters to the child or his family. This may require a degree of holding back, and watching or listening before saying or doing anything.

**Activate Curiosity: Reflections from the field**

“Being curious and wanting to find connections between current knowledge and new learning has supported my growth and helped me create and strengthen relationships.

**Before:** I noticed that I sometimes felt inadequate when I needed to ask questions about something that was unfamiliar to me.

**Now:** I like to place myself in situations with “great minds” so that I can engage in conversations that offer different perspectives and ideas.”

Consider, what might it look like if everyone in your setting practiced the Five Commitments of Optimistic Leadership?

---

*Barack Obama*
Resources:


## Optimistic Leadership: A Reflection Tool

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commitment</th>
<th>Reflection and Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Think Impact</strong></td>
<td>A moment I’ve paused before I’ve acted in the past year:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ways I plan to integrate the commitment of thinking about my impact moving forward:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultivate Self-Awareness</strong></td>
<td>Name the last time I reflected on myself and my impact on others:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ways I plan to integrate the commitment of cultivating my self-awareness moving forward:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nurture Relationships</strong></td>
<td>Identify a relationship I know I have not nurtured effectively in the past year:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ways I plan to integrate the commitment of nurturing relationships with stakeholders moving forward:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Refine Communication</strong></td>
<td>Remember a time I intentionally communicated with someone before making a decision:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ways I plan to integrate the commitment of refining my communication style moving forward:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activate Curiosity</strong></td>
<td>Pinpoint a recent time when being curious and asking questions led to successful change:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ways I plan to integrate the commitment of activating my curiosity moving forward:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ways my practice will change when I practice the 5 commitments of Optimistic Leadership:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>