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I don’t know of a single child who said, “When I grow up, I want to be an early childhood specialist working in state government.” Personally, at age four I vacillated between wanting to become a veterinarian or dinosaur. Yet today hundreds of professionals occupy such roles in state government as state early childhood leaders, and their paths to these positions are as varied as the individuals themselves.

When I arrived at the Vermont Dept. of Education to assume my responsibilities as the Early Childhood Education Coordinator, a one-person deep unit within the Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment Unit, I was eager and well-intentioned but pretty much clueless. Where do I begin? What do I do? Who do I need to know? How do I get in to the building on weekends? Even though my window looked across the street to the Golden Dome of the state capitol and Governor’s Office, I was unaware of the relationship it would have on my daily work. As I’ve since learned, this is a common experience for many entering state government even to this day.

There was no playbook to guide me or formal orientation to my position. Sure, I had a job description which helped but I quickly learned it simply identified “what” I was expected to do with no
hint of “how” best to achieve it. Even so, the “what” column turned out to be only a partial list of what I could expect. Then there’s that last line in the job description – “Performs all other tasks as assigned by supervisor” – which could have been fleshed out in a bit greater detail. Ultimately, I think that last line was inserted for three purposes. First, it recognized that work in state government is ever-evolving and defies being written in stone. Second, it kept the door open for unexpected “opportunities” at the department that no one else wanted to take on. Finally, it prevented me from heading for the exit before formally accepting the position.

Had it not been for the kind and generous support offered by my overworked supervisors and colleagues (“We’ve got to keep him here just a little longer),” I may not have survived the probationary period. These saints were instrumental in answering my endless questions and using “anticipatory guidance” to make sure I didn’t embarrass myself or the department in the process of learning the ropes. Also, early childhood education was still largely “under the radar” on the education agenda at that time which allowed great latitude in what I did and didn’t have to do. It was an exciting time and great things were happening all around. As time passed, early education moved from “under the radar” to “under a microscope;” a situation in which I’m not sure I would have flourished.

Throughout my 18 years with the Vermont Department of Education and its nine rotating commissioners and interim-commissioners, I learned many lessons. Some were perhaps more
relevant to the times and context in Vermont, but many still translate well in today’s environment and across state borders. State government is a creature unto itself.

Working with many inspired, well intentioned and naïve young leaders entering state government service to improve opportunities for young children, families, and teachers, I am encouraged. I realize, however, that their transition may parallel my early years’ experience of “fake it ‘til you make it.” With this realization, I offer some lessons I’ve learned over the years hoping others will adapt effortlessly and take full advantage of the incredible opportunity accompanying their position to lead early childhood forward. I stood on the shoulders of some real giants in my work, and I think it’s my responsibility to offer a piggy-back ride to our next generation of leaders.
Following are some valuable lessons I learned over my course as an early childhood education leader working in state government. These lessons follow no particular order or priority, much like work-life within state government where out of chaos emerges the illusion of order. Perhaps several will resonate immediately as you scroll through the list; others will make better sense with the benefit of hindsight. Hopefully, they will aide you through a transition to any position of leadership whether it be within state government or outside looking in.

1. **It’s a different ballgame.**
   Nothing can fully prepare you for work in state government as an early education leader. You may have been an effective teacher in the classroom or exemplary program administrator which is critically necessary but not sufficient for being effective within the new and unfamiliar bureaucracy. Some
knowledge and skills are transferable but the context is unique and stakes much higher. Different rules are in place, some unwritten and passed on through the oral tradition, and players frequently change positions and teams. If you want to get an inkling of moving to the big leagues, I suggest tuning in to House of Cards.

2. **Befriend your predecessor.**
Few people have the opportunity to serve as an early education leader in an SEA meaning the pool of experienced sages is rather limited. The person who best understands what you are stepping in to is the person who just stepped out. She has a wealth of knowledge that can be shared during your transition, but it’s going to take longer for you to feel competent and confident. Maintain that special relationship into the future and it will serve you well. This was particularly true in my case where my colleague-friend also returned to become my successor!
3. **Observe and learn the SEA culture.**

Hidden rules abound in the SEA shaping how people think, feel and behave. Some cultures welcome dissenting perspectives while others operate in an atmosphere of fear. Take some time to understand the culture as it absorbs you and shapes you. The culture combined with your specific work help determine your level of comfort and fulfillment.

There is a long tradition in my state of Vermont where the first Tuesday of March is declared a state holiday to hold Town Meetings as citizens gather at the town hall, school auditorium, or fire station to debate and decide a variety of issues such as school budgets, road maintenance and nuclear disarmament. One piece of advice given to me at my first Town Meeting was “Don’t talk at your first town meeting- just keep quiet, listen, and learn. There will be plenty of years ahead for you to influence, inspire, and piss off others. Don’t blow it right off the bat” The same advice holds true for new hires in an SEA.
4. **It is an honor and privilege to be in your position.**
   There are perhaps only 100 people like you in the nation who have been brought into a SEA to make a big difference for young children. You are in a unique and powerful situation, and it should humble you to your core. Things will get very difficult at times, but remember that you are in that position for a reason and you have been given some authority to make things happen. Be thankful you have been given this opportunity. You earned it.

5. **You are now the face of “The State.”**
   Often an SEA early childhood education specialist enters state government from the outside – classroom teacher, local education agency administrator, university faculty, political appointment. Regardless of your previous title or work station, it is important to shift your thinking to serve as the face and voice of state government. Your words take on new power and gravity when
you speak, something you may be initially unaware of or uncomfortable with. Use your position for positive change.

Never dishonor your agency or state by your actions. You may agree or disagree with state policies or positions, but you can work on these quietly from within. Speak up, but do so appropriately in ways that won’t embarrass you or others.

Relationships with former colleagues and old friends may change now that you are the state authority (don’t confuse authority with expertise), sometimes for better or worse. Just remember to take it professionally, not personally. Your role is to improve early education for the benefit of young children, not to be everyone’s best friend.
6. **Know your place (B/ART).**
   As a new leader in the SEA, you are given an element of “social capital” with power and authority to accomplish grand things for young children. Still, there are limits or boundaries to your authority, responsibilities and tasks. In this sense, you have much in common with the President of the United States. As time moves forward, you may expand these boundaries and have greater latitude. If you are in doubt, ask or be prepared to seek forgiveness for stepping over the line.

7. **Use your social capital early or lose it.**
   Your new title carries weight which can be used to establish important new relationships, create new opportunities, and accomplish important goals. Consider this your “honeymoon period,” though because it won’t last forever unless you prove yourself. Small but noticeable gains will enhance your credibility, allowing you accumulate greater support to take on bigger goals and challenges.
8. **Be expert in your domain.**

Your title will carry you only so far. You need to possess high-level knowledge about young children, education, and the early childhood system to make wise decisions. Be a voracious reader, follow the research with a questioning mind, and delve deeply behind the headlines. Let the facts inform your opinion, not vice versa. You don’t have to be the smartest person in the room, but it is important to be at a level where you can hold your own professionally and contribute positively to the discussion.
9. **Understand the legislative process.**

You may have been a master in the classroom but being an effective early education leader goes beyond pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment. Laws and regulations shape early education and you need to position yourself strategically to ensure the rules that govern early education are rooted in both research and pragmatism. Civics education can tell you the steps involved in bill making, but there is much more to it than meets the eye. It is far from a linear process described in civics textbooks, and lawmaking has been compared to sausage-making as a messy process. Be prepared as you may be called upon to jump into the fray as the topical expert, but don’t be surprised if final language doesn’t resemble your recommendations. Be a proactive voice when it comes to establishing important state policy yet stay within the boundaries of your position while exercising other levers when needed.
10. **Know the influencers on a first name basis.**
   There are many stakeholders in early education and it is essential you establish professional working relationships with as many as possible. It takes time, but it is an investment that pays dividends. Stakeholders may be parents, business leaders, researchers, university faculty, community-based administrators, teacher unions, health professionals, advocates, or colleagues within your agency. As a former colleague once advised, “Never underestimate the power of good old American know-who.”

11. **Dance with advocates but don’t let them lead when it’s your song.**
    Advocates can be tremendous allies because they can say what you may want to express but are unable to do so politically. Their alliances may shift depending on the issue, however. Forge productive and respectful relationships with all advocates, recognizing you may find yourselves representing different interests from time to time. If you are the correct person to take the lead role, assume it with conviction and confidence.
12. **Don’t advocate for others; teach them to advocate for themselves.**

Speak for yourself and your agency. Others will be most effective when they advocate for themselves, and it conveys interest over self-interest. You will never be as effective representing others as they can be when speaking for themselves. They may benefit from coaching, but give them the floor. As an adage states, “The tale of the tiger will never be heard as long as it is told by the hunter.”

13. **Keep others informed, even if they aren’t asking for it.**

Don’t wait to be invited to provide updates to others in your department or the field. You have an opportunity to set in motion the wheels of internal communication for early education within your agency. Focus on important issues, opportunities, accomplishments, challenges (no one likes a surprise), and research. Keep it brief- no longer than one page. Also, consider the elevator or bathroom “ambush” as a way to sneak something in. If you are leading a team, have periodic stand-up meetings in the hall.
14. Make your superiors look good.
This should have been written into your job description. Superiors are held accountable for their charges and they can only succeed to the extent they help you be successful. The better they look, the easier your work will become and you’ll have more autonomy in doing the right things for young children. If you do the right things right, they may get the credit but you will get noticed and eventually acknowledged.

15. Show up as a solution, not a problem.
There is no shortage of issues to be resolved or improved upon. You have a choice to be deliberate and part of the solution or critical and a barrier to improvement. You may not always agree with others’ proposals, but offer it in the spirit of seeking the best possible solution. Strive to work through things so young children are the ultimate winners. No one should have to handle you as a state leader as there are more important things demanding everyone’s attention.
16. Don’t be perceived as the perpetual bearer of bad tidings but tell it like it is.
When people head to the doors as you enter a room, take notice. You have a responsibility to create a positive climate and culture. If you become perceived as a “Debbie Downer” by only focusing on what’s wrong or not working, you will be tuned out. Some matters cannot be swept under the rug or ignored, and you should address these head on. Still, try to take more interest in sharing good news. There’s plenty of good things happening out there.

17. Be honest, even if it means not being polite.
If you respect people, you owe it to them to tell the truth as you see it. Avoidance is not any more respectful than the intent to hurt. As uncomfortable as it may be to be honest with someone, they deserve to know it. People cannot deal with things that aren’t made clear and apparent. It’s not what you say, however, it’s how you say it. If you communicate respectfully from a solution-oriented space, they will appreciate it.
18. Talk to people, not about them. Don’t keep secrets.

Gossip has been a cancer in many relationships and workspaces. For some reason unbeknownst to me, people like to know others’ business. It easily crosses the line between being interested in someone’s welfare versus relishing in their despair. Things get especially juicy when it involves an element of hurt and pain. It’s as though the more “secrets” one knows and can share, the more power and popular that person feels. That’s simply a lie. Those are precisely the people I would not confide in or trust. If they talk about others like that, they’ll do the same to me when I’m not in the room.

One rule of thumb I learned early was to inform people not to tell me anything about someone else they didn’t want me to be able to share with that person. I would not keep their secrets about others. When they tried, I suggested they talk directly to that person about it. I refused to get caught in the middle or unwittingly become part of an alliance against others. As my wife, a former guidance counselor would ask her students, “Are you telling or are you tattling?”
19. **Step away from your desk.**

Your desk is your work station, not your life. Put down that mouse every now and then and get up to walk around. Your work is about people and programs, and once your computer becomes your most frequent colleague you risk losing touch. Better yet, get out in to the field as often as you can. It will inform your work more than Wikipedia and recharge your batteries more than a game of Solitaire. Yes, getting away from your desk provides a health benefit as well as professional growth. There is a saying that sitting is the new smoking. Take a five-minute break every hour away from your desk and you’ll be amazed how much more productive you can become (unless it means a trip to the vending machines for some Fritos and a diet Coke).
20. **Make a lunch date at least twice a week.**

Connections and relationships are essential to your work and will sustain you. Even if you consider yourself to be an introvert, go out there and have lunch with other introverts. These lunch dates may include professional matters but should focus on fun and friendship. Mix it up by taking your boss to lunch one day, your spouse another day, and someone from a different agency another.

One other piece of advice- unless it’s your significant other or child, don’t let them pay for you.

21. **Never eat at your computer.**

It really gums up the keyboard with crumbs and prevents the “pause that refreshes.” You really don’t save that much time or accomplish much more by having a mouse in one hand and a sandwich in the other. You only think that you do. Take a break. Repeat Suggestions 19 and 20.
22. Stay in touch; adopt a classroom for the year.

It will not take long before the demands of your new position cause your prior experience in classrooms to become a distant memory. With the rapid change of early education, it is necessary and important to have a reality check to discern the ideal from the real. Your goal of getting out into the field regularly can easily get postponed, and drive-by-visitation does not provide the same depth of understanding as spending unhurried time in a classroom interacting with children, teachers and administrators. Why not adopt a classroom for a year? Establishing meaningful school-based relationships will yield results on many levels. They will actually look forward to you coming and showing a genuine interest. It’s a win-win.
23. **Find a mentor - inside and out.**

You are likely not the first person to take on this role, nor will you be the last. The transition can be daunting but soothed by having a mentor to serve as a guide and support. Mentors don’t have to be predecessors; rather, they should be people whom you respect and aspire to be like. Coaches and supervisors are assigned by others but a mentor is someone you select. They may come from within the state system but it’s not necessary. The important thing is that you respect and trust the person, and that she or he will commit to helping you find your way.

Do not be timid about asking someone you consider to be “out of your league” to serve as a mentor. Mentorship is an honor bestowed upon but a few.
24. **Create a personal board of directors.**

Boards have tremendous power and influence by virtue of their authority and expertise. This is certainly the case for State Boards of Education or Governor appointed boards. Their mission is to set a course without micromanaging a department or agency, and ensure leadership is effective in maintaining that course and producing results.

I advise that you create your own board of directors to support your professional and personal growth. You may not need to assemble everyone together in the same room; instead they can be called upon individually or collectively to help you set new horizons, navigate challenging waters, and think through sticky situations with the eye of a concerned but disengaged observer.

As is the case with selecting a mentor, pick those whom you truly admire for their knowledge, effectiveness and demeanor. Create your own Dream Team to help you grow as a person and professional.
25. **Be an agent of change.**

I didn’t coin this term but it certainly resonates. You have a choice every day. You can manage the status quo from your strategic position (which is a lost opportunity) or be a leader for positive change. Learn what you need to know and do what needs to be done. My experience tells me the rewards rest in the latter.

26. **There is no room for cynicism in our work.**

Early in my career I wrote a letter to the editor about our community’s short-sighted approach toward early education. When I ran it by my boss for his approval, he frowned and said, “There is no room for cynicism here,” and threw it back to me. I was crushed at first but realized how astute his observation was.

It is too easy to feel self-righteous when you feel strongly about a position, but take care to not let cynicism creep in. It will color your perspective, deflate your energy, and blunt your ability to inspire and lead the undecided.
27. **The loudest voice in the room isn’t always right.**
Voices that dominate discussions command attention but are not necessarily persuasive or correct. Passion is important but has its limitations. As you listen to others, actively encourage all points of views to be expressed and considered. “I wonder what others think?” Similarly, don’t be afraid to speak your piece even if it diverges from the majority. The best decisions are those made from an informed stance after multiple perspectives are considered.

28. **Don’t confuse leadership and management.**
Numerous articles have been written about the distinction between leadership and management, but it is an academic discussion until you are actually in the position of a state early education leader. Many accept their job with the aspiration or illusion of being able to lead the state in a new direction, only to discover their tasks require them to manage
systems maintaining the status quo and satisfying accountability requirements.

The truth is that you are required to be both manager and leader. Budgets and programs must be managed, oftentimes your staff as well. You may be familiar with the term “crisis management,” but have you ever heard anyone talk about “crisis leadership?” Initiatives require leadership, typically creating something out of nothing or transforming that which exists into something entirely different. Wonderful managers have faced strong headwaters when leading people in new directions. Similarly, leaders who cannot manage effectively frequently find themselves putting out fires.

Management and leadership are both necessary and important in an agency. It is a remarkable person who can simultaneously do both well.
29. **Write your appointments in pencil.**

My colleague Coley Baker told me this as I began my service in state government, and it proved to be some of the most valuable advice I received. My best laid plans and well-orchestrated work schedule constantly fell prey to meeting the shifting demands of my superiors (and there were many). I would be frustrated annually between January and May when the legislature was in session as they considered their needs to be highest on the priority ladder. Often I would be “on call” in the hallway or committee room, only to have my required appearance pre-empted without notice after several hours of waiting. I learned to always bring other work with me wherever I went, and write my schedule in pencil rather than carve it in stone. Your schedule is not your own.

By the way, I know no one uses pencil or DayTimers to plan their schedules anymore; the point is to be flexible with a smile.
30. **Guard your schedule.**

Time is one of the most precious commodities you will never have enough of to accomplish everything in front of you. Understanding this conundrum, I encourage you to plan your weekly schedule to work 80 percent of the time. Reserve the remaining 20 percent to deal with the unexpected. Don’t worry about having time on your hands- it just won’t happen. While Nature abhors a vacuum, state government despises the clock.

31. **Befriend your predecessor.**

Few people have the opportunity to serve as an early education leader in an SEA meaning the pool of experienced sages is rather limited. The person who best understands what you are stepping into is the person who just stepped out. She has a wealth of knowledge that can be shared during your transition, but it’s going to take longer for you to feel competent and confident. Maintain that special relationship into the future and it will serve you well. This was particularly true in my case where my colleague-friend also returned to become my successor!
32. Engage your mind before putting your mouth in gear.

You are the state’s expert in the eyes of many, and you will be peppered with questions constantly. Many times you will be able to provide informative responses extemporaneously. Other times, however, it will be better to hold them off while you do additional research. Some may pressure you for an immediate answer, but you are in control of what you say. It’s OK to think before speaking. Personally, I know that I am a “slow thinker” who likes to take time before crafting a cogent response. Granted, situations may not afford you the luxury of time to answer others’ pressing questions, but I learned that people don’t always need an immediate answer. Be honest if you don’t have the answer but promise to find it out. Ask them when they need it and then deliver.

Don’t worry about answering every question perfectly. What you need to worry about is when they stop asking you for information.
33. **Don’t say “yes” too soon or to everything.**

Of course, you want to please everyone. This often translates into saying “Yes” to every invitation or opportunity that interests you. You’ll soon realize that you can only commit to a finite number of tasks and be effective. Guard your schedule carefully. Before saying “Yes” to something new, consider what on your plate can be jettisoned. You may want to enlist the guidance of your supervisor in managing your projects, priorities and time. If you hate to say “No” to people, try offering “Not right now.” You’ll be surprised to learn that your refusal won’t cause the world to spin wildly out of control. In fact, it creates opportunities for others to get involved.

Another note about the problem of premature agreement- something you now realize too late in the game for your current position. You had the greatest power to negotiate your authority, responsibilities and salary before you said “Yes” to accepting your current position. This may not help you now though it may be of value in the future.
34. **Don’t ask anyone to do anything you aren’t willing to do yourself.**
   You’ll have your share of tedious or dirty things to do as part of your position. If you are in the enviable position of having a staff report to you, you can assign these chores. You’ve earned it so you can tackle bigger challenges. Be cautious about unloading too much of the dirty work to others, however. Spread it around and take some on yourself. When they see you making copies or carrying boxes, they will go the extra mile to help you out. It builds teamwork. You’ll know you’re in good standing if they don’t stop talking every time you enter the room.

35. **Know your numbers.**
   You may not think of yourself as a “numbers person” but you better get over it. There is power in numbers whether it concerns the budget or program data such as enrollment figures, kindergarten entry
assessment results, and research analysis. Learn the budgeting process so you can advocate effectively for what is needed. View your budget as an expression of what we value. Simply put, get great with data because you’ll need to back up everything you say or feel.

36. Befriend researchers.

Early education works and the only reason we know this is thanks to our research community. The cumulative body of research we call science is directly responsible for the steady expansion of early education. The skills of research may be outside of your toolbox or authority, but universities in your state and across the country are filled with experts and aspiring researchers eager to engage in applied research. Work collaboratively with them to develop an early education research agenda focusing on the children in your state’s system for a win-win. Take a researcher to lunch.
37. **Chew before swallowing.**

Don’t believe everything you hear, especially sound bytes. If every child in early care and education saved $7 for every $1 invested, we’d be rolling in the dough (the famous High/Scope study was based on a sample of very high-risk children taught by highly qualified, credential teachers which is not the standard situation for child care or preschool programs). Some people allow their opinions to shape “the facts:” others let facts shape their opinions. Be among the latter group, even if you are disappointed by the findings.
38. **Save your energy for listening to and informing the undecided.**

The bell-curve comes in handy when trying to understand how the public views a situation. A small percentage will be adamantly opposed to your position and a proportionate percentage fully supportive regardless of its merit. Some adversaries will never be persuaded regardless of how much evidence or passion is presented. Don’t expend an inordinate amount of your time and energy on trying to persuade a small number of opponents. To move the needle, focus on the larger majority in the middle.

39. ** Spoil your colleagues.**

Our work in state government is difficult and often goes without recognition. It doesn’t have to be that way, though. As my home state ice cream gurus Ben and Jerry suggest, “Practice random acts of kindness and senseless beauty.” Bring bagels for the office as a “Friday surprise” or send anonymous “happy notes” for no apparent reason. You don’t need permission to appreciate your colleagues and it will positively shift the culture.
40. **Network with the lifeline you never knew you had.**

If you haven’t heard of the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (a mouthful with an unintelligible acronym), you are missing out big time. These kindred spirits from across the country share your position and predicament like no others. When you think you are alone facing an untenable situation, it takes only a click of the mouse to connect with a community who have been there, done, that, and came out on top. The cumulative wisdom and support of NAECS-SDE is a safe harbor and gold mine wrapped into one. Join and become active today! Otherwise, you’ll eventually feel lonely in your day-to-day work thinking no one else understands.

If you work in another state agency such as a Department of Human Services or Health, find out which professional organization best matches and represents your role and responsibilities. Then join to take advantage of the support they offer.
41. You’ll never be caught up with all your work.

During my brief out-of-field work experience as General Manager of the Georgia Sea Turtle Center, my Executive Director Jones Hooks warned, “You’ll never be all caught up with your work.” It was certainly the case at the Center and has been for my entire professional career in early childhood education. While I aspired to leave the office every day with a clean desk and prioritized To-Do list for my return the next day, reality conspired to replace my filing system with a piling system and a laughable list of tasks considering I worked about 50 hours a week (on a good week).

The truth is that there is too much to be accomplished by one person and it is all important. Don’t burn yourself out trying to accomplish the impossible. Handle the high priority matter first and be responsible about deadlines but make peace with the fact that there will always be work for you to return to (some call it job security).
42. When you trip, fall forward.

I made my share of faux pas working in state government and you will as well. It is part of the job and it doesn’t matter how long you’ve been in your position. Risks are inherent in moving a system forward and you need to keep pace. Hopefully, you benefit from these “learning opportunities” so they are not repeated. If you are knocked to the ground three times, get up four times.

Every now and then I give someone a “Forgiveness Coupon.” I printed these business card size coupons to read “This coupon entitles the bearer to be forgiven for courageously attempting a bold action or advancing an innovative idea which did not work out as intended. The bearer shall be held harmless for future radical thinking and actions taken for the purpose of improving the current situation.” People always ask for extras so I tell them to laminate it instead.
One for you

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Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes
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One for a friend

FORGIVENESS COUPON

This coupon entitles the bearer to be forgiven for courageously attempting a bold action or advancing an innovative idea which did not work out as intended. The bearer shall be held harmless for future radical thinking and actions taken for the purpose of improving the current situation.

Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes
www.ceelo.org
43. **Start your drive to work and back home with your mantra.**

Unless you work at home as I do now, you have the gift of commute time. My 45 minute drive to and from work five days a week was more than I preferred, but I made the best of it between carpooling with Vermont Public Radio (I miss Red Barber and Susan Stamberg) and watching Vermont's seasons change. Still, I found that I had time to center myself by reciting my little work mantra on my way to and from. I came up with “Purpose - Power- Impact” as a way to remind myself why I was doing what I did every day, the realization that I had power and authority to make things happen, and reflect on the difference I made as a result of my work that day. This mantra tuned the rest of the world out for a while, geared me up and calmed me down. It also made my commute seem shorter.
44. Organize a Divestiture Day at the office twice a year.

I detest disorganization and our office space seemed to be a magnet for it. There was seldom an open space on a bookshelf, counter top, table, or filing cabinet, and finding needed materials always felt like a bit of an adventure. And I’m talking about the entire department, not my cubicle. I’ve been to Health and Human Services, too to witness the same. It’s a government thing, I suppose.

Twice a year we held Divestiture Day on Fridays. We brought in extra big recycle and trash bins and went to town. By day’s end we’d uncovered spaces that hadn’t seen the light of day for six months, mountains of paper for recycling, and piles of emptied 3-ring binders ready to donate to schools. There would be a pizza party for lunch and pot-luck dessert at the end of the day with the “Golden Broom Award” given out to the most productive de-clutterer. Oddly enough, we had to repeat the process again in six months.
Don’t just hold meetings; produce results.

When my friend’s child asked her what she did for work, she replied, “She goes to meetings.” Meetings can be productive or the bane of your professional existence. I can’t recall the number of times thinking my time could have been better spent as I sat in those uncomfortable chairs when an update email would have sufficed. It got to the point where I would look around the table, count up the hours for people present and their salaries, and wonder to myself, “Was it worth it?” I wish I had tracked the amount of time involved in researching and preparing responses for legislative requests and, based on the total amount of time I and others put into it and our approximate hourly pay, includes a “Cost of Request” at the end. I suspect legislators or others might have be more thoughtful and selective before sending requests which frequently were given scant consideration.

Never walk into a meeting where the purpose or result does not appear on the agenda. Does a decision need to be made on a policy
recommendation? Do flexible workgroups need to be formed to problem solve? Know up front why you and others are present and what will make the meeting successful in terms of producing results. If it’s simply a matter of keeping people informed, communicate updates electronically rather than calling everyone together. Make everyone’s time meaningful, including your own.
46. **Beware of the hardened heart of a state administrator.**

Former Vermont Education Commissioner and mentor Marc was an incredible leader whose heart and voice were soft though his passion and commitment steadfast. When he passed away unexpectedly, he was eulogized by a colleague at a packed State House who warned of the hardened heart of a teacher. The same holds true for state administrators such as early education leaders as well.

I was never one with thick skin or a hardened heart, though at times I wish I had been less vulnerable. It can be a difficult, risky environment advocating for change in early education and you will not be without critics or detractors if you do your job well. Even though you may play things over and over again in your head well after they should have been put to rest, it is important to remain sensitive to others. Be yourself and open your heart.
47. Put a good person in a bad system and the system will win nine times out of 10.

You assumed your role with the best intentions to make quick, positive change for young children, teachers, and families. As you become familiar with the system in which you are immersed, that enthusiasm will likely be tested and tempered with the realization that change, especially from within the system takes time and persistence. Don’t get too discouraged when the sprint becomes a marathon.

Each state government has its own personality, most of which are reluctant to change. Quick fixes are the exception, and whatever is built in a day can be dismantled just as quickly. I learned early there was an advantage to state government’s inertia. It allowed a level of stability and continuity that would resist sudden and chaotic change every time a new administration rode in to town. Still, it could be frustrating.

Never underestimate the power of a system, especially that of state government. It has the power
to change people as well as policies. Even though systems typically triumph over personal aspirations and approaches, it does happen. Commit to being among the one in 10 that survive the system. You don’t have to play it safe, just smart and steady.

48. **Finish what’s on your plate.**
When you commit to a task or goal, complete it. Make sure you have the necessary time, tools, staff, and support to finish what you start. Nothing causes burnout faster than too many unfinished tasks. And don’t leave major unfinished projects or problems for your successor or colleagues to clean up. Fulfillment will be your reward as you tick items off your list and others will respect you for keeping your word.
49. **Embrace the future of technology but keep a foot in the past.**

My father was a gimmick junkie and a geek before his time. He had the first punchcard telephone (automatic dialing) on his desk and loved the arrival of personal computers shortly before his passing. In contrast, I am an admitted Luddite who spurns infatuation with every technological gimmick that comes along. In fact, I still have an active AOL account for email and prefer a phonebook over Facebook. Still, I’d be foolish not to see the value much of it holds.

For me, technology is a tool. It is not the content, but a tool for effectively understanding and communicating content. This is the wave of the future and if our work is about preparing systems to support young children and families, we must embrace technology to best serve future generations. Technology will never be a substitute for content any more than marketing will make product quality obsolete.
50. Make sure your email sends the right message to the right person before hitting “Send.”

There are times when you just can’t help being a little snide or snarky when composing your remarks for an email. The intended recipient will get the message and no harm is done. Unfortunately, there may be occasions when the email finds itself to an unintended recipient, either through an inadvertent “reply all” or responding to a listserv message which can create embarrassment, hurt feelings, and unintended consequences. I still recall having to meet my Commissioner in the hallway between legislative committee meetings after mistakenly delivering one such message to a venerated lobbyist to warn him of potential backlash. Whoever invented the “cancel send” command for email deserves royalties.

Whenever you compose an email containing messages that may be deemed inappropriate or inflammatory by some, wait at least an hour before hitting the send button. This is especially true if you type while absorbed in the heat of the moment
when the heart overrides the head. You never know where that message may ultimately land.

51. Celebrate accomplishments. There is never a shortage of tasks for you tackle, and the never-ending to-do list can be a distraction and barrier to fulfillment. You and others will undoubtedly accomplish many important and great things over time. Don’t lose sight of what has been achieved and make sure you celebrate it, recognizing others for their contributions as well your own. You don’t have to rent a ballroom for such celebrations as even a kind word or cupcake carries tremendous power.
52. Good things take forever; bad things happen overnight.

Making good things happen within state government is often an arduous, long-term endeavor. Multiple meetings with numerous stakeholders cause the process to feel painfully deliberate and interminable. Still, the end results are often worth it as the best possible solution or policy evolves.

Bad things can happen in an instant, however, seeming to derail months of well-intended efforts. Despite all the planning with all the best minds, unforeseen circumstances can and will arise to stop things in their tracks. It’s easy to be discouraged when these situations occur but use it as an opportunity to further improve upon what is everyone’s shared goal. Follow that one-way sign and keep moving forward.
53. **Get involved. Stay involved.**

You’ve heard it before. “If you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu.” “If you’re not a stakeholder, you’re a chip.” “If you’re not part of the solution, get out of the way or get run over.”

While it is challenging, if not impossible, to be integrally engaged with everything requiring your attention, it is important to keep abreast of as many developments as possible. The first few months will be most overwhelming, and you’ll feel like that duck appearing so calm on the surface while pedaling frantically below just to keep in place. Try to participate and not just be present—“no shows” often occupy seats at the table but their minds are elsewhere. You are a leader in your position and your contributions are desperately needed.
54. **You can’t do it all alone.**

You will soon realize that the work in front of you is often more than you can reasonably handle all by yourself. You are not alone in your work, even if it feels that way. Others are willing to pitch in to help if only asked, and they may be found outside of your agency. A great leader will do two things—delegate and trust. This doesn’t mean you absolve yourself from responsibility, instead, it shows you consider the work important enough to achieve and your colleagues competent enough to contribute and succeed. It will lighten your load.
55. Forget buy-in.

Moving initiatives forward is not a solitary activity. It requires multiple stakeholders all rowing in the same direction. We often talk about getting “buy-in” from everyone, but I think this approach misses the mark. Buy-in presupposes that an idea has been hatched and others are approached to fall in line with what has been previously decided upon. Buy-in works, but it also carries the downside of potential resentment and sabotage because key partners were not consulted earlier in the process.

I suggest you strive for “ownership.” It may mean involving more people earlier in the process, but critical energy, enthusiasm and commitment will be garnered through ownership. While others may buy-in to your idea, it takes it to a whole new level when others own it and hold themselves accountable for the results. This is particularly important when engaging in collaborative work across departments or agencies. Own it!
56. You can have anything you want; you just can’t have everything you want.

Ray McNulty, one of my former commissioners was fond of paraphrasing these words from President Calvin Coolidge. It came in handy throughout my career, forcing me to consider what was most important. In hindsight, many key priorities were attained, but not all at once. Clarity, persistence and patience go hand in hand when it comes to working in state government.

All too often, early educators present a laundry list of “wants,” and when asked which one was most important, they’d stumble or decry, “It’s all important.” That is not what your boss or legislators want to hear- you are the expert! It is fine to have an extensive list in your pocket, but you don’t have to overwhelm everyone with your big picture. Prioritize and be pragmatic. Focus intently on select items and they are more likely to materialize. You’ll also feel a sense of accomplishment which can be elusive in large systems such as state government.
57. **Every day counts.**

It’s easy to lose track of yourself and your schedule given the number of simultaneous tasks you are dealing with day in and day out. Deadlines also force you to focus on the finish line, even if it’s weeks or months away. Your true accomplishments will not occur in one-day segments; rather, everything you do after you arrive at work should contribute to your ultimate work goals. There should be no wasted moments and every day counts. As an educator, I told myself, “Every child should be better off every day.” It was not something that would magically happen at the end of the school year. The same holds true when you are in your leadership position.
58. Be yourself. Take good care of yourself.

You are in your position for a reason, and you are the only you who ever was and will be. When you try to be or act in a way that isn’t yourself, it feels like forcing yourself into a shoe two sizes too small. There will always be people smarter than you, but no one brings your unique blend of thinking, feeling, and experience to the table. Celebrate your individuality and uniqueness, and bring it fully to your work every day.

Finally, take very good care of yourself. The work will demand every bit of you and more, day in and out. Pace yourself and be kind to yourself. When you hit a wall, stop, recharge and redirect. It does no one any good if you are not operating at your peak, especially yourself. And you are too valuable to lose for the long run.
With a Little Help from My Friends

Early education is still in its infancy for all intents and purposes. There are not that many colleagues who have served in high leadership positions for early education in state education agencies, however.

I’ve been most fortunate to be surrounded by hundreds of fantastic colleagues who contributed to my growth and well-being as a professional and a person. Whether they know it or not, they’ve been my playmates, coaches, mentors, and inspiration.

I invited a few of my colleagues to share some of their advice on how best to survive stage government. I trust you’ll find their suggestions helpful.

**Harriet Egertson** (retired Early Childhood Director, Nebraska Department of Education)

**Just when you think you are done, you’re not.**
All too often I felt like my work resembled a big pot of vegetable soup. I would ladle the top layer believing that I would eventually get to the bottom when I captured that last lump of potato. However, every time I emptied my ladle,
another layer (and another) moved right on up behind it. There is always another layer lurking beneath with state government work which will be brought to your attention time and again. Be focused, patient and persistent in your work, and eventually you can begin to ladle from another pot.

**Ellen Frede** (former Early Childhood Education Director, New Jersey Department of Education)

**Don’t burn your bridges.**
I was lucky when I accepted my new position with the New Jersey Department of Education because I was on a leave of absence from my tenured position as a faculty member. This gave me the flexibility to live by my convictions. I knew that if I was ever faced with a directive that I thought was actually bad for children, I could refuse. This only almost happened once but meanwhile I was more courageous than I might have been without that safety net and I was never in danger of losing my job. I think this shows that you have to respond to each situation as if you have a job to go back to. Then you can do the best for the children.
Lindy Buch (retired Early Education Director, Michigan Department of Education)

Accept the role of leader when you are the manager. Give credit to your staff when things go well; accept the blame for the team when they don’t. If you’re lucky enough to have staff, whether they are administrative /financial/statistical support or early childhood colleagues who report to you, always publicly acknowledge their contributions to successes (even if they only did what you told them to and the big ideas were yours). And if there’s a problem, publicly accept the responsibility for it as the leader of the team. You can figure out how to avoid future problems privately.

You may now be a bureaucrat, but bureaucracy isn’t the goal.
You’ve chosen to lead change from within the system, but the goal isn’t to make the system function better—it’s to better the lives of children, families, and those who work with them directly. When you make rules and put burdens on programs or individuals for reports and data, always consider how the request might burden them, and explain why it’s necessary for the effectiveness or continuity of the program.
**Penny Milburn** (retired Early Childhood Education Director, Iowa Department of Education)

**Know your forms.**
State government is fueled by multiple forms and procedures. Establish relationships with other staff who can assist you with these forms and procedures. If you turn in a form in which nothing has changed but the footer date, know that you will need to resubmit that form. If you are required to complete the ‘green form’ make sure you don’t copy it onto white paper as no one will recognize the content as being that of the ‘green form.’” It sounds crazy, but this is state government!

**Double check your lavaliere microphone.**
In no time at all you will be addressing large groups where a microphone is necessary. When using a lavaliere microphone on your lapel for a presentation, make sure you turn it off prior to the break time. The audience doesn’t need to know what you ate or drank during the break, or any off-handed comments you may make. Oops!

**Be clear about your expectations.**
I once contracted with an out of state consultants to conduct professional development for our agency. Everything went smoothly and the intended outcomes were achieved. Driving
through rural communities on our return trip to the airport, we stopped for lunch where the consultant ordered a veggie burger. When her meal arrived, she was given their version of a veggie burger - a hamburger with lettuce and tomato. The point here is that you need to be explicit and crystal clear with what you expect from others in order to get what you want. They are representing you and need to deliver the goods you promise.

Parting Words

Much like a game of leapfrog, we stand on the shoulders of giants who will then serve as pillars for future leaders. Every turn in the road seemed to have a guiding angel when it was needed. Be there for others as you move forward.

I am a fortunate person. I look back on my career in early childhood education and feel a sense of accomplishment and contribution to the field. It did not come without doubts, frustration, long days, and sleepless nights. At the same time, it was peppered with smiles, hugs, and respectful collegiality. In the end, it was worth every bit.

I wish you well in your journey and hope you end up at a similar destination.
“This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. Life is no ‘brief candle’ to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for a moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to the future generations.”

~ George Bernard Shaw
About the Author

Jim Squires, Ph.D. devoted his entire career to improving the lives of young children and those who teach them. He spent two decades as the Early Childhood Education Programs Coordinator at the Vermont Department of Education before serving as Senior Fellow for the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) and Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. His background also includes teaching and administering early childhood programs in child care, Head Start, migrant education, and higher education. He received his Ph.D. in child development and public policy from the Union Institute in Ohio.

Jim enjoys retirement with his wife Debbie as they move between Charlotte, Vermont and Saint Simons Island, Georgia. He may be reached at SquiresJames@aol.com or 802.734.9715.

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