Visible Leadership in Practice & PAUSE

The Science and Practice of Relationship-Focused Early Childhood Leadership

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Community Agreements

- **Be present.**
- **Listen to understand.**
- **Make space for every voice.**
- **Speak from own experiences and use “I” statements.**
- **Approach differences with curiosity.**
- **Maintain confidentiality.**
- **Allow room for humor, joy, and imperfection.**
- ***Give grace*.**

I define a leader as anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential.

-Brené Brown

What Makes Leadership VISIBLE?

What qualities do you associate with effective leadership?



We invite you to take out your phones and scan the Mentimeter QR Code.
Please submit one or two words.

What Is a Visible Leader?

A visible leader is not simply someone who is seen. A visible leader helps other people feel:

Seen. **Heard.** **Valued.** **Connected.**

Today's focus: less about having the "right" leadership answers, more about developing habits of:

Curiosity **Reflection** **Connection** **Intentional Action**

Leadership Reflection

Take a quiet moment to reflect on the questions below and choose your two qualities.

One leadership quality that feels natural to me is...

One leadership quality I want to strengthen is...

Small-Group Connection

1. What does effective or reflective leadership look and feel like?
2. Who has influenced the way you lead?
3. What did they do that made their leadership meaningful?
4. What comes naturally to you? What requires more intention?

Qualities become meaningful when they are translated into action.

VISIBLE

V Value Individuals

I Invite Voice

S See Strengths

I Investigate With Curiosity

B Belonging

L Listen Before Leading

E Experiment and Evolve

Relationship-focused leadership made visible through everyday actions.

Visible Leadership in Practice & PAUSE

V Value Individuals

People are more than their roles and responsibilities.

Visible leaders:

- **Recognize contributions.**
- **Learn people's strengths.**
- **Show genuine interest.**
- **Make time for connection.**
- **Treat people with dignity and respect.**

REFLECTION

Who on your team may need to feel more seen by you?

I Invite Voice

Create opportunities for others to contribute.

Visible leaders:

- Ask open-ended questions.
- Seek multiple perspectives.
- Invite quieter voices.
- Encourage honest feedback.

Try

- "What are you noticing?"
- "What perspective haven't we heard?"
- "What would you recommend?"

Do not assume silence means agreement.

S See Strengths

Notice what people do well.

Visible leaders:

- Name contributions specifically.
- Recognize growth.
- Help individuals identify their capabilities.
- Delegate in ways that build confidence.

Try

- "One strength I see in you is..."
- "I noticed how thoughtfully you handled that."
- "You brought calm to a difficult situation."

Do we offer adults the strength-based lens we offer children?

I Investigate With Curiosity

Move from judgment to understanding.

Visible leaders ask:

- “What might be happening here?”
- “What information am I missing?”
- “What assumptions am I making?”
- “What have we already tried?”

Reflect

- “What biases do I carry?”

Curiosity does not eliminate accountability. It helps us understand before we respond.

B Belonging

Grows through acceptance, connection, participation, safety, and dignity.

Visible leaders ask:

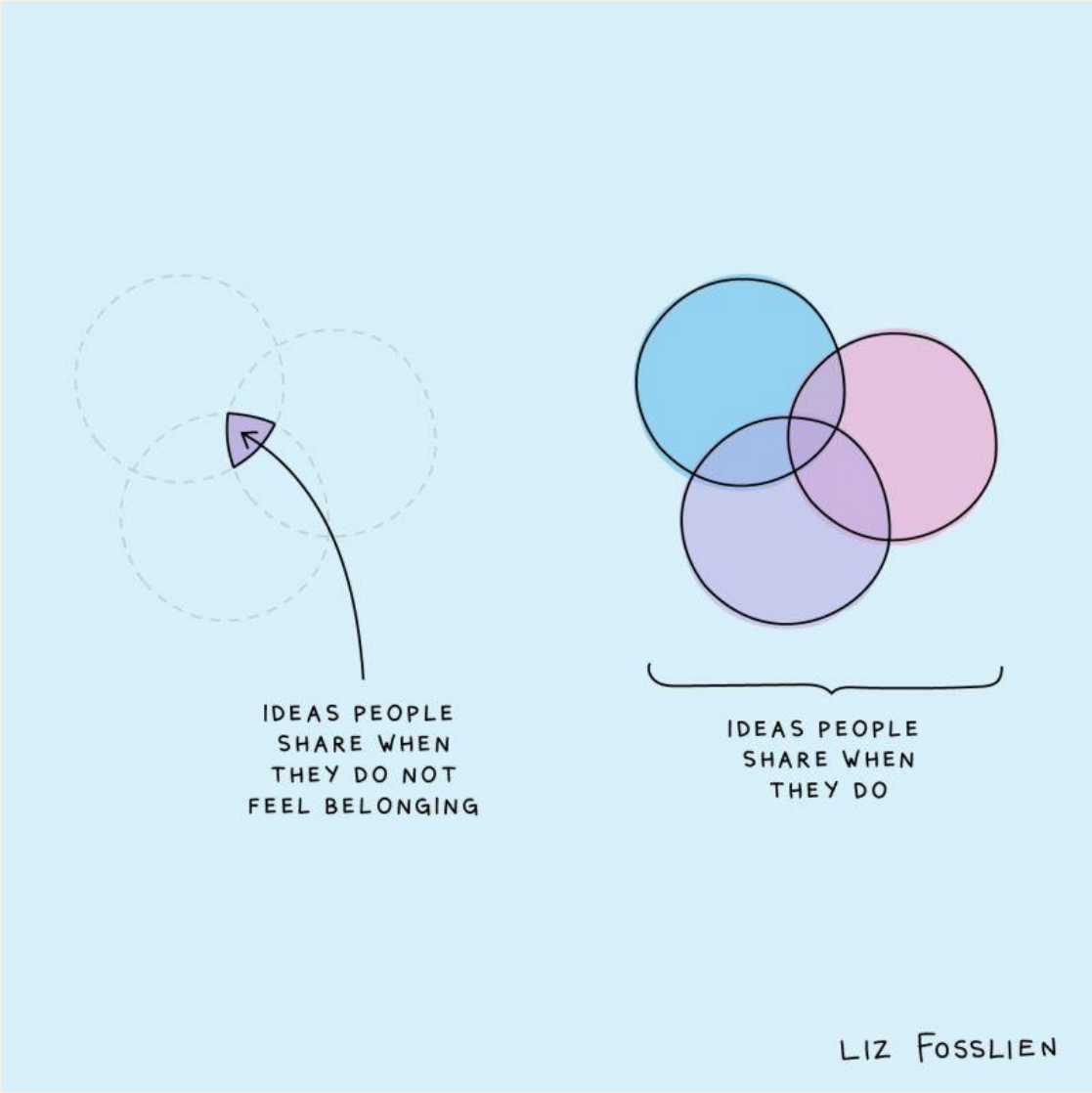
- “Who feels included?”
- “Whose voice is regularly heard?”
- “Who might feel outside the group?”
- “Whose voice may be missing?”

I matter here. I have a voice. I can contribute. I will be treated with dignity.

B Belonging

Belonging is not the same thing as feeling like you fit in. Belonging is when you feel valued for everything that makes you stand out.

-Liz Fosslien



L Listen Before Leading

Resist the pressure to immediately solve every concern.

Visible leaders:

- Are fully present.
- Listen for emotion **and** information.
- Reflect what you hear. Use "I" messages.
- Clarify before directing.

Try

- "Tell me more."
- "What I'm hearing is..."
- "What kind of support would be helpful?"

Sometimes the first responsibility is understanding.

E Experiment and Evolve

Leadership is not predictable.

Visible leaders:	Ask
Try something new; take thoughtful risks.	"What did we learn?"
Allow time; expect trial and error.	"What can we continue? What can we change?"
Reflect on failure and adjust.	"What might we try next?"

We observe. We wonder. We try. We gather information. We adjust.

VISIBLE in Everyday Language

	Quality	Try asking or saying
V	Value Individuals	Who on your team may need to feel more seen by you?
I	Invite Voice	"What perspective haven't we heard?"
S	See Strengths	"One strength I see in you is..."
I	Investigate With Curiosity	"What assumptions am I making?"
B	Belonging	Whose voice may be missing?
L	Listen Before Leading	"What I'm hearing is..."
E	Experiment and Evolve	"What did we learn? What might we try next?"

Small Group Connection

Each group receives one part of VISIBLE.

Discuss (5 min.):

- What does this quality look like in practice?
- What might prevent a leader from demonstrating it?
- How would staff experience its presence?
- How might staff experience its absence?
- What could a leader say to demonstrate it?

Then:

We will reconvene and each group will share one key insight from their small group discussion.

Leadership Is an Experiment

Leadership can be unpredictable because leadership involves people.

Relationships change

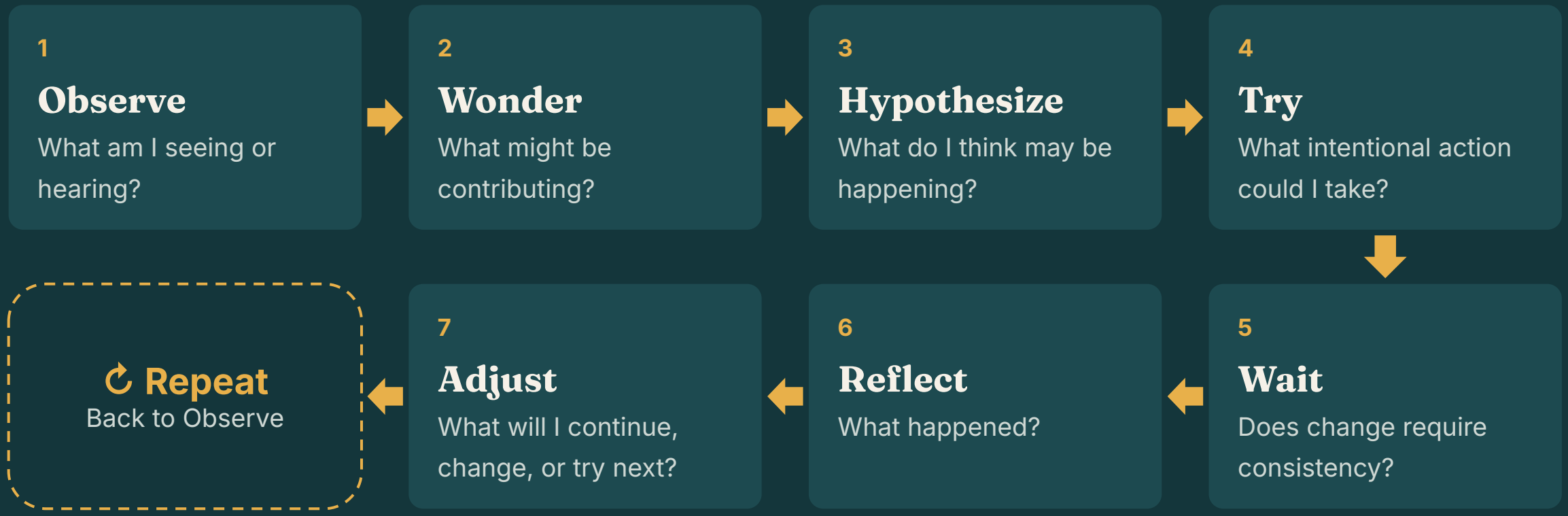
Circumstances change

Needs change

What worked yesterday may not work tomorrow

Leadership sometimes looks a lot like science.

The Leadership Learning Cycle



Hypothesis is not certainty. Sometimes failure provides information.

Visible Leadership in Practice & PAUSE

Leadership Includes...

Unpredictability	Time	Trial + Error	Risk
Mistakes	Failure	Reflection	Growth

Sometimes failure provides information.

“What did this teach me?”

Imagine a staff member approaches you and says:

“I need to talk to you.”

What happens in your body?

PAUSE: A Relationship-Focused Practice

P	A	U	S	E
Presence	**Ask**	**Understand**	**See Strengths + Seek Solutions**	**Encourage Ownership**
Notice my emotions, assumptions, and tone.	Use questions before giving answers.	Listen for the experience underneath the problem.	What has helped, even a little?	What would you like to do next?

Pause before reacting, correcting, advising, or taking over.

P Presence

Before responding, notice:

- My emotions
- My assumptions
- My tone
- The person in front of me

What am I bringing into this conversation?

A Ask

- "What happened?"
- "What feels most important?"
- "What do you need?"
- "What have you already tried?"

Use questions before giving answers.

U Understand

Listen for the experience underneath the problem.

> "What I'm hearing is..."

> "It sounds like..."

> "Tell me more about that."

Understanding does not always mean agreeing.

S See Strengths + Seek Solutions

- "What has helped, even a little?"
- "What strength can you bring to this?"
- "What options do you see?"
- "What might be one next step?"

The goal is collaborative problem-solving and capacity building.

E Encourage Ownership

- "What would you like to do next?"
- "What feels manageable?"
- "How can I support you?"
- "What part of this can you take ownership of?"

Support without taking away the opportunity to grow.

Reactive or Reflective?

A TEACHER SAYS:

“I cannot keep working with this child. Nothing I do works, and I’m exhausted.”

Reactive response	vs	Reflective response
“You need to stay consistent. Try the strategies we talked about last week.”		*“I’m hearing how exhausted you’re feeling. Tell me what you’ve been noticing lately.”*

Practice PAUSE

Work with a partner. Use PAUSE to continue the conversation. Take turns as leader and staff member.

P	**Presence:** Slow down.
A	**Ask:** "What has been happening?"
U	**Understand:** "What feels most difficult?"
S	**See Strengths + Seek Solutions:** "What has worked, even briefly?"
E	**Encourage Ownership:** "What is one thing you'd like to try next, and how can I support you?"

Debrief

Come back together and share some insights:

- How did the two approaches feel different?
- What builds greater capacity?
- What strengthens trust?

When is it hardest for you to PAUSE?

Does My Leadership Match My Values?

What do I value most as a leader?

What are my professional goals?

Do my daily behaviors reflect those values?

Which part of VISIBLE is already strong? Which requires more intention?

Where could PAUSE change how I respond?

“One way I want my leadership behavior to more closely align with my values is…”

Who Are Your People?

Leadership can sometimes feel isolating. Leaders also need:

Trust

Acceptance

Challenge

Honesty

Encouragement

Belonging

Your Leadership Circle

Individuals Who Ground Me	Individuals Who Help Me Grow	Individuals I Support
Who helps me feel safe, accepted, and understood?	Who asks hard questions? Who gives honest feedback? Who encourages me to stretch?	Who looks to me for guidance, mentorship, or encouragement?

Trust Grows Through...

- Consistency
- Honesty
- Listening
- Follow-through
- Respect
- Accountability
- Confidentiality
- **Repair after mistakes**

Small-group connection:

- What helps trust grow?
- What weakens it?
- What creates belonging?
- How can acceptance and accountability coexist?

Relationship-focused leadership does not require perfection.

My Visible Leadership Commitment

- One strength I will continue using...
- One VISIBLE quality I will strengthen...
- One way I will PAUSE before reacting...
- One relationship I will nurture...
- One action I will take this week...

A Visible Leader...

- Values Individuals
- Invites Voice
- Sees Strengths
- Investigates With Curiosity
- Creates Belonging
- Listens Before Leading
- Experiments + Evolves

And when leadership becomes difficult...

PAUSE.

Lead so individuals feel seen.
Listen so individuals feel heard.
Respond so individuals feel valued.
Create spaces where individuals know they belong.

What is one word or phrase you are taking with you?

As a Visible Leader...

- How do people experience me?
- Do individuals feel seen, heard, trusted, and valued in my presence?
- Am I creating followers, or developing other leaders?
- Can I remain curious when I do not immediately know the answer?

And...

Can I PAUSE long enough to understand before I lead?

Relationship-Focused Leadership Resources

McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership

Facilitative Leadership

Leading With Heart

Early Childhood Leadership Development

mccormickcenter.nl.edu

ZERO TO THREE

Reflective Practice and Program Development

Three Building Blocks of Reflective Supervision

Reflective Practice for Early Childhood Professionals

zerotothree.org

Continue Exploring

NAEYC

Standards and competencies for relationships, ethical practice, collaboration, communication, and professional growth.

naeyc.org

Harvard Center on the Developing Child

Responsive relationships, serve and return, resilience, supportive relationships.

developingchild.harvard.edu

Exchange Press

Research, strategies, articles, videos, and professional learning.

hub.exchangepress.com

Community Playthings

Articles on learning through play, learning environments, child development, and outdoor learning.

communityplaythings.com

Books for Early Childhood Leaders

MacDonald, S. (2016). *Inspiring early childhood leadership: Eight strategies to ignite passion and transform program quality*. Gryphon House.

LeeKeenan, D., & Ponte, I. C. (2018). *From survive to thrive: A director's guide for leading an early childhood program*. National Association for the Education of Young Children. NAEYC.

Sullivan, D.R.E. (2023). *Learning to lead: Effective leadership skills for teachers of young children* (2nd ed.). Redleaf Press.

Carter, M., Casio, L. M., & Curtis, D. (2021). *The visionary director: A handbook for dreaming, organizing, and improvising in your center* (3rd ed.). Redleaf Press.