# LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS OF SCHOOL FOODSERVICE DIRECTORS AT FINANCIALLY SUCCESSFUL OPERATIONS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

Although the majority of leadership research has focused on self-reported leadership behaviors, this qualitative research study assessed observable leadership behaviors of school foodservice directors. Participant observation of seven directors occurred individually over a total of 55 hours.  Data triangulation and analysis revealed six key leadership dimensions: serving, mentoring, humanizing, innovating, leveraging, and challenging.  These leadership dimensions are described and suggestions are given on how they might be used for educational purposes and human resources management of foodservice directors.

**Keywords**: leadership, school, foodservice, directors

## INTRODUCTION

School foodservice directors face multiple challenges in their jobs. Participation rates, wellness policy, and recess placement are just a few of these challenges (Rainville, Wolf, & Carr, 2006). Leadership, defined as exhibiting leadership behaviors, is necessary for success in addressing these and many other job challenges.

The leadership literature is immense; common leadership theories abound such as older theories and models emphasizing traits or styles of leaders to more recent theories and models like servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), transformational leadership (Bass, 1985), and leadership practices (Kouzes & Posner, 2002) as well as the importance of the leadership-learning connection (Brown & Posner, 2001; Marques, 2007).  When reviewing such theories, it is important to note the leadership evolution and current leadership "think" with emphasis on relationships, interactions, and behaviors towards others.  The benefits of leaders who exhibit leadership behaviors have been touted: decreased employee turnover, increased employee satisfaction, and increased organization financial success (Lim, 2008; Ozcelik, Langton, & Aldrich, 2008; Waldman, Ramirez, House & Puraman, 2001).

Minimal works have been published about dietetics and foodservice leadership (Gregoire & Arendt, 2004). When reported, published works have found the leadership measurement instruments to be less reliable in dietetics and foodservice sample populations as compared to other populations studied (Arendt & Gregoire, 2005a; Burzminski, 2002).  Dietetics and hospitality management students' leadership perceptions, self-reported leadership behaviors, and learning strategies have been studied (Arendt & Gregoire, 2005a, 2005b, 2006).  The ability to exhibit leadership behaviors both as a student and later as a professional is important.

Competencies, knowledge, and skills for success as a school nutrition

manager have been established, and "providing leadership" is a commonality to the functional areas of service, sanitation, safety and security, nutrition and menu planning, procurement, marketing, human resources management, and professional management (Cater & Carr, 2007). Gregoire, Sames, Dowling, and Lafferty (2005) researched leadership needs for foodservice directors. Thirty-nine competency statements were developed for hospital foodservice directors.  Both hospital executives and directors rated two competency statements (acts as an effective team leader and demonstrates leadership) in the top three of the potential foodservice director competencies identified (Gregoire, Sames, Dowling, & Lafferty, 2005).  Likewise, in their study rating competencies and skills of assisted-living food service directors and their administrators, Lee, Remig, and Shanklin (2008) found that "act as an effective team leader" was rated the most important by both directors and administrators. In another study of 149 school nutrition professionals, Dycus (2007) found self-reported leadership practice scores, as measured using the Leadership Practice Inventory questionnaire, to be higher in this group as compared to score norms.  Although the importance of leadership is recognized, little work has been done to identify how foodservice directors exhibit leadership behaviors.

Therefore, this research project was a first step in theory-development work related to leadership behaviors of school foodservice directors. The purpose of this research was to provide insights about observed behaviors of school foodservice leaders. Additionally, findings may aid educators by providing information on leadership behaviors needed for school foodservice director jobs so that opportunities might be incorporated into the classroom allowing students to practice leadership. This research identified key behaviors for foodservice school leadership that can be used in selecting the best candidate for these positions and in preparing succession plans for expected voluntary separations such as retirements.

### METHODS

Qualitative methodology was utilized; qualitative research allows the researcher to explore the "how" question because it is emergent in nature and involves theory developing (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Theory (or concept) sampling was employed; this is a type of purposeful sampling technique "in which the researcher samples individuals or sites because they can help the researcher generate or discover a theory or specific concepts within the theory" (Creswell, 2008, pg. 216).

A contact list of 13 potential on-site foodservice directors, who met the sampling criteria, within a 300 mile radius of the researcher's institution was developed.  All contacts were viewed to be "leaders" by their colleagues and served as a foodservice director of a financially-stable school nutrition program. All potential participants were contacted by telephone and commitment was received from seven of the 13.  Those declining were either not available at the time of the contact or not available during the observational period. Protocol consistent with that submitted and approved by the University Institutional Review Board was followed.

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Participant observations occurred at seven different sites with seven different informants (directors). Achterberg and Arendt (2008) wrote this about participant observation, "The researcher becomes part of the study and is able to learn more through firsthand experiences by participating themselves" (pg. 69). Two examples of participation during the observational period included: serving students lunch along-side the director as she "filled in" for an absent employee and participating in a meeting of foodservice managers led by the director.

Six of the site visits spanned the director's entire work day (starting between 6am and 8am then ending between 4pm and 5pm), however one visit was cut short due to the threat of bad weather resulting in a five-hour observation period (as compared to eight or more hours for all others). As noted by Angrosino (2005), "naturalistic observation should not interfere with the people or activities under observation" (pg 730). Therefore, care was taken to blend into the normal flow of the operation by observing from locations away from heavy traffic flow and participating in normal operations, as appropriate. All interviews were conducted during the observation period with the exception of the shorter visit; this interview was conducted via phone.

Particularly in qualitative research, the credibility of the researcher is of concern because the researcher is the instrument. I have extensive knowledge, training, and experience in qualitative research methods including (but not limited to) qualitative research coursework and experience in qualitative data collection such as individual and group interviews.

Field notes, tape-recordings, leadership observation tracking forms, and in-depth interview guides were the primary data collection tools. Artifacts (i.e. meeting agendas, inservice handouts, memos, and standard documentation forms) also were collected for analysis. Upon completion of each site visit, field notes, artifacts, and observational tracking forms were analyzed for themes by another trained researcher and me. Tapes, containing the in-depth interview, were transcribed by an experienced, paid transcriptionist and data were analyzed. Verification of data interpretation was confirmed using triangulation, a method used for cross-checking data sources. Trustworthiness of data was strengthened using member checking as described by Achterberg and Arendt (2008).

**RESULTS**
All participants were female and ranged in age from 45 to 65 years old. Larger sized districts and smaller school districts were represented (900 – 7000+ meals/day served). During the interview process, all directors confirmed their operation's positive financial status. Total observational time period for all seven visits was 55 hours.

Based on coding and themeing, six predominate areas emerged and were found consistent among all leaders: serving, mentoring, humanizing, innovating, leveraging, and challenging. A model of the leadership dimensions can be found in Figure 1. Likewise, Table 1 illustrates examples of behaviors in each leadership dimension.

### Serving
Not only did all directors serve their employees, but they also anticipate needs of their employees. Providing resources such as time, additional employee help, or additional training was viewed as the serving dimension. Exemplary quotations from foodservice directors as they practiced serving follow:
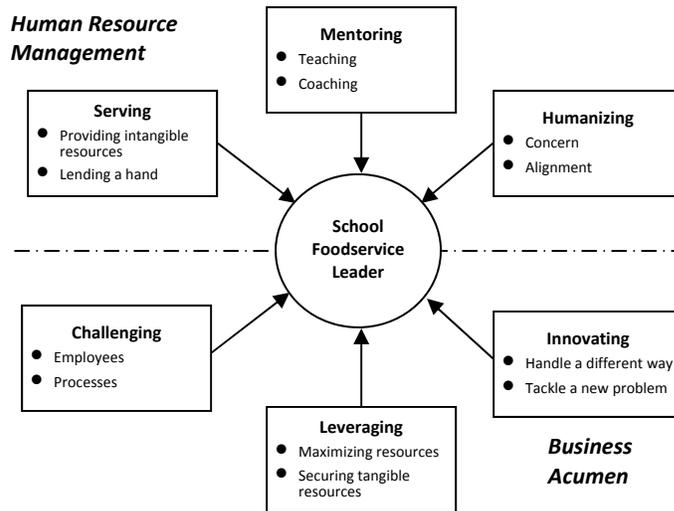


**Figure 1: Dimensions of Leadership Model**

- " Hello, I am fine. What can I do for you?" – participant on the phone with an employee.
- "Now what can I do for you?"
- "Anything else I can do for you?"

### Mentoring
All leaders were observed mentoring others. Several worked with students interested in foodservice or dietetics, others mentored co-workers and/or employees. Teaching and coaching also were viewed as mentoring. Two directors addressed their mentorship of disabled or otherwise challenged employees. Referring to one employee the directors stated, "We're doing something good here. He's a good kid."

### Humanizing
This term is an all encompassing term used to cover the behavior exhibited by these leaders referring to "I am one of you, I am human too. I care about you. I can empathize with you." Concern for others also was placed in this category. It was common to hear words aligning the director with the employee, i.e.,"I'm glad your household is like that too" (director stating that the employee's household was similar to the director's with regards to a particular home situation.)

Recognizing that all of these directors were women, the literature related to women's leadership parallels some of the noted themed areas. For instance, it has been noted that women leaders, as compared to men leaders, are more concerned about "taking care of others, more concerned about making sure others are comfortable" (McMahon, 2005, p. 302). This parallels the notion of the "humanizing" dimension in the current foodservice director leadership model.

### Innovating
Innovating referred to new and different ways to handle the situation in which the leader had been placed. Several examples dealt with the location of foods in the cafeteria line, healthy vending machine options, and different ways to handle human resource management issues such as recruiting and scheduling. One participant gave this innovating quotation, "The first day of school is only a half day. It's a nightmare to get all kids through (the lunch line). They are just learning their id number and learning the process. So, I proposed we just feed for free and take reimbursement."

**Table 1:  Leadership Dimensions with Selected Situations and Example Behaviors**

| Dimension | Situation | Exhibiting Leadership Behaviors |
|---|---|---|
| **Challenging** | • A change has been made to lunch schedule and change was not communicated to foodservice<br>• Recess occurs after lunch but director prefers it before<br>• Manual processing of free/reduced applications | • Leader addresses involved parties and explains reason why having the change communicated is so important (portion sizes are different for different ages of students)<br>• Continues to voice concern and push for change to align with best practices of recess before lunch<br>• Consideration of an automated system |
| **Leveraging** | • Limited resources available for marketing<br>• Wanting to get an after school program started to help promote wellness concepts | • Partnered with vendors and local organizations to get funding<br>• Writing of grant to get funded.  Have already obtained one grant to support wellness efforts |
| **Innovating** | • Fresh fruit not being selected by students<br>• Casino is coming to town<br>• Always needing subs but never enough | • Reallocation of space to allow fruit a more visible location and encourage students to take it<br>• Noted impact and need for different way of hiring<br>• Created a full time sub position with title of utility worker |
| **Serving** | • Employee struggling with inventory issues | • Director responds by asking what else the employee needs in her inventory to make it easier for her |
| **Mentoring** | • Manager not understanding offer vs. serve concept<br>• Manager completing employee performance evaluations differently than established evaluation criteria | • Director patiently explains to the employee during manager's meeting and then continues to follow-up.<br>• Director coaches manager on a specific employee evaluation |
| **Humanizing** | • Threat of snowstorm<br>• Employees with challenging past<br>• Walking program at the school | • Meeting canceled due to impending snow storm as informant notes "we don't want anyone to be injured"<br>• Investing in employees by providing opportunities<br>• Director joins in, and foodservice department has highest miles of any other department |

### Leveraging

This dimension was labeled as leveraging based on observations where participants used the resources available to make the operation even better.  Leveraging was done by all participants but exhibited in multiple ways.  In one case, the director utilized student labor to open an a la carte venue when labor resources were otherwise not available.  Human resource constraints had previously prohibited opening of the venue.

### Challenging

This referenced challenging the organizations status quo and also challenging employees regarding work attitude and duties.  These directors did not seem to subscript to the adage, "If it's not broke, don't fix it" but rather looked to challenge the process in order to make the overall foodservice operation better. Illustrative comments and situations of challenging follow.

There was an accounting problem as the person in charge of accounting had recently changed the process.  The participant relayed this: "I knew there was something wrong with it.. So, I went in and said… (You) can't be afraid to confront when issues need to be resolved". Another participant had this to say as she met with a supervisor who was consistently rating employees lower on performance appraisals, "Is there any reason you won't rate her above average?"

Serving, mentoring, humanizing, innovating, leveraging and challenging best encompassed the behaviors of all foodservice directors observed.  The dimensions of serving, mentoring, and humanizing appear to be focused toward the human resources management (people) side of the job. Innovating, leveraging, and challenging appear to be focused toward the business acumen of the job such as financial resource management.

### CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS

This study serves as an exploration of exhibited leadership behaviors by seven foodservice directors.  Although most leadership work in the area has used self-reported questionnaires, this study is unique in that actual observations of school foodservice directors were made. Common to all directors observed were six dimensions of leadership: 1) serving 2) mentoring 3) humanizing 4) challenging 5) leveraging and 6) innovating.  A blending of human resources aspects and business acumen appear to be key behaviors of on-site school foodservice directors. Further research is needed to test this leadership dimensions model.

Certain limitations are recognized with this work and with qualitative work in general.  Qualitative work is not to be generalized but rather to cover breadth and depth of a topic area. This study, therefore, serves as the catalyst for additional quantitative work.  Furthermore, it is recognized that participants' behaviors may have been altered by the researcher making observations. To minimize the potential of this happening, the researcher observed for an extended period of time and collected various documents (such as meeting agendas, memos, and reports) to supplement observations.  Bias also can become a limitation in qualitative work. This researcher has had training and experience in qualitative research methods and had not met any of the participants prior to observation.

Individuals exhibiting leadership behaviors have been shown to have a positive impact in the workplace: decreased employee turnover, better employee performance, greater employee job satisfaction, improved organizational success (Bono & Judge, 2003; Calloway & Awadzi, 2008; Lim, 2008). Specific knowledge and skills are required to become a successful foodservice leader. The visible signs of leadership are behaviors, exhibited by individuals, often based on their acquired knowledge and skills. Foodservice management students acquire knowledge and skills in the classroom and other

context areas, such as home and work. Although these knowledge and skills are important, overall leadership behaviors, or the visible sign of leadership, are most important. Opportunities both inside and outside the classroom may help students develop leadership behaviors. For example, mentoring opportunities could be developed by having senior students work with lower classmen. Senior students could provide mentorship on class projects or assignments as well as work or job context related activities.

Instructors need to know how to design coursework appropriately. There is evidence that group work projects allow students to further develop leadership behaviors (Arendt & Gregoire, 2006). All six dimensions of leadership described above could be incorporated into such a project. Through innovation of ideas, leveraging of resources, serving others in the group, mentoring group members, practicing compassion (humanizing), and being encouraged to challenge the status quo, students can practice leadership behaviors and prepare to assume leadership roles in foodservice professions. As noted by Posner (2009), "Teaching about leadership is necessary to enable others to lead effectively, but it is not sufficient…in the sense that leadership requires doing and leadership development therefore requires action-learning…" (pg. 1).

Additionally, these dimensions could be incorporated as criteria for the selection and hiring process as well as professional development and succession planning for school foodservice director positions. Applicants for such positions could be screened for the behaviors of challenging, mentoring, humanizing, serving, leveraging, and innovating. The use of probing, behavioral questions on an application or in an interview would be one way to screen for these six dimensions. Example questions might include: "Tell me about a time when you mentored someone?" or "Tell me about a time when you came up with a new idea or new way of accomplishing a task?".

Gregoire and Greathouse (2008) found that mentoring was one of the most common assignments used in succession planning of school foodservice directors, but only 20% of the study schools responding to the questionnaire participated in succession planning. Given the majority of organizational leaders are Baby Boomers (Chartrand & Hagemann, 2009) and expected to retire over the next 15 years, succession planning is of paramount importance in all organizations. Seeking out individuals with the six leadership behaviors identified here, will help secure the continued success of school foodservices.

The observation and identification of these six dimensions of leadership in successful school foodservice directors is important for use in education of future directors. Likewise, these dimensions are useful for job placement and succession planning.

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