

DAME LEADERSHIP HELPS CATHERINE HERSHEY SCHOOLS' SHARPEN LEADERSHIP SKILLS, CULTURE

PROJECT: Catherine Hershey Schools Leadership Academy
CLIENT: Catherine Hershey Schools for Early Learning

OVERVIEW

The leaders at the Catherine Hershey Schools for Early Learning have ambitious plans. Opening six early learning centers in a few years. Going from a small group to perhaps 500-600 when all the centers are open.

Founded in 2021, CHS had a unified vision, a clear mission, and a burning desire to help meet the urgent need for childhood education in its core central Pennsylvania community.

Even more important was the responsibility of living up to the humanitarian legacy of the organization's namesake, Catherine Hershey, late wife of the famous chocolatier and a noted philanthropist herself.

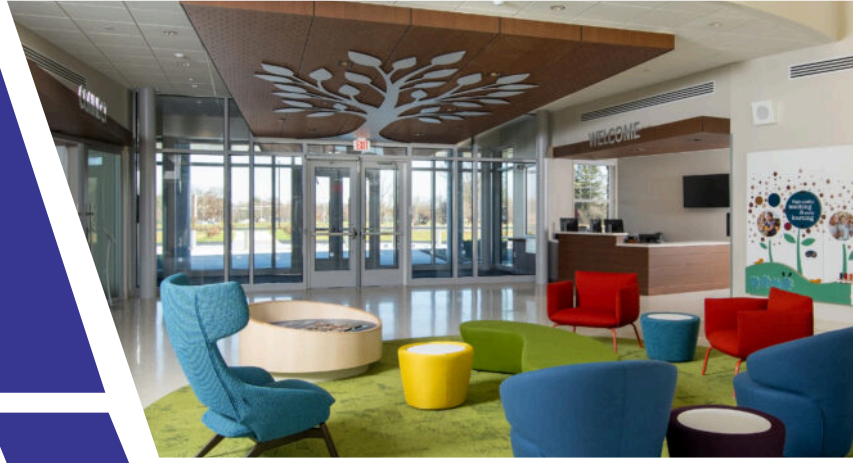
CHALLENGE

The organization chose to be very intentional about the growth, laying the groundwork by building trust and fashioning a shared culture. The goal was to be responsive to employee feedback in establishing its culture and preparing new and existing leaders for our ambitious goals and growth.

THE SOLUTION

To address some of these cultural and leadership issues, the school recently launched the Catherine Hershey Schools Leadership Academy as part of a collaborative effort with training experts and facilitators at Dame Leadership. The ongoing program involves 18 CHS participants in two 2-hour workshops held monthly. Two sessions are held each month to accommodate schedules. Krista Beljan, a leadership consultant at Dame, leads the sessions with co-facilitation support from her Dame Leadership team member, Jolene Pickens.

The program focuses on offering and practicing usable tools and ideas that participants can apply immediately. Key topics include establishing a culture, leadership, and building trust.



RESULTS

The training was a complete success, according to the participants.

"It was a good approach that was different from other training I've done," Information Technology Manager Chad Leese said.

For Beth Kroutch, CHS's Human Resources Director and the prime sponsor of the program, a key part of the program was that CHS showed that it was willing to invest in the growth and development of its key people. And the participants responded.

"I think they are well invested in it," Beth said.

For Marketing Manager Lauren Schuman, the benefit was the chance to collaborate with the other team members.

"I enjoy taking this dedicated time away from my desk to work with other leaders in the organization, hear how they lead their teams, and have the opportunity to learn together," she said.

Building trust. Establishing a culture. Handling rapid growth. Admittedly tricky for a new organization, but challenges the Catherine Hershey Schools took on willingly, even eagerly, by focusing on leaders and leadership with the help of Dame Leadership.

Highlighted What CHS Needed to Work On

The program helped the participants challenge themselves about where the organization is going and what else it needs to do.

"Having the academy piece has allowed us to think about other supports we need," Beth said. "What other supports would be helpful to us as an organization?"

TAKEAWAY NO. 3: MEANINGFUL PROGRESS

Lauren said she appreciated the help Dame Leadership provided on change management.

“Working at a startup, there is a steady amount of change,” Lauren said. “I feel lucky to work at a place where I can contribute to the changes.”

Additionally, Dame Leadership has introduced CHS to other nonprofits that are looking at their own cultures. CHS has benefitted from that insight.

“It’s been very helpful,” she said.

TAKEAWAY NO. 1: ACCESS TO EXPERTS

For Beth, it’s been helpful to have Krista as a sounding board.

“It’s been really wonderful for me to have Krista,” Beth said. “It’s nice to have another support in the training and development space of leadership and competencies, to bounce ideas off an individual that has a great experience.”

“I was looking forward to expanding my knowledge of leadership and how it applies to supporting a team. The program has expanded my knowledge and introduced me to many new ways of thinking, especially, building a team that trusts and feels supported. - *Lauren Schuman, Marketing Manager*”

TAKEAWAY NO. 2: COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE AND ACCESSIBILITY

Chad was impressed that Krista went out of her way for the participants, even engaging in conversations after the sessions concluded.

“She was willing to have other conversations outside of the training, before or after the training.”

Plus, he said, she allowed the group to drive the discussions. “Krista has been really good if the group wants to stay on a different topic,” he said. “We wouldn’t just move ahead in the material just because we needed to get it done.”

Chad also valued the help in dealing with his leadership style, understanding his high expectations can be a turn-off to some. He’s worked on active listening, he said, and now believes “over-communicating is not a negative.”

BENEFITS

Authentic Leadership

Not surprisingly, the group was highly engaged in the topic of leadership.

Lauren said, “I was looking forward to expanding my knowledge of leadership and how it applies to supporting a team. The program has expanded my knowledge and introduced me to many new ways of thinking, especially, building a team that trusts and feels supported.”

Beth said the group had good conversations on authentic leadership and the related concern of building trust. It resonated with the participants.

“What I’ve heard from a couple of people is this idea of authentic leadership,” she said. “How can I be the leader that I want to be?”

She said the program is helping many of her participants focus on advancing to the next level of leadership. “It really is helpful,” she said.

Lauren added that the program has given her new confidence in her leadership skills. “As my team continues to grow,” she said, “it’s helping me reframe how I approach the first months when bringing on a team member and how they are crucial to your long-term relationship with that individual.”

Establishing a Culture

Beth said many of CHS’s staff members came from smaller childhood education centers. The organization’s ambitious

Counting in our garden





About Catherine Hershey School

Catherine Hershey Schools for Early Learning (CHS) provides non-residential, year-round weekday care and education to children from six weeks to age 5 from under-resourced and over-burdened backgrounds, with all costs covered for qualifying families. CHS is a subsidiary of Milton Hershey School (MHS) and is part of a \$350 million initiative to develop six Early Childhood Education Centers in Pennsylvania.

About Dame Leadership

Dame Leadership provides a full range of services aimed at empowering leaders and transforming organizations. We specialize in Strategic Planning, ensuring businesses align their direction and position themselves for growth. Our Dame Leadership Academy offers training that equips individuals with the confidence and skills to lead effectively. Additionally, our Executive Coaching and Employee Assessments deliver personalized guidance and insights to enhance leadership development and improve hiring decisions.

growth plans mean that many of them will have to learn to think like leaders in a larger and more complex organization.

“We started getting into culture quite a bit with Krista,” Beth said. “What we started to understand is that along with culture, we needed to really start to think about what competencies we have as leaders in driving culture.”

She said that spurred all kinds of new questions, such as, “What do we need to change to really be sure that we are inviting more people with the right values, the right competencies into the organization?”

Not surprisingly, the task is ongoing.

“That work is not perfected at this point,” she said. “But it is a channel that we’re starting to go down to say, ‘Hey, this is something that we need to be leaning into more.’”

Building Trust

The group talked a lot about building trust, Beth said, which is especially important in a new environment like CHS.

“I didn’t get here any sooner than a bunch of other people got here,” she said, so there’s not the level of innate trust she found in organizations that had been in place for decades.

She found herself asking predictable questions: “How am I showing up? Do I come across as reliable? Do I follow through?” While many more mature organizations may still ask these questions, they are especially pertinent to new teams that are establishing the foundation for success in how we work, think and perform together.”