



PARTICIPANT HANDOUT

Leading with the Good Mind

Healing-Centered Leadership & Staff Wellness in Indigenous Early Care

Dr. Kimber Olson, MSW, PhD | Juniper & Pine Consulting, LLC | Native American Child & Family Conference

A good leader does not stand in front of the people.
A good leader tends to the ground the people walk on.

Ganigonhi:yo · Gózhó · The Good Mind walks in Beauty

SECTION 1: ARRIVING WITH THE GOOD MIND

This session is for the people who hold the circles; the directors, the coordinators, the team leads, the supervisors. The people who show up every day not just for children, but for the adults who serve children. Because you cannot pour from an empty vessel, and too many of our leaders are running on fumes.

Ganigonhi:yo is a Haudenosaunee teaching often translated as "the Good Mind." It holds that a gathering begins with gratitude, bringing our minds together before we do the work. It is not the absence of difficulty, but the practice of returning to clarity, compassion, and connection amid difficulty.

SOMATIC PRACTICE | Gratitude Grounding & Bringing Our Minds Together

1. Place both feet flat on the floor. Feel the ground beneath you. Let your weight settle.
2. Take three slow breaths, inhaling for 4 counts, exhaling for 6 counts. With each exhale, release any urgency. We are here to be present.
3. Bring to mind one small thing you are grateful for right now, nothing large or philosophical, something immediate. The person beside you. The fact that you showed up today. Wearing your favorite color.
4. As you hold that moment of gratitude, notice how your body feels. This is the beginning of Ganigonhi:yo; the return to the Good Mind.
5. Before you make decisions or lead others today, take just one conscious breath to return here.

◆ What are you carrying into this space today? What do you need to set down to be fully present?



SECTION 2: THE QUESTION NOBODY ASKS ENOUGH

Who is taking care of the people who take care of the children?

We measure developmental milestones, classroom quality, attendance, enrollment, and transition rates. But who is measuring whether the teacher is okay? Whether the home visitor who sat with a family in crisis has someone to debrief with? Whether the director managing a budget shortfall, a staffing crisis, and a licensing review simultaneously has slept this week? And why does this even matter?



- 📖 Whitaker, R. C., et al. (2015). The prevalence of core symptoms of secondary traumatic stress among childcare workers. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 48, 200–209.
- 📖 Whitebook, M., McLean, C., Austin, L. J. E., & Edwards, B. (2018). *Early Childhood Workforce Index 2018*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment.
- 📖 Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2005). Can instructional and emotional support in the first-grade classroom make a difference for children at risk of school failure? *Child Development*, 76(5), 949–967.

The number one predictor of quality outcomes for children is not curriculum, class size, or funding levels. It is whether the adults in the room are well, meaning stable, supported, regulated, and fully present. A dysregulated staff creates a dysregulated program. A well staff creates a well program.

◆ **Who is currently taking care of you as a leader? What support structures do you have in place? What ones do need to be created? Who needs to be involved to create those?**

SECTION 3: INDIGENOUS FRAMEWORKS FOR HEALING-CENTERED LEADERSHIP



This session draws on teachings from two distinct Nations, with respect and gratitude. These are not metaphors; they are living frameworks for how to be in right relationship with the people and communities we serve.

Ganigonhi:yo: The Good Mind (Haudenosaunee)

Ganigonhi:yo is a Haudenosaunee teaching that forms the foundation of their governance. All major decisions were made traditionally from this place of clear, grateful, collectively-held mind. It is a disciplined, daily practice of returning your mind to a place of gratitude, peace, and collective responsibility. It is not toxic positivity. It is the practice of settling the storms inside yourself so that you can show up clearly for your people.

Leadership application: Every day, circumstances will pull you out of the Good Mind. These can include a staff call-out, an angry parent, a funder deadline, a child in crisis. Ganigonhi:yo does not say: ignore all of that. It asks: during all of that, can you return to clarity? Can you return to compassion? This is Indigenous stewardship: not controlling the storm but being the steady ground others can stand on.

- 📖 Hill, S. M. (2017). *The Clay We Are Made Of: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River*. University of Manitoba Press.
- 📖 Lyons, O., & Mohawk, J. (Eds.). (1992). *Exiled in the Land of the Free: Democracy, Indian Nations, and the U.S. Constitution*. Clear Light Publishers.

Gózhó: Walking in Beauty & Balance (Diné)

Gózhó means living in balance, in harmony, in right relationship with all of creation. It holds that wellness is not the absence of illness; it is the active, daily practice of tending to the whole person across four interconnected dimensions:

Physical	Rest, nourishment, movement, presence in the body. Are you sleeping? Are you eating? Are you moving for joy, not only obligation?
Emotional	Honesty, processing, co-regulation, joy. Do you have someone to process with? When did you last feel held rather than only holding others?
Intellectual	Curiosity, learning, reflection, humility. Are you still curious? Are you still learning? Or has your mind become a to-do list?
Spiritual	Purpose, gratitude, connection to something larger. Do you still know why you do this work? Can you feel the purpose beneath the paperwork?

- 📖 Witherspoon, G. (1977). *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*. University of Michigan Press.
- 📖 Walters, K. L., & Simoni, J. M. (2002). Reconceptualizing native women's health: An "indigenist" stress-coping model. *American Journal of Public Health, 92*(4), 520–524.



◆ Across the four dimensions of Gózhó (physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual), which dimension is most depleted in you right now? What does tending to that dimension look like this week?

SECTION 4: FROM MANAGEMENT TO STEWARDSHIP

Most of us were trained in compliance-based management: write policies, conduct evaluations, track data, meet federal standards. That model is not sufficient because it treats people as functions rather than human beings. Stewardship is an Indigenous leadership concept. A steward does not own the land, they tend it. They watch the soil, read the weather, notice what is thriving and what is struggling, and respond.

Compliance-Based Management	Healing-Centered Stewardship
Controls outcomes through oversight	Cultivates conditions for growth
Treats staff as positions to fill	Tends to staff as whole human beings
Monitors for deficiency	Watches for signs of depletion
Evaluates performance against external standards	Supports growth through relationship and reflection
Asks: "Are you meeting requirements?"	Asks: "What do you need to thrive?"
Burns people out, replaces them	Sustains people, sustains programs

The question that shifts organizational culture more than any strategic plan:

"What do you need to thrive?"

Ask it genuinely. Ask it regularly. Ask it even when (especially when) you don't have the power to fix the answer.

📖 Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1), 1–40.

📖 Ginwright, S. (2018). The future of healing: Shifting from trauma informed care to healing centered engagement. *Occasional Paper*, 25.



◆ Think of a staff member who is struggling right now. What does stewardship look like for them, not as a position to fill, but as a whole human being?

SECTION 5: NAMING WHAT DEPLETES OUR PEOPLE

Before we can heal, we must name what is. Naming is not blaming; it is the first act of dignity. Each of these wounds has a history, a mechanism, and a pathway toward healing.

Compassion Fatigue

The cost of caring

Your staff sit with children carrying intergenerational trauma, walk into homes facing crisis, and hold all of that in their hearts and minds, every day. The heart gets tired before the body does. They don't burn out because they stopped caring. They burn out because they cared too much without enough support.

Secondary Traumatic Stress

Absorbing what doesn't belong to you

STS is not just "being stressed"; it is a clinical condition with symptoms mirroring PTSD: hypervigilance, nightmares, emotional numbness, avoidance. Your staff are absorbing trauma through their work. Are you screening for that? Providing space to process it? Noticing whether it is happening in yourself?

Lateral Stress & Violence

The hurt that comes out sideways

Lateral violence is a colonial wound, not an Indigenous character flaw. It is what happens when oppressed peoples turn their pain inward. Gossip, exclusion, undermining of one another, these are symptoms of historical trauma, not character defects. They can be healed when named with compassion.

Institutional Erosion

Death by a thousand requirements

The paperwork. The compliance checks. The systems designed to ensure quality that, in practice, crush the spirit of people doing the work. When systems make documentation more important than relationship, you lose good people, and the children and families feel it.

Figley, C. R. (1995). *Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized*. Brunner/Mazel.

Brave Heart, M. Y. H., Chase, J., Elkins, J., & Altschul, D. B. (2011). Historical trauma among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 43(4), 282–290.

Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.



Pair Discussion — For the Room

Turn to a partner. Take 4 minutes each. Share honestly:

- ◆ Which of the four wounds is most present in your team right now?
- ◆ What is one thing you are doing to tend to your team's wellness? And what is one thing you wish you could do but haven't?

Listen fully. You are not here to fix anything, you are here to witness with compassion.

◆ After the pair discussion, this is a place to record what surprised you and what theme(s) kept surfacing that you want to carry forward from this room?

SECTION 6: HEALING-CENTERED LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

Practice 1: Reflective Supervision as Sacred Space

The single most protective practice against burnout in early childhood programs is reflective supervision, and most programs either don't do it at all or do it in name only. Many leaders are not aware of what this type of supervision is. Reflective supervision is not performance evaluation, case consultation, or a staff meeting with a new name. It is a sacred space; a protected relationship where a staff member can bring their full self, including the parts that are struggling.

Regularity	Weekly or biweekly, protected, non-negotiable. It is not optional when things get busy and it is most essential when things are hard. When things get hectic, reflective supervision is the first thing canceled. That is exactly backward. This is so important it needs to be the one things that does not get cancelled.
Reflection	Begin with: "How are you?" and mean it. Before the to-do list, before data, before child concerns: the person first. Really listen. Wait. Don't rush past it. Sit together as regular human beings. Model vulnerability with boundaries.
Relationship	The supervisor's nervous system matters. If you are activated, your staff feels it. Take 5 minutes before the session to ground yourself. Model the regulation you want to see. If you become dysregulated, you can lead a practice together in the session.



Reciprocity

If you expect vulnerability from your staff, offer it yourself. Share your own challenges. Admit when you don't know. Ask for help. This is Ganigonhi:yo modeled in leadership; not weakness, but the demonstration of the Good Mind.

- 📖 Heffron, M. C., & Murch, T. (2010). Reflective Supervision and Leadership in Infant and Early Childhood Programs. Zero to Three.
- 📖 Parlakian, R. (2001). Look, Listen, and Learn: Reflective Supervision and Relationship-Based Work. Zero to Three.

◆ **What would it mean for your staff to have a truly protected space each week? What barriers exist, and what is one step you could take to remove one of them?**

Practice 2: Team Regulation Practices

Your nervous system sets the thermostat for your entire team. When the leader is regulated, the team can breathe. When the leader is activated, the whole building feels it. These four practices can be started this week with no budget or new program required.

🌀 SOMATIC PRACTICE | **Opening Breath: Begin Every Meeting Here**

1. Begin every meeting, training, and staff gathering with 60 seconds of shared silence or three breaths together.
2. Invite participants: place both feet on the floor, close or soften the eyes, take one slow breath together.
3. Do not apologize for it. Do not make it optional. By the third meeting, your team will notice if you skip it.
4. Research note: Even 60 seconds of intentional breathing activates the vagal brake, shifting the nervous system from sympathetic activation toward social engagement. (Porges, 2011)

🌀 SOMATIC PRACTICE | **Check-In Before Content: One Word Arrival**

1. Before opening any agenda, invite each person to share one word for how they are arriving today.
2. Accept any word ("tired," "grateful," "okay," "overwhelmed") without comment or fixing. Just witnessing.
3. The word tells you everything about the room. The act of being asked is itself regulating and communicates: you matter here.



4. Variation: Use a weather metaphor ("I'm arriving as partly cloudy with a chance of sunshine") to allow lightness alongside honesty.

Midday Pause: A 5-minute team pause can include stepping outside, stretching, humming, putting your feet in grass if possible. A nervous system activated for four straight hours needs a reset. This is not self-care theater. This is neuroscience.

Closing Gratitude: End each gathering with one genuine, specific appreciation. Not performative, but real and authentic. "I appreciated that Maria shared honestly about her struggle today." Gratitude rewires the brain toward resilience (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). This is Ganigonhi:yo made tangible.

📖 Porges, S. W. (2011). *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation*. W.W. Norton.

📖 Emmons, R. A., & McCullough, M. E. (2003). Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(2), 377–389.

Addressing Lateral Stress: Healing the Hurt from Within

Lateral violence and lateral stress are not who we are. They are what was done to us and are the predictable consequence of generations of colonization that taught our people to turn pain inward because it was too dangerous to direct outward. Naming this clearly, without shame, is the first act of healing.

- ◆ Name it without shame: bring lateral stress into the open as a collective wound, not individual blame: "This is what colonization did to us. We can choose differently."
- ◆ Create relational agreements: not HR policies, but co-created team commitments. "How do we want to treat each other? What do we do when we fall short?" Review quarterly.
- ◆ Model accountability: when lateral behavior occurs, address it with compassion AND directness. The Good Mind holds both truth and kindness.
- ◆ Celebrate publicly and specifically; the antidote to a culture of criticism is a culture of genuine appreciation. Name what you see people doing well, loudly and often.

📖 Duran, E. (2006). *Healing the Soul Wound: Counseling with American Indians and Other Native Peoples*. Teachers College Press.

📖 Coyhis, D., & Simonelli, R. (2008). The Native American healing experience. *Substance Use & Misuse*, 43(12-13), 1927–1949.

Practice 3: The Leader's Own Medicine Path

You cannot steward what you have not tended in yourself. Gózhó begins with you, not as a person in a leadership role with a specific title, but as a whole human being. Your self-care is not selfish. It is your first act of leadership.



Physical: When did you last sleep a full night? Move your body for joy, not obligation?

Emotional: Who holds you when you are struggling? Who can you be fully honest with?

Intellectual: When did you last learn something that had nothing to do with your job?

Spiritual: Do you still know why you do this work? Can you feel the purpose beneath the paperwork?

A depleted leader depletes everyone around them. Your nervous system sets the thermostat. Your wellness is your team's wellness. Tend to it.

 **SOMATIC PRACTICE | Four-Directions Breath: The Leader's Daily Anchor**

1. Sit tall. Close your eyes or soften your gaze. Take a moment to arrive in your own body.
2. As you inhale: bring awareness to your physical body. Feel your breath, your weight, your feet on the earth, the chair that is supporting your body, Mother Earth beneath.
3. Hold for a moment: turn attention to your emotional body. Notice what are you carrying. Name it, even silently.
4. As you exhale: move to your intellectual body. Release any urgency to solve or analyze. Let your mind rest.
5. In the pause before the next breath: touch your spiritual body. Why does this work matter to you? Let that purpose be present.
6. Repeat for 3–5 cycles. Use this before difficult conversations, after hard moments, or at the start of each day.


◆ **Which of the four dimensions (physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual) do you tend to neglect most? What would it look like to offer that dimension even 10 minutes of care this week?**




SECTION 7: THE GOOD MIND DECISION TEST

Before any significant decision, hold these five questions. Print this page. Put it on your desk. Use it.

- 1.** Does this decision honor the people it will affect (staff, families, children) as whole human beings? Not as FTEs. Not as compliance data points. Whole people.
- 2.** Am I making this decision from a regulated, clear mind, or from stress, fear, or pressure? If you are making a major decision at 9 PM after a terrible week: Stop. Sleep on it. The Good Mind is not available when the nervous system is in survival mode.
- 3.** Does this decision sustain balance, or does it sacrifice someone's wellness for someone else's convenience? Is the cost distributed fairly? Or are you asking one person or team to absorb the impact?
- 4.** Would I be comfortable if the people affected by this decision were in the room while I made it? If you would decide differently if they were watching, that tells you something important.
- 5.** How will this decision feel to the seventh generation from now, to the children, seven generations hence, looking back? This is for the decisions that shape culture, policy, and structure. Imagine them. Would they thank you?

 Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants. Milkweed Editions.

 Cajete, G. (1994). Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education. Kivaki Press.

◆ **Think of a decision you are currently wrestling with. Walk it through the Good Mind Decision Test. What does the test reveal?**

SECTION 8: DESIGNING A STAFF WELLNESS RHYTHM



Think rhythm, not program. Think tending, not adding another thing to the list. A wellness rhythm repeats. It is predictable, consistent, and something the team can count on. Like the seasons. Like the tides.

Cycle	Examples	My Team's Practice (write here)
Daily (2 minutes)	<i>Opening breath at check-in Gratitude text to a staff member One-word arrival</i>	
Weekly (15 minutes)	<i>Reflective supervision check-in Team walk outside Shared story or laughter</i>	
Monthly (1 hour)	<i>Potluck or shared meal Talking circle A learning conversation not about compliance</i>	
Seasonal (ceremony)	<i>Harvest celebration. Winter gathering. Spring renewal. Summer retreat.</i>	

BEFORE YOU LEAVE TODAY

Homework & Commitments to Carry Home

These are not new programs. They are ways of being.

For Your Own Medicine Path — This Week:

- ◆ Choose one of the four Gózhó dimensions that is most depleted in you. Identify one specific, small act of tending for that dimension and do it before you do another task for your organization.
- ◆ Practice the Four-Directions Breath for three consecutive mornings before you check your phone or email. Notice what shifts.
- ◆ Find one person who holds you: a peer, a mentor, a friend. Reach out to them this week. Tell them what you are carrying. Let yourself be held.

For Your Team — This Month:

- ◆ Introduce the Opening Breath practice at your very next staff meeting. Don't explain it extensively. Just do it. Note the response.
- ◆ Schedule a reflective supervision conversation (or series) with one staff member you are concerned about. Come to it regulated, unhurried, and genuinely curious about them as a whole person.



- ◆ Bring the language of the four wounds to your next leadership team conversation. Name what is depleting your people (compassion fatigue, STS, lateral stress, institutional erosion) and invite an honest assessment of where you are.

A Longer Horizon — This Year:

- ◆ Design a Staff Wellness Rhythm with your team (use the table from Section 8). Embed it, protect it, and tend to it like you would tend a garden.
- ◆ Print the Good Mind Decision Test. Place it where you make decisions. Use it for every significant choice.
- ◆ Identify one practice of lateral healing for your team: a relational agreement, a public appreciation practice, an honest naming. Begin there.

Call to Action For Our Field:

The wellness of our people is not a benefit to offer when resources allow. It is the infrastructure of quality care for children. We cannot build healing-centered programs on the broken backs and depleted spirits of the educators and leaders who serve them.

Use your voice to advocate for: adequate staffing and compensation; protected time for reflective supervision; trauma-informed healing-centered organizational policies; and the integration of Indigenous frameworks into program design, not as add-ons, but as foundations.

The children are watching. The seventh generation is waiting. Tend to the ground they walk on.

- ◆ **What is the one commitment you are taking from this room today — for yourself, for your team, or for the field? Write it here where you will see it.**



Juniper & Pine Consulting, LLC

Leading with the Good Mind | Healing-Centered Leadership & Staff Wellness

© Juniper & Pine Consulting, LLC



Juniper & Pine Consulting, LLC

Indigenous-and-Woman-Owned. Healing-Centered.

Dr. Kimber Olson, MSW, PhD

Founder, CEO & Principal Consultant

Enrolled Member, Chiricahua Apache Mimbres Band Nation

juniperpineconsulting@gmail.com

www.juniperpineconsulting.org



Scan to visit our website
Training · Consulting · Resources

Ganigonhi:yo · Gózhó · The Good Mind walks in Beauty

© Juniper & Pine Consulting, LLC. All rights reserved.