

Jo Ann Grode

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"I first met Lilly Irvin-Vitela when I, as a board member of a fledgling statewide nonprofit organization, interviewed her as a candidate for the executive director position. I never met someone who made such a positive first impression, and hiring her was among the best employment decisions I have ever been involved with. The first director of the brand new organization had absconded after less than one year, leaving unfulfilled all organizational obligations. The Board hired an interim director, who did a fine job to keep it afloat but was not interested in the permanent position.

From the moment she stepped into her role as the second full-time director, Lilly was faced with the onerous task of leading an organization teetering on the brink. One of her first major challenges was effecting a merger with another organization that well complimented the mission of her organization. Within a year, Lilly had made extreme progress in developing this new organization, and under her leadership, it morphed from a weak underling into a strong statewide presence.



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During this time, Lilly was working with a board whose membership struggled to develop organizational policies that reflected the strength of the new, vibrant organization. She was instrumental in leading a cohesive effort that resulted in the implementation of sound and consistent policies that became the foundation of an increasingly powerful and successful organization.

Once Lilly had framed the direction of the organization, she encouraged the board to become more participative in growing the organization and ensuring its sustainability. She formed action teams comprised of board members and member partners—action teams that aligned with the mission and vision of the organization. Lilly played a strong role in developing these teams and in encouraging communication among them. She also developed a formal board orientation program for new members and was instrumental in working with the nominating committee of the board to seek diverse and effective Board membership which would reflect great passion for the organization and its mission.

One of Lilly's key strengths while leading the organization was expanding programming and services which complemented the organizational mission. She carefully selected projects with great potential to enhance organizational capacity while never straying from being mission focused. Lilly also led the painstaking, difficult process of redesigning the statewide membership of the organization which was responsibly for service delivery. As a result of this redesign, some member agencies dissolved, and others merged to form an entirely new member network predicated on Lilly's strategic plans for the future.

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She was driven by her goal of positioning her organization to be the statewide provider of choice for service delivery, and she continued to grow the organization by selecting and grooming staff who worked very well with her as a team to achieve this lofty goal.

Within a few short years, Lilly, a tireless worker unwilling to rest despite a rapidly growing list of accomplishments, was able to engineer what I had always thought previously to be impossible—a unified system designed to promote quality improvement in early care and education statewide. Under her leadership, this enormous program was launched and still grows today under new leadership for which Lilly served as mentor.

Lilly managed to accomplish all of these things in less than four and a half years. If I would not have been present at both the beginning of the organization and the end of her tenure there, I never would have believed all of this to be possible. She is not only visionary but immensely capable of ideation, planning, development, implementation, evaluation and re-creation. Any person or organization fortunate enough to be connected with her is certain to reap impressive rewards as a result of that partnership.

Lilly is the most unique and amazing person I have ever had the privilege to work alongside. Her attributes, too many to list, include intelligence, creativity, passion, leadership, financial acumen, strength, perseverance, dedication, diligence, integrity, compassion, fair-mindedness, honesty, respectfulness, transparency, thoughtfulness, kindness, professionalism, resourcefulness, savviness, sensibility, and experience. I would highly recommend Lilly as a consultant for any project large or small as her skill set is unparalleled.”