



SCHOOLS OF EXCELLENCE

# How Sheila Smozynski Took Accountability & Transformed as a Leader



*“It's a different type of growth for me that not only changed who I am as a leader in my center, but also gave me an opportunity to be a better mom and wife.”*

**SHEILA SMOZYNSKI**

Owner of Wishing Well Preschool & Childcare and Wishing Well  
2.0 School Age Program



## About Sheila & Her Business

Sheila Smozynski is the owner of Wishing Well Preschool & Childcare and Wishing Well 2.0 School Age Program in De Forest, Wisconsin. Across her two centers, Sheila serves children from preschool through 4th grade, and both schools hold a 5-star YoungStar rating, which is Wisconsin's child care quality rating and improvement system.

### CHALLENGES

*“The center was running great, and then when COVID hit, I felt like I was standing in the middle of an ocean all by myself.”*

Sheila Smozynski had always felt confident in running her centers. Her programs were high-quality, she had passionate team members, and staff morale was high overall. While Sheila knew there was always room for improvement, she was content with the performance of her centers.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic of March 2020 threw everything upside down. Suddenly, Sheila's schools didn't have access to essential items in the classrooms, restrictions inhibited the quality care she and her team were used to providing, time management became difficult, and staff morale started to slip.

The pandemic also caused Sheila to revert back to her tendency to take control. Although she thought she had managed this issue, the high-stress conditions of COVID revealed that it was still lurking under the surface. Because restrictions forced Sheila to make a lot of swift protocol decisions, she quickly sank back into her old habits. Unfortunately, this shift took away her team's confidence to make decisions on their own and left them floundering once restrictions eased.

In a matter of months, Sheila had gone from proud owner to lonely outcast. She felt like she was all on her own, with no one to talk to who could validate her experience. **The stress and loneliness of the pandemic had extinguished her passion for early childhood education, and she was at her wit's end.**

Then, when almost all hope was lost, Sheila stumbled across the Schools of Excellence podcast. She had never heard someone talk about early childhood education like Chanie Wilschanski, and it felt like she had found her people. With nothing left to lose and a curiosity to know more, Sheila decided to join the Owner's Only HQ membership program, where she could exchange ideas with people who understood exactly what she was going through.

*“I was ready to throw in the towel at that point.”*

## Challenges

- Struggled to deal with COVID-related restrictions & deficiencies
- Grappled with time management, and worked long hours
- Fought against decreasing morale among her staff
- Reverted to her controlling habits, causing her team to lose confidence

## Solution

- Forged strong & supportive relationships with other owners
- Developed a better work-life balance & time management strategies
- Enrolled her team in the Schools of Excellence Director's Inner Circle
- Implemented regular, focused one-on-one meetings with her staff

## Results

- Cultivated a new, positive outlook on the future of her centers & her retirement
- Spent more time with her family & caring for herself
- Transformed her relationship with her staff by giving them more support
- Restored her team's confidence in making their own decisions

## SOLUTION

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*“I was like 'Oh my goodness, what is this? What is this group? These people get me.’”*

Inside of the Schools of Excellence Owner's Only HQ program, Sheila found a safe space filled with other owners who shared her values. She felt as if she had grown a tribe on her island in the middle of the ocean. Among them, she could share her frustrations without fear of being judged and find support around brainstorming solutions. It was a stark contrast to the previous programs she had participated in, where she felt disconnected and out of alignment.

The most significant change that Sheila experienced within the program was a mindset shift. **Because she felt safe and supported within the group, she could open herself up to feedback and take accountability for what she could be doing differently.**

For example, Sheila's fellow owners helped her realize that she had fallen back into her pattern of taking control. Once she saw how it had negatively affected her team's confidence and decision-making abilities, she immediately committed to making a change. With the support of the Owner's Only HQ program, she was able to give her team their voices back by trusting them to make the right decisions on their own. With that trust in place, Sheila could then focus on implementing effective new time management strategies like time blocking to help her stay focused on her leadership role.

Beyond how she was treating her team, Sheila came to realize she wasn't spending enough intentional, quality time with her staff. Although she had been conducting informal check-ins with them, the meetings weren't scheduled or focused. But after hearing from other owners in the program, Sheila realized that she wasn't doing enough to support her staff. This recognition inspired her to start dedicating time to regular one-on-one meetings, where they could share their questions and struggles as well as stories from their personal lives.

Over time, Sheila was amazed at the transformation she experienced as a part of the Owner's Only HQ program. Thanks to the incredible relationships she forged with fellow owners and the opportunity to exchange ideas with others who had walked the same path, **Sheila had not only become a better leader, but also a better mother and wife. It was a new level of personal growth that she had never imagined she could reach.**

Sheila has had such a transformative experience in the Owner's Only HQ program that after a year, she decided to enroll her team of directors in Schools of Excellence's sister program, Director's Inner Circle. Even though they were already doing a great job of running the centers, Sheila felt that participation in the program could inspire a new level of growth in her team—just as she had experienced.

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*“The personal growth I've had—the mindset shifts I've had—have made me a better leader.”*

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## RESULTS

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*“What's going to be the best thing for me to do in order to be the best owner and manager I can be?”*

Thanks to the encouragement and support Sheila felt within the Owner's Only HQ program, she was able to shift her mindset and take accountability for her actions. **By having a safe space to share her struggles and receive feedback, she could examine her leadership more critically and do what needed to be done to grow into a better leader for her centers.**

The impact of this change was felt in many aspects of Sheila's life and leadership. To start, Sheila's commitment to holding regular, focused one-on-one check-ins with her staff has had a positive impact on her relationship with them. They appreciate the opportunity to ask for what they need and look forward to getting quality time with Sheila.

Sheila also developed a deeper respect for her time. She now puts a sign on her door during her productivity time (or "fire" time) to ensure she won't be disturbed unless there's a real emergency—like the school being on fire.

The positive ripple effect of Sheila's transformation has extended into her daily home life, too. Thanks to spending her time more productively at school and understanding that she needs a healthy work-life balance, she no longer takes work home with her. Instead, she uses her time outside of work to have dinner with her family and go on walks with her husband. Unlike in the past, when she was too busy at school to be present for her kids, Sheila now dedicates ample time to being a part of her adult children's lives.

In addition, because she was able to relinquish control back to her team and trust that they would make the right decisions on their own, Sheila can now spend more time away from her centers without worrying about what's happening in her absence. These days, she takes more vacations—as many as three per year—and can leave at the drop of a hat if a spontaneous opportunity arises.

Now that she's a different leader, Sheila has a new outlook on the future of her centers. **Whereas once she felt alone in the middle of an ocean, she now has the support behind her to build schools of excellence.** In the coming years, she intends to develop a robust support system for incoming staff and continue to build her centers' culture prior to her retirement. Sheila's ultimate goal is to leave behind a lasting legacy on her community.

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*“I'm able to take the break that I need, and then I can come back and be the person I need to be for my team.”*

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Invest in your team,  
and become  
a better leader.**

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