

Straight From the Field

Reflections on the director's job

by Jo-Ann Spence

The first three years that I was a director passed in a blur. Everything was new and interesting. Driving over to the school in the middle of the night to answer the alarm, my husband and I

felt like Dick Tracy speeding to the scene of the crime. (Never mind that it was usually a squirrel that set off the electric eye and the conference with police was a series of squirrel jokes.) The director's job was a series of new experiences. I felt sure that once I got a grip on the job, all would settle down and run like clockwork. Seventeen years later, I have come to a better understanding. This is a job where anything can happen and does with

Jo-Ann Spence has been the executive director of Lowell Day



Nursery since March 1987 and a teacher at the school since 1978. She is a founding member of The Greater Lowell Directors' Group, a member of Community Partnership Executive Council, National Association of Child Care Professionals (NACCP), and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). She is a member of The Greater Lowell Non-Profit Executive Forum and works with many other area agencies to promote the cause of quality Early Childhood Education.

startlingly frequency. Along my way, I have found some real truths about this job that I hope you will find helpful as well.

Accept and expect the unexpected

The first and perhaps most important thing to remember is that THINGS WILL HAPPEN! The mix of parents, teachers, children, regulations, building problems, and so on is so complex and filled with so many elements out of your control that things happening — good and/or bad — is a given. I know a director who quit her job for that very reason — being judged on things out of her control. Expect to be a fire chief fighting fires! Things just happen AND overtime won't help! At first, you will be tempted to think you can control these happenings by working more hours, doing more yourself, being nicer (harder, more understanding, and so on) to everybody, or some combination of the above. None of this will work. Things will still happen. So, take your vacation and go home as close to your time as you can. A rested director can handle these things better than a stressed, tired one.

Be out there

With so much to do and so many things happening, you will be tempted to see meetings, community groups, and other similar activities as a waste

of time. However, these groups and meetings are where you will find out about grants, good plumbers, and all sorts of needed information. You are also being the cheerleader for your school by keeping your school's name in the public mind. *It used to be a joke in my director's group that to get free things you had to be named Jo-Ann. This happened because I am out there all the time, meeting people, talking about the school and what we want to accomplish. When something comes up, people remember Lowell Day.* This important skill is to **Network, Network, and Network.**

Don't wait to act

One of the toughest skills for me to learn was to **handle things as soon as possible.** I hate controversy and was always tempted to wait until things calmed down before stepping in. However, I found that when I stepped in quickly, I could often nip problems in the bud. Discussion with an angry parent around your policies about biting can often bring the situation into focus for you both. Waiting until the toddler stops biting or hoping that parent's child doesn't get bitten again may earn you a complaint to your licensing agency or the loss of a client.

If you think you need to fire someone — do it now — later is always worse.

The longer you wait to fire someone, the more damage that person can do and the harder it is to fire them. This is related to **handle things as soon as possible**.

I had a staff member working for me for four years. During those years, I spent extraordinary time working with this person. Everything large and small was a commotion; every decision had to be discussed again and again. I got complaints on a weekly basis about this person. I counseled, mentored, insisted, checked, worked with, bossed, and still each day brought a new problem. Eventually I was able to recognize the damage she was doing to the image of the school and to staff morale and to acknowledge my own need not to fail to help a person. I knew what needed to be done. The whole staff was relieved and many stopped by my office to say so. The school was on the upswing. I still felt sad but sometimes, doing the right thing doesn't feel great.

Care deeply and openly

Care about your staff. Caring about your staff means more than asking how they are in the morning and making sure they get breaks. Are your school's policies and procedures overly strict and demeaning to staff?

When I was a teacher at Lowell Day, the office would hand out staples not by the box (39 cents a box) but by the handful. You were required to sign for a record player needle. (I guess they had a rash of people taking those record player needles home with them.) It made all of us feel like children — not professional educators. If you can't be trusted to use supplies, how can you be trusted to educate children?

People need to feel some control over their job; so ask for and use their input whenever possible. Don't ask for plan books to be on your desk by Friday if you have no time to read them or for

schedule ideas if you aren't going to consider them or your staff meetings will be full of silent staff members who feel disenfranchised, knowing their ideas aren't important.

If you are stressed, they probably are, too. Let them know you see that. One really crazy week with sick kids, absent staff, and a difficult parent situation, I bought 20 bottles of shampoo and left them on the table in the staff room. I put a big sign saying "Take one of these and wash this week right out of your hair." My staff talks about it to this day and it only cost \$20.00. Caring for your staff doesn't have to be detailed or expensive.

Focus on the big picture

Another important director skill that comes with experience is **global thinking**. As a teacher, I only had to think of my class and my students (local thinking) and it took a mom to help me see that a director can't do that.

I was director for a month or so when a little boy fell and bumped his chin. He was okay but the mom came to discuss it with me. "Well," I said, "his classroom teachers weren't in when it happened." "I know you are new at this," she said, "but your job is to know who was." She was right and I've always remembered that lesson.

Global thinking is looking at the BIG picture, of thinking about today and tomorrow. **If you let three teachers who really need Tuesday off, what will you do when another calls in sick?** Directors who succeed learn to do this.

Maintain strong support relationships

Since my college experience did not include Building Maintenance 101, I know the importance of **finding good people and keeping them**. When things happen, you need good people to call who will come when you need them.

When you find a good electrician, plumber, or other helper, keep them. Don't be tempted by a lower price on some job and ditch these people. No amount of money can replace those who will come when you call!

A few years ago, the water main burst in our cellar mid-morning on a Friday. There were five feet of water in the cellar. The electrician came immediately. The plumber brought four pumps and three men and we worked over 11 hours each day of the weekend. The plumber got someone from the city, on a weekend, to fix the water main in front of the building. The electrician got the electrical inspector to come on Sunday to give his approval. On Monday morning, we opened as usual. This would not have been accomplished if I had to thumb through the phone book to find these people. The work they did, and the weekend they gave up, saved the school lots of money and grief.

Some events will occur over and over and knowing this will help you prepare. I call this **historical perspective**. My first winter as director, several staff members told me they *hated* their jobs and wanted to quit. I was devastated. What was I doing wrong? Would I have to get new staff? Am I a lousy director? After some agonizing months, spring came and I realized that the teachers had not quit. Over several winters as this happened again and again with different staff, I realized that this was a pattern. Winter cold and flu season, time indoors cooped up with staff and children, and holiday stress were the real culprits. In addition there are issues that never go away like clumping in the playground, taking phone calls, and so on. This is just the nature of the business.

Remember you are making a difference

You are still saving the world. People often talk about how teachers enter the field wanting to save the world. Teachers feel that every day with the children. They hear the child playing in the

sandbox singing a song they taught them. Directors rarely have that luxury.

Directors have other responsibilities that are much less visible. *I was working on a huge grant proposal. My staff was tired of hearing I was busy and couldn't run down to help them. I stood at the Post Office and had to force myself to mail the proposal and endure the wait. I tried to show my copy to anyone who would stand still. When I did get the grant the board was happy, but by then, I was on to the next fire.*

My supportive husband reminds me in down times of the successes I have had. I am the one who made sure there was sand in that sandbox and that it was in a great playground! If you don't have that kind of a person, write down the good things you've done and keep the list in a prominent place. The pond is smooth for the children and the staff because you are paddling furiously underneath.

Delegate at every opportunity

It is important to remember to **only do your job**. Believe me, there is always plenty of work to do. By this, I don't mean that you'll never plunge a toilet again. I mean don't do everyone else's job, too. I listen to directors all the time as I go to conferences and director groups. "I have to do all the plan books again because they are just not right," one director said. I wondered if she really had such incompetent teachers or did she need total control?

Another director was going on and on about how this teacher that she can't get along with was lining the children up all wrong on picture day. "I had to go there and do it myself," she said. Lining the children up for pictures doesn't seem beyond a teacher's skill level. Did the director really need to do that? *When my school got a new janitor, accustomed as I was to doing all that stuff, he had to kindly tell me numerous times that he was here now. It was*

his job to do that work. So, I've learned to do all the job requirements of my job and to trust my staff to do theirs.

Just ask

One of the newest skills that I've learned is one of the simplest — **just ask for what you need**. Several times I've needed things and felt worried about asking for them. *Would the board pay the rest of the money to send me to the NAEYC conference in New Orleans? After several worried days (and nights), they said, "Great idea." After waiting over 20 minutes to buy toys because the clerk didn't know how to process a large check (and a business one at that), I worked out a presentation to the board about why I needed a school credit card. I had only begun my presentation when it was voted; I got it in the mail in a week.* Now, I am more confident to ask for help from all different sources. What can happen if you ask?

Show your appreciation

Nice is not bad — be nice no matter what they say. Knowing that when I was on vacation, my staff would have to deal with unaccustomed work without direct support, I arranged for the florist to send a rose to every member of my staff. The florist was so nice that she wrote an individual card for each person. Although the staff was thrilled, a substitute was there that day and there wasn't one for her. I heard from lots of people that her feelings were hurt. Many people said, "See what happens if you are *too nice*." Many times, people will laugh at something I've done and say there you go again being *too nice*. Even though acts of thoughtfulness don't always go smoothly, I fully intend to be nice every chance I get.

I think that appreciation, caring, and thankfulness are important rewards to staff who work very hard in stressful jobs. Dr. Edward Hallowell in *Connect* (Simon & Schuster, 1999) cites several

studies showing that staff do better when they feel the human connection between them and their jobs. You are a large part of that connection. In "Celebrating Teachers and Their Work" (*Child Care Information Exchange*, 11/94), Margie Carter talks about how much teachers (and I add all staff) need our support and feedback. Treat staff with respect and support them in whatever way you can. Thank them for extra work. *Sometimes, when I am thanking a staff person for staying late, I have already worked 40 hours and it's only Thursday.* Nevertheless my job is to acknowledge that they gave of themselves and to demonstrate my appreciation.

Your school needs you

Once I realized that so many jobs and people depend on the school remaining open and solvent, it made lots of decisions easier. Many years ago, the economy was in a downturn and the school lost children. We had to lay off people and rent out our space. By understanding that the school *must go on*, I could see the BIG picture and work for the better days. So, I see my job as working for the good of all — staff, children, parents, board members — but most of all to make the school as an institution strong, healthy, and caring. I think of the **school as a separate entity** with needs of its own.

My friend, Holly Bruno, taught me — **keep your eyes on the prize**. Sometimes the prize is getting the billing done in order for the school to get paid. Paperwork does need to be the prize sometimes, so don't feel badly to say, "Not now, I have to get this done." All the time, the prize is the good of the children and focusing on that can help you speak to that grumpy teacher or angry parent. Sometimes the prize is a tired director allowing himself to go home.

Take a moment to think of the real outcome that you are seeking (the prize) and many times that will enable you to take

action. This helps me when I need to collect money from a parent or ask a parent to withdraw their child. I focus on the prize — paying the bills or the safety of the other children.

These skills are not the ones that I was taught in my director courses. These are hard lessons learned over 17 years of finding what works and what doesn't, from asking questions everywhere I go from everyone, and of trying and failing. I hope that these ideas help you. You can reach me at jo-annspence@verizon.net and tell me what has worked for you. I am always on the lookout for new lessons — straight from the field.

References

Hallowell, E. (1999). *Connect*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Carter, M. (1994, November/December). "Celebrating Teachers and Their Work." *Child Care Information Exchange*, 100, 56-58.