

Stocking the Toolbox

Ideas for successful facility management

by Ann Gadzikowski

Here's a new version of an old joke:

Question:

How many child care directors does it take to change a light bulb?

Answer:

Just one, but you have to wait until she's finished plunging the toilet.

If you found any humor there, it's probably because you are a child care director who handles

a variety of facility management tasks, tasks that are often not named in your job description.

So if it's 2:00 a.m. and the phone is ringing in the home of a child care director, chances are there's some urgent facility problem that requires the director's immediate attention. Perhaps the security alarm has been triggered or the basement is flooding. At these moments a child care director might begin to wonder, how can I do it all?

From snow removal to dishwasher repair, from pest control to playground renovations, there are countless demands on a child care director's time and attention. A child care director is required to juggle a wide variety of roles and expectations

related to facility management, often with very little training or expertise in this area.

The training that child care directors receive is usually related to child development, curriculum planning, and teacher supervision. Early childhood professionals are accustomed to thinking of our work in terms of people rather than things. It is hard, for example, to change our attention from families to furnaces. It requires a completely different set of skills.

Yet most child care directors report that facility management demands a significant amount of their time and energy. Some child care directors think of their facility management tasks as distractions from our "real" work, something we tend to only when the need is urgent or something is broken. It may be surprising to learn that facility management is, in fact, a profession all its own, with international credentials and standards, just like early childhood education.

The International Facilities Management Association (IFMA) defines the profession of facilities management as encompassing many disciplines "to ensure functionality of the built environment by integrating people, place, process, and technology."

It may be helpful to look at the facility management work of a child care director

in the context of IFMA's "Core Competencies of the Facility Manager":

- Operations and maintenance
- Real estate
- Human and environmental factors
- Planning and project management
- Finance
- Quality Assessment and innovation
- Technology
- Leadership and management
- Communication

Every child care center is different in its staffing and leadership structure. A center may have a board that manages the building and grounds, or the center may be church-housed and receive in-kind maintenance services. The common thread is that every director is ultimately responsible for the safety of the children and the efficiency of the program, and that requires knowledge and skills in facility management.

Operations and maintenance

According to IFMA, the category of Operations and Maintenance includes developing emergency procedures, implementing disaster recovery plans, allocating resources, and managing the maintenance and cleaning needs. It also includes evaluating furniture and equipment performance, managing climate control systems, maintaining grounds and exterior elements, and managing custodial

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staff. IFMA makes a very careful distinction between different kinds of repair work; there is “corrective,” “preventive,” and “predictive” maintenance. The expression, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” doesn’t apply here. “Corrective” maintenance is, indeed, the repair of something broken, but the terms “preventive” and “predictive” maintenance suggest that with careful and deliberate maintenance of the “built environment,” repairs don’t have to be surprises. With the right planning and foresight, routine repairs can be both prevented and predicted.

One of the most useful tools for child care directors managing the operations and maintenance of a child care facility is a set of checklists for routine tasks that are performed on a regular basis, such as the annual inspection of the fire extinguishers, the quarterly servicing of the HVAC system, and the monthly pest control service. It is not necessary that the child care director become an expert in every item listed in the checklists. It is necessary, however, that the child care director consult with experts in planning for these maintenance tasks in order to create a comprehensive checklist that will assist the director in his/her facilities management role.

Real estate

This category includes managing the lease or purchase of property and keeping relevant documents. Again, the structure and governance of the child care center will determine the director’s role in this process. The child care agency may own or rent its facility. If the child care agency owns the facility, the child care director may serve as a landlord to other tenants. Some child care programs, such as many church-housed programs, may be given use of the facility “in-kind” by another organization or partner. It is important for the child care director to be familiar with any written agreements or contracts that govern the use of the facility and its maintenance.

Human and environmental factors

According to IFMA, this category includes monitoring laws and regulations, monitoring the facility function and services, and monitoring trends related to the use of the facility by clients/customers. It also includes the provision of training to maintain safe and effective use of the facility, environmentally conscious use of the facility; developing emergency preparedness procedures, testing and ensuring the operational use of emergency systems, and conducting emergency drills.

Most child care directors are already familiar with these functions as a result of our many obligations to meet state and local licensing, health department, and fire safety codes. IMFA’s reference to “monitoring trends related to the use of the facility” brings to mind the director’s role in ensuring that drop-off and pick-up procedures for families are both safe and people-friendly.

Planning and project management

This category refers to expansion and renovation projects, including short-term and long-term planning, all issues relative to a competitive bid process, and managing construction projects. Any child care director who has been involved with a renovation or construction project knows what an overwhelming process that can be.

A useful tool for a director heading into a renovation or construction project is a detailed timeline of significant tasks and deadlines in the renovation process. Again, it may not be realistic for every child care director to fully understand all the elements of a renovation and construction process. But it is important that the child care director surround herself with a team of experts

who can effectively guide the process. A wise child care director will seek out volunteers and professionals with expertise in bidding and contracting. And it is important to be well informed of your agency’s rights and protections if the contractor does not meet your expectations.

Finance

According to IFMA, the category of “Finance” includes preparing and managing budgets, monitoring revenues and expenditures to contain costs, and managing the financial obligations of the facility. Most child care directors already manage budgets as part of their role. An important consideration related to facility management is the awareness that many child care directors tend to under-budget for facility management expenses. Our lack of familiarity with facility management and the “make-do” attitude characteristic of early childhood professionals contribute to a general tendency to budget too low for facility repair, upkeep, and equipment. As advocates for quality services for children and families, child care directors must commit the time and energy to research the full cost of facility management and budget accordingly.

Quality assessment and innovation

IFMA describes this category as conducting customer surveys, establishing standards, and monitoring and promoting the quality process. As mentioned earlier, child care directors are usually well aware of the state and local codes and regulations that govern our facility and environment. But this category of “quality assessment and innovation” is something different. The closest correspondence we have in the field of early childhood care and education is to the process of accreditation. The IFMA literature acknowledges the significance of monitoring quality. It is interesting and affirming that the IFMA language

parallels the accreditation process, a voluntary self-study that informs our short- and long-term planning.

Technology

This category refers to the planning, directing, and managing of facility management technologies. Anyone who has forgotten the password to the security system or tried, unsuccessfully, to re-program a thermostat knows the significance of being well-trained in the ever-expanding technology of facility management. One helpful hint in this area: Always be sure to train more than one staff member in the operations of these facility management systems. Whether it's something simple like the time clock or the coffee maker, or something more complex like the security system, fire alarm system, or voice mail, you can be sure that the one person who knows how to work that system will be out sick on the day it stops working correctly.

Basics for beginners

For basic information about the terms, equipment, and functions involved in building maintenance, try the popular about.com web site. For example, about.com offers articles on "How to Find the Right Contractor" at www.homerepair.com. The same site also includes a "Home Repair Glossary" that will tell you, for example, the difference between an air duct and an air lock, or the difference between backfill and backflow.

Leadership and management; Communication

These two final categories are grouped together because these are the two topics that an early childhood director will probably find most familiar.

According to the IFMA, "Leadership and Management" includes planning for staffing needs and requirements, coordinating personnel assignments, evaluating performance, and supporting personnel development. And "Communication" includes using effective communication strategies, giving directions, making oral presentations, actively listening, and establishing personal and professional networks. These are the kinds of responsibilities that usually figure most prominently in a child care director's job description.

Conclusion

Many child care directors underestimate the importance of their facility management responsibilities. When our work with parents, teachers, and children is interrupted by the demands of a broken faucet or torn window screen, we are irritated by the distraction, insisting that our true work is far more important than these mundane facility tasks. The truth is, all the work is important and all of it requires our attention.

One reason child care directors may not be accustomed to thinking of ourselves

as facility managers may be because of the legacy of stereotypic gender roles. Child care is traditionally thought of as women's work while facility management may be perceived as men's work. If child care directors become more familiar with the preventive practices, organizing systems, and strategic planning of facility management, we may become more confident in thinking of ourselves as facility managers.

The International Facility Management Association is one place to start. The IFMA has an excellent web site (www.ifma.org). You may want to familiarize yourself with the IFMA categories of facility management and think about how those distinctions apply to your own work. Take a realistic look at your own facility management responsibilities and document what kinds of tasks you are required to do and how much time it takes. Are there jobs that you could delegate to a volunteer or staff member? Or perhaps you will need to hire a professional to address certain tasks. Carefully document your observations, questions, and ideas regarding facility management and use this information for budgeting, advocacy, and long-term planning. As child care directors, it is our commitment to providing a safe and healthy learning environment for children and families that will motivate us to continue to improve and refine the ways we manage our facilities.