

Ideas for Training Staff



What Do Teachers Need Most From Their Directors?

by Margie Carter

“Perceptions are powerful regulators of behavior that can influence teachers’ level of commitment to a center. In fact, people’s perceptions of events may be more important than reality because individuals act according to their interpretation of events.”

— Paula Jorde Bloom, *Circle of Influence*

Over the last eight months, I’ve been doing an informal research project. Nothing scientific. No statistical analysis. Just keeping my ears finely tuned and asking a few focused questions as I work with child care teachers at their program sites and in seminars at conferences. There is now an established process called “participatory research,” but I can’t claim to have been even that systematic in my inquiry. Mostly, I’ve just been trying to carefully listen for what management styles, dispositions, and skills engender confidence and respect from staff toward their director. Are there particular philosophies, policies, decision-making and communication systems that influence teachers to stay at their workplace longer, despite inadequate salaries and benefits?

What I’ve consistently heard from teachers reflects the research behind several important publications in our field:

■ Paula Jorde Bloom’s two books, *A Great Place to Work: Improving Conditions for Staff in Young Children’s Programs* and *Circle of Influence: Implementing Shared Decision Making and Participative Management*

■ The Center for the Child Care Workforce (CCW) publication, *Creating Better Child Care Jobs: Model Work Standards for Teaching Staff in Center-Based Child Care*

Bloom discusses her research on how the interplay between people and the environment, and between work attitudes and group dynamics, supports the professionalism of an organization. In discussing the concept of organizational climate, she says: “Although it is not clear whether climate or satisfaction comes first, job satisfaction seems to be higher in schools with relatively open climates. These climates are characterized by a sense of belonging, many opportunities to interact, autonomy, and upward influence.” (1997)

More recently, through the efforts of the Center for the Child Care Workforce, early childhood program staff themselves have been developing an assessment tool, the Model Work Standards, which highlights the components of work environments that are linked to quality for children in our programs. This tool is a welcome addition to our field and substantiates Bloom’s point:

“One valuable insight gained during an assessment of employee attitudes about their work environment is the sharper understanding of where perceptions differ between administrators and employees. One of the more common findings, for example, is that directors often believe they give far more feedback to their staff than their teachers perceive they get. Another common difference is found in the directors’ and staff’s perceptions regarding staff involvement in decisions about practices to be followed in the center . . . directors typically rate the climate more favorably than do teachers.” (1997)

The impetus for my own investigation into what teachers want from their directors stems from continually hearing examples of differing perceptions between directors and staff in their rating of the work environment. It strikes me that because directors work so hard and under such stress, they are sometimes reluctant to welcome staff perspectives on what needs changing if there aren’t resources or time to commit to an issue. However, I’ve discovered that when directors welcome feedback on how the work environment feels, they unlock the potential for creative problem solving. A tool such as the Model Work Standards helps directors clearly see where their program should be headed. As with accreditation crite-

ria, it can serve as a weather gauge for the organizational climate and a concrete reference point for budgeting and/or grant writing.

In *A Great Place to Work*, Paula Jorde Bloom is instructive about the dimensions of an organizational climate that need tending to in our early childhood programs. She is also quite persuasive in *Circle of Influence*, detailing the value of shared decision making and participative management. What she says in these two publications outlining her research is what I have been hearing in my informal, yet careful listening work with teachers.

As I ask, “What do teachers need most from their directors,” either as a direct question to them or as I focus my listening and watching, I consistently hear a call for tending to the physical, social, and emotional environment of the program. These are my categories for their ideas, different from but interrelated to the research message from Bloom and the Center for the Child Care Workforce.

Offer Genuine Respect and Trust

The words “trust” and “respect” easily roll off our tongues, and our heads nod when we hear them, but what do these words look like in action? Teachers say they usually feel respected when someone really listens to them, trying to understand and be responsive, rather than just placating. Some talk about “being trusted to succeed,” even if they falter or “goof up.” But they are quick to add that respect and trust means being given the time, support, and tools they need, not leaving them alone to sink or swim but neither hovering or micro-managing. “When I’m really listened to and taken seriously, I feel validated and respected.” Others use the word “empowered” along with trust and

respect. One teacher commented: “Empowerment can be a bogus word. No one can give you your power, but they can disempower you, taking away your self-trust and respect. When your director trusts you, you are motivated to use your power to learn and get it right.”

Some teachers claim that directors only show trust and respect to staff members who agree with them. This clearly undermines what Bloom refers to as “collegiality” in naming ten important dimensions in an organizational climate. Posting a sign or announcing “We will all respect each other here” irritates some teachers. You can’t mandate trust and respect. These feelings have to be developed over time with accumulated experiences to confirm or counter our initial impressions.

Trust comes more quickly when we work from both our heads and our hearts. As we become clear about our values and ideas, and learn to communicate them with a blend of honesty and empathy, respect for different points of view can grow. We don’t have to become best friends to trust each other, but we do have to have mutual respect and be able to count on each other if genuine trust is to grow and thrive.

Work With a Vision

It’s striking to hear teachers describe the contrast between directors who work with a vision and those who settle for how things are. The word “vision” isn’t always used, but they excitedly describe how their director really inspired them to work at the center, how “she’s usually got a twinkle in her eye,” is always “showing us pictures or little quotes to expand our thinking,” or “keeps her eye on the prize even when our budget comes up short.” Perhaps some of this is related to the dimension Bloom calls

“innovation” or “goal consensus.” Teachers can sense when directors are moving their program forward toward a bigger dream, even as they are thwarted by the crisis of the week. The climate is quite different than one limited to following the rules and regulations or resigning the program to the limitations of the moment.

Teachers acknowledge that directors with big dreams can sometimes overlook the trees for the forest. They can get caught up in grant writing, meetings in the community, or calls and visits to their legislators and neglect a child, parent, or teacher requiring immediate attention, film waiting to be developed, or a promised professional training opportunity. Most teachers don’t just want to be kept informed of where the director is heading; they want a role in shaping a vision for the program. When they are offered this involvement, their energy and talents can be tapped and their commitment to the program grows. This is a very different experience for staff than merely delegating responsibility for some tasks the director can’t get to. Teachers not only want to work with visionary directors, they want to dream and plan along with them.

Share the Decision-Making Process

“I hate it when our director has made a decision and then goes through the motions of asking for our input. It’s a waste of time and makes me resentful.” CCW’s Model Work Standards have several components which address this common sentiment from teachers. Their categories of communication, team building, and staff meetings, as well as decision making and problem solving, offer important descriptions of what teachers deem as necessary in a quality work environment. Bloom, in turn, has devoted a book in her *Director’s Toolbox*

series to the topic of implementing shared decision making and participative management. Circle of Influence outlines principles and values that support collaborative decision making and offers guidelines for determining decision-making processes and avoiding pitfalls. Bloom says:

“It is not enough to embrace the beliefs and values surrounding participation. Organizational structures and processes must be adapted so that staff and other stakeholders have the power and capacity to participate actively in decision-making ventures.”

Teachers want clarity in the process for making decisions about things which impact their ability to do their jobs well. Many want more than that and are eager to be mentored in understanding the big picture and learning consensus-building skills. They want their directors to offer strong leadership in getting all voices to the table. Teachers are intuitively clear about the difference between autocratic and democratic leadership, often mentioning the way their director succeeds or fails to facilitate the group dynamics so that everyone has power and input and teachers cultivate their own leadership skills.

Reject a Scarcity Mentality

Related to working with vision is the idea that teachers don't want their directors to just settle for how things are. They need to see and hear their directors pushing ahead with improvements in their compensation and working conditions.

A wonderful example of this can be found in an article by Carl Sussman, “Out of the Basement: Discovering the Value of Child Care Facilities.” Sussman's specific focus is a story of a Head Start director with a vision to create an inspiring new building, but the lessons for directors are even broader —

what I call rejecting a scarcity mentality. Sussman puts it this way: “To conserve energy for the educational tasks at hand, many teachers and administrators learn to live with modest expectations. They avoid disappointment by sacrificing their vision . . . (they) need to cultivate the cognitive dissonance of living with inadequate facilities while harboring an ambitious vision that could sustain a greatly enhanced program.”

Teachers have many ways of describing the scarcity mentality they experience in their directors, be it excessive penny pinching, power holding as if there's only so much available, failure to network and connect with outside resources, or repeated responses to new ideas with a “They won't let us” or “No way! We can't afford it.” They describe directors who inspire and sustain them with contrasting responses such as “Let's see how we could make that work” or “You're pushing me beyond what I know how to do but I want to take up that challenge.”

Tend to the Physical Environment

The typical early childhood program is situated in a less than ideal space with more limitations than we know what to do with. In his article, Sussman describes our situation this way: “Years of budget balancing and widespread acceptance of inadequate facilities has desensitized providers to their environment and created chronically low expectations.” In his article, he goes on to describe how the physical quality of a center can influence the way teachers interact with children and has the potential to reduce staff turnover rates. Indeed, one of the component areas of the Model Work

Standards is the physical setting, where what teachers need for the children and themselves is delineated.

Most early childhood programs don't draw on the research from other professions about the impact of space, light, and color on behavior. We often furnish our programs with little attention to aesthetics or imagination. Across the country, many early childhood programs have begun to look alike, a mini replica of an early childhood catalog. Usually there are child-sized tables and chairs, primary colors, an abundance of plastic materials, commercial toys, and bulletin board displays. You have to search to find soft or natural elements, places where adults as well as children can feel cozy, alone or with a friend. The smell of disinfectant often floats in the air. Have we forgotten how a cluttered or tattered environment quickly seeps into our psyche? Do we know how a sterile and antiseptic climate shapes our soul?

Caregivers, teachers, and children are spending the bulk of their waking hours living their lives together in our programs. The way we organize the space, create traffic and communication patterns, furnish and decorate all affect the experience people have in our buildings. When I listen for what teachers want from their directors, there is always something about improving the physical environment. In our book, *The Visionary Director*, Deb Curtis and I offer scores of ideas for creating an environment for adults that not only meets their needs but parallels what we want them to be providing for children: softness; beauty; order; reflections of their interests, culture, and home life; things to discover and invent with; a place for personal belongings; and so forth. When

directors give attention to the physical environment, it nourishes everyone involved and creates an on-going sense of possibilities.

Walk Your Talk

Again and again, teachers tell me there's nothing worse than a director who doesn't walk her talk. Promises without follow through, martyring oneself rather than modeling self-care, making excuses rather than making things happen are all behaviors that erode trust and respect. If you say you want more diversity in your program, then you must change the things that are keeping your program homogeneous. When you articulate a vision for your program, you must grow your way into it with how you set priorities and goals, create an environment and organizational culture, harness resources, and conduct human interactions. Listening to what teachers need from their directors can be a superficial endeavor or one which deepens understandings and broadens possibilities. It also contributes to a more stable, committed staff.

References and Recommended Resources

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