

Becoming a Director: Lessons Learned

by Beth Engelhardt

As I reflect on my early childhood career, I remember my first time as a director. Moving from a teaching position into administration was not a smooth transition. The jobs are very different: different tasks and responsibilities. When I began directing I had no idea what I was doing; although I acted as if I did. It was my secretary, Dolores, who taught me how to do my job.

Dolores taught me a great deal about running a company. You see, child care centers are businesses, after all. Our days are filled with the many tasks of running a business. In my case, Dolores would type my correspondence and then give it to me for my signature. I would fold the letter and put it in the

envelope. Dolores would tell me that folding the letters was her job. That seems rather insignificant, but that conversation with Dolores was the beginning of my understanding of my job.

She helped me to realize that I needed to devote my energy to leadership and running the organization, not on the clerical tasks that were her responsibilities. Over time I adopted the belief that if I am in the classroom or elsewhere in the center doing someone else's job, there is no one in the office doing mine. My responsibilities will be waiting for me when I return to my office. I began to appreciate that leadership and administration of a child care facility is a full-time job. If I were to do it right it would take my full attention. This realization came to me slowly over the years through a great deal of self-reflection and the wise words of colleagues.

Give staff your respect

- Respecting my staff allowed me to focus my attention on leadership and administration.
- Hire skilled teachers who require little direct supervision.
- Believe that your staff can do the jobs for which they were hired.
- Expect that teachers will do their best in their classrooms.

- Provide them with the resources to do their jobs (e.g., articles, books, journals, NAEYC membership, and paid time off for professional development).
- Nurture your staff with recognition, respect, time to refresh, and be available to offer support and encouragement.
- Compensate them with good pay and benefits.
- Provide perks such as morale boosters, volunteers, thank you notes, small gifts of appreciation, and dinners at staff meetings.

The first person I hired was a dream in the classroom and I soon discovered the many gifts she had to share with the center. She implemented a religious education component in each classroom. I gave her a line item in the budget to help her build a collection of supplies and materials. As Religious Education Coordinator she also put together our monthly newsletter. I increased her pay to recognize her contributions to the center and to show that we valued her commitment and dedication to the quality of programming we were offering.

Beth Engelhardt has over 30 years' experience in early childhood education, including 15 years as an administrator of an accredited child care center, child care licensing specialist, CDA advisor, and mentor to area directors and student teachers. Currently Beth is a professor at the University of Dayton.



Beth authored *The Director Mentoring Program* and co-authored *Dayton's Children*, a resource guide for families. Beth presents at local, state, and national conferences and is past president of the Dayton Association for Young Children, a member of the Montgomery County Early Childhood Coalition, and moderator for the Montgomery County Child Care Directors Online Group. Beth earned her master's degree in Leadership in Education and Human Development from Pacific Oaks College.

Delegate

Delegation is key to running any organization. My first secretary focused her attention on secretarial responsibilities: filing, correspondence, and clerical tasks. My second secretary assumed all secretarial responsibilities and tried to manage the center's finances. Unfortunately, finance was not her forte, and this wasn't successful for her or for the center.

- Identify people's strengths and interests.
- Offer staff new challenges.
- Increase compensation with added responsibility.
- Discover each person's individual strengths and help develop these.
- Train staff and encourage them to accept additional responsibilities.
- Delegate any job that someone else can do or can do better than you can.

When my third secretary came along, I had grown a great deal as a director and quickly recognized her for her talents. She became my assistant and assumed secretarial and financial responsibilities for the center — and, believe it or not, she could finish my sentences! She was a gift to me. We were a perfect match. She freed me up to fulfill my leadership and administrative duties.

Commit to staff training

My cook had a math phobia. This presented a challenge as I strived to teach her how to compile reports for government funding.

- Recognize that you cannot be all things to all people.
- Cultivate the talented people around you.

- Guide staff in new areas, building their confidence and developing their skills.
- Recruit people who have talents in areas that complement your skill set.
- Reward them for their willingness to learn and grow personally and professionally.

With help, my cook was able to manage the ordering, planning, and reporting required in her position. The true test came when I was leaving for a two-week vacation, during which time she would have to file the paperwork with the government. She was apprehensive, but submitted the paperwork required in an accurate and timely manner. From that day on she completed all the work related to the kitchen and was excellent at record keeping.

Focus on leading

Many directors teach and direct. You are in the kitchen preparing meals, and opening and closing the center. In 15 years directing a center, I never had to open the center. For me, it was about putting systems in place to support the way I wanted things to run. How many CEOs do you know who worry about who is going to open the office every morning? I venture to say none. They have systems in place that provide for that. The system I established was as follows. First, I had two people open at 6:30 AM. If one of the opening persons called off (didn't happen very often) they would call the next person, the 7:00 person, to come in early. When my assistant arrived at 8:00 she would locate a sub to fill in if needed for the day or the shift that needed to be covered. We also developed a sub list so that we had the available staff to maintain staff-child ratios on a daily basis. (One way to keep subs is to guarantee them a minimum number of hours each week.) Planning ahead — anticipating

what could happen — is what running an organization is all about. In that same period of time, I only had to fill in for a teacher once. You can't anticipate everything that will happen, but for most others you can learn from your mistakes and try out your new learning the next time the situation arises.

Many directors tell me, "I love teaching. That's why I'm in the classroom." I hear you. I had to decide for myself that it cost the center too much to have me in the classroom. If I dedicated too much of my time to the classroom, I wouldn't be available to parents, teachers, and children in the way my role demanded. In other words, I wouldn't be doing my job.

I saw my primary responsibility as a director as supporting my teaching staff so that they could do their jobs to the best of their ability. Nurturing and challenging them helped me to be true to my role and fostered their growth. Not only did I care for my teaching staff, I recognized and rewarded my cleaning company, maintenance person, and other support staff who helped to keep the center running smoothly. It takes everyone to provide quality care and education for young children.

Nurturing yourself

I learned that I have to be willing to grow and learn and to accept feedback. I remember a time when one of my teachers went to task with me concerning the Americans with Disabilities Act. She was not willing to open herself up to a lawsuit by administering breathing treatments to an asthmatic child. We resolved the situation by working together and putting systems in place to help her feel more secure. She helped to open my mind and stretched my own growth. It has been tremendously rewarding to see

two of my former employees develop into leaders/directors of centers. Feedback from my staff about my leadership continues to be the barometer I use to evaluate my effectiveness.

"You do not realize how you influenced me in my directing style. I try very hard to live up to your standards with my own staff. I decided you were the person I would role model myself after if I became a director."

— Mia

"I remember all the uplifting notes you would stick everywhere. I would come into work and stuck to the cabinet in my classroom would be a sweet little pick-me-up. It really helped with unity and learning to truly care for each other. There was a true bond between staff that most places only touch on."

— Susan

What a compliment it is to have staff that worked with me over the years say that I influenced their personal growth. I have come to realize that you can make a difference in the lives of children through the care and education that you provide to the staff and parents who choose your center. As Gesell said, "The measure of a society is its reverence for children." One way to show reverence for children is by caring for their teachers.

Not only do I care for my staff but I have also learned over the years to take care of myself. I need to role model to

those that I work with the importance of balance. When I take the time to replenish myself through professional development, director support groups, meditation and devotion, connecting with friends and family, and physical exercise, I have more to give to others.

For more information

Bracey, H., Rosenblum, J., Sanford, A., & Trueblood, R. (1990). *Managing from the heart*. New York: Dell.

Carter, M., & Curtis, D. (1994). *Training teachers: A harvest of theory and practice*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf.

Covey, S. (1989). *The seven habits of highly effective people*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Fowler, D. (1988). *A guide to effective administration in child care*. Palatine, IL: Associates in Human Development, Inc.

Glanz, B. A. (1994). *Care packages for the work place*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Nelson, B. (1995). *1001 ways to reward employees*. New York: Workman.

Senge, P., Ross, R., Smith, B., Roberts, C., & Kleiner, A. (1994). *The fifth discipline fieldbook: Strategies and tools for building a learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.

Zachary, L. (2000). *The mentor's guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.