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ABSTRACT

Work is a key part of an individual's identity. As such, an important part of effective and caring leadership is to care for the worker's mind, body, and spirit. An administrator has responsibility for making child caregivers feel valued, respected, and understood. The workplace should be an environment which fosters professionally and personally supportive relationships. There is great value in training child caregivers to be reflective practitioners--individuals who ask questions about and reflect on their own behavior and motivations in a commitment to continuous improvement. Similarly, an administrator should reflect on how his or her attitudes, physical posture, facial expressions, and tone affect employees. Administrators should establish clear priorities for their work goals and for the goals of the childcare center. Childcare, at its best, stems from a workplace environment which has a strong sense of community. (JW)

Keynote Address

"Who Do You Think You Are? The Director as Role Model for a Caring Community"

Presented at the Fifth Annual Fox Valley AEYC Conference Directors' Symposium
February 9, 1996

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When I was a young girl, 11-years-old, I remember going with my father to his office in downtown Chicago. He was starting a new business and he requested my help in stuffing envelopes. The actual work mattered little to me as I dressed up in my finest "work clothes" to accompany him to his office. I felt special. He told me how much he appreciated my contribution to the business and that he couldn't do it without me. It was a good thing that I was as excited as I was at the prospect of helping my father out, because the reality of stuffing envelopes for eight hours a day was less than enviable. Of course, I gained a lot from our special lunches out and our "important" conversations in which my father confided in me about his dreams and concerns for his new business. I am sure that much of what I know about work, people, and change comes from my father's talking about his goals as we drove to and from his office that wonderful week in my childhood.

What I learned from my father, in those early years, was that relationships were the most important part of the work. He took great care in cultivating and nurturing relationships with his employees, clients, and colleagues in the larger business community.

These early memories of work -- the sense of contribution and feeling of belonging -- created an image of work in my mind that has become an expectation for me in my adult life.

In the beginning, work meant spending money and parental approval. My earliest memories of work go back to that summer when I helped Dad start his business. I began regular work, for pay, when I was sixteen. In the fifteen years since, I have held as many jobs. I have been a salesperson, camp counselor, drama coach, tutor, receptionist, crisis worker, nanny, home health aide, preschool teacher, clinic worker, center director, social worker, meeting planner, professor, and consultant. Mostly, I did not look for jobs but created jobs I wanted to do.

I recognized early on that work is one key we can use to figure out who we are. I believe our identities exist, in large part, in the language we use to describe our experiences. Each of us has a sense of the role that work plays in our lives. As directors, when we are fully engaged in our work we feel satisfied at a deeper level than when we are just going through the motions, just getting by. Through the work of my colleague, Paula Jorde Bloom, and her research in the area of organizational climate, we have learned that it is the director who sets the tone in the workplace. It is disturbing to learn, therefore, the results of national opinion polls that tell us that up to 95% of American workers don't like their work. That's a lot of people spending what will amount to years of their lives in jobs that don't fulfill them.

It is interesting to note that we take a lot of care to ensure that workers' bodies are not accidentally or otherwise injured in the workplace. If a worker is injured, the worker may claim compensation. But her soul and her spirit? If her work damages her, by reducing her to a robot, punching a time clock, merely going through the motions of her job, and answering to a boss who seems to have no connection to her or her work, we say that

is just too bad.

We have all heard of people who complain of symptoms that illustrate the chasm between what they want and what they have in their work. People are tired, anxious, irritable, and frequently sick. They describe their workplaces as "battlegrounds," in which they are "in the trenches" and "running from enemy fire." Once a director told me she felt like an "island." Another, that she was like a "dartboard" for her staff. And many directors have told me they are always "putting out fires." These metaphors are powerful indicators of the emotional life within a program. As we create healthy environments for children and families, we cannot forget that we must also make the commitment to creating caring communities for our staff.

There has been a great deal of attention paid, in recent years, to the isolation of the modern worker and the resulting cost to companies in lost productivity. Increasingly, work, community, and family are getting mixed up and lumped together. As many Americans live in places where they are anonymous, they seek to find their community at work. The neighborhoods of the past have been replaced, for many workers, by the modern company. These companies, with the help of organizational development consultants, are trying to make the workplace the new home, the new family. The motto is: humanize the workplace; make it a community; let communication flourish at all levels. Working Mother magazine publishes an annual listing of family-friendly businesses, other publications highlight the unique needs of certain groups of workers and the organizations who are crafting solutions to meet their unique needs. In short, the workplace is rapidly becoming its own culture that defines who we are.

People's greatest need is to be valued, respected, and understood. We know that people who are involved in mutually supportive relationships cope better with stresses inherent in their personal and professional lives. A sense of community, in the workplace, provides employees with social support that nourishes the spirit and provides the impetus that makes individuals strive for optimal performance as well. Caring for staff not only makes for good business, it makes good sense.

In my work with directors around the state, in my role as Training Coordinator for the Taking Charge of Change Early Childhood Leadership Training Program, I am reminded of something Paula once told me -- Cultivating relationships is the business of child care. I did not recognize the accuracy of this notion at the time, but have grown to appreciate this over time. In my work with these directors, I have tried to facilitate their personal growth by asking questions that encourage them to examine their actions more closely and to correct the course they're on when this is indicated. I believe it is the ability

to ask questions more than the ability to suggest solutions that truly exemplifies intelligence. At my best, I am probing. At my worst I suggest a path to a director that she is uncomfortable with because I have failed to hear her story before offering a solution. Understanding takes time and conscious effort.

I was in Denver over the weekend, visiting a friend of mine who had started a retreat center and was eager for me to spend some time with her there. I don't know what I was expecting to find. I do know that the beautiful log cabin on 22 acres in the foothills was more than I could have imagined. As I spent the weekend hiking, taking in the

beauty of the land and the graciousness of my hostess, I thought about the talk that I would be having with you today. In my friend's vast library I discovered a wonderful book called Mindfulness and Meaningful Work. This book is a real treasure. (There is a resource list and information about the work that we do at the Early Childhood Professional Development Project available for you at the back of the room.) Among its many words of wisdom was a definition of "wisdom." Wisdom is defined as "developing an intellectual understanding of the truth about life -- that all things are interdependent." This is akin to the concept of "sharedness" in which a sense of team spirit is developed among staff where the combined energy of the group is working in harmony. In my mind, the ability to balance the many responsibilities of a director (the "wearing of many hats") while keeping relationships in the forefront of one's mind is the genius of the early childhood director.

You will know programs with positive and healthy organizational climates, as measured by the Work Environment Survey, by their high energy, openness, trust, a collective sense of efficacy, and a shared vision. This is sharedness, born out of wisdom. Staff in these programs are accepting of other points of view, stress group goals, make sure each person knows what others in the group are trying to accomplish, tie individual success to group success, emphasize each contribution (my stuffing envelopes for my Dad), promote cooperation and point out how each individual can help one another, and use this as a measure of performance. We know that teachers must first feel connected to one another before they can feel a sense of connection to the center.

Thomas Berry describes community as the sense of "we work together." His vision of an attractive world, a world of community, a world of personal attachment begins with the powerful influence of personal association, the presence of others that inspire and attract us to be our best selves, to be our true selves. We have learned this lesson in the field of anti-bias and anti-racism work. Individuals who have personal connections with people who differ from them in any of a variety of ways (ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, class, language, etc.) are more likely to be accepting of other members of these groups than are those without such personal connections. We know this through our work with children, as well. Learning is an exercise in which we make emotional connections with our environment. What we learn cannot be separated from the experience of learning it. Construction of knowledge involves socioemotional connections. What implications does this have for our work with the people in our programs?

Margie Carter has done much to inform my ideas in this area. She describes many ways that we can build community among our staff and foster a sense of belonging, a shared early childhood culture, in her new book, co-authored with Deb Curtis entitled Training Teachers. These authors suggest that we can create a sense of community among staff in much the same way that we create a sense of community in our classrooms. In our early days with children we contemplate the questions -- Who are we? Why are we here? Why are we together? as we consider who we want to be as a group. The process is similar for our work with staff. Using our work as classroom teachers as a starting point, we can consider the many ways in which we help the children to learn about each other and us and envision how this might look when done with our staff. We hold circle times during which children are encouraged to share their ideas and stories and to process these aloud with their classmates. The teacher

plays a critical role in helping the children express their ideas and gain support from their peers as they explore the connections between them. We ask children to bring in photographs of their families to display in the school. We help children to create their classroom by displaying their work in prominent places in attractive displays. We document the life of the classroom by marking time with major events, both positive (the birth of a baby brother or sister) and negative (the death of the class turtle) events in our lives. We help children to create a sense of "we-ness." New children are brought into the fold by "experienced peers," accomplishments are highlighted for all to celebrate, space is provided for meeting, talking, and working together. Children design bulletin boards and mailboxes to exchange ideas and stories with friends. Families are invited in to get to know each other and support the work of the children.

We know as early childhood people how to do this with children and yet it is often so difficult to do with our own staff. Over the weekend I joined my friend at Sunday mass at her parish. As I walked into the church, I saw a message on the bulletin board that spoke to me of the "community" we all hope to belong to. The message was in the form of three questions -- Do you know the person sitting next to you? Do you know the other people in your pew? Do you know everyone at this mass? And the message ended with the words -- How can strangers be a community? And so I ask you -- How can strangers be a community? My friends, do you know your staff? Do you know what their dreams are? Do you know their talents? What motivates your teachers? What values affect their teaching the children? Do they feel informed about the inner workings of the center to the extent that they desire and that is appropriate? I say "appropriate" because as a fearful flyer I was not pleased with the information sharing that the pilot did on my return flight from Denver last Sunday. He advised us to keep our seatbelts fastened as we were experiencing turbulence because of our position in the cloud cover. "We'll have a smooth ride once we climb to our cruising altitude of 35,000 feet," he informed us. "Unfortunately, there are three other planes above us at the moment all going in the same direction, so we'll just have to wait." I did not feel empowered as I considered what the other planes might do to us as we waited. A little information can be dangerous. So I say information that is appropriate to share? Do they feel a sense of ownership of the program? Do they share your views on important early childhood issues?

In my work with graduate students I emphasize their ability to become reflective practitioners, questioning their behavior and motivations through introspection and a commitment to continuous improvement. We use the term "metacognition" to describe our ability to both experience a situation as we also stand outside ourselves and reflect on what this feels like. In conducting performance appraisals with your staff, for example, as you discuss the specific issues of their work as classroom teachers consider how your body language, facial expression, choice of words, and actions contribute to or interfere with your message. With increasing self-awareness we all grow as professionals. This self-awareness is the cornerstone of emotional intelligence (the EQ we have been hearing about in the media of late). Self-awareness is the sense of "being smart about what we feel." Writing these feelings and ideas down in a journal can be a very powerful tool for self-growth. It is a wonderful method to teach your staff as well. There are consultants who can assist you in training your staff in this area.

Stephen Covey includes this commitment to continuous improvement in the seventh of his Seven Habits of Highly Effective People -- Sharpening the Saw, The Principles of

Balanced Self-Renewal. Be a role model for your staff in daily reviewing the level of your energy in each of the four areas: physical, mental, social/emotional, and spiritual. Reflect on how well you care for yourself and what happens when you "run on automatic" in habitual and preprogrammed ways. Consider the following questions to help you in this regard: Compared with the way I felt at the beginning stages of my career, this is how I feel today... To improve my professional performance, I am, at this time, placing priority in these areas ... Covey calls this cycle The Upward Spiral: Learn, Commit, and Do. Be an example to your staff.

When we are clear about what we believe in we are more effective in our work. Prioritize your reasons for working and appraise how evident these are in your work. Do you work for self-gratification, freedom/independence, excitement, money, recognition, experience, health care and benefits, the opportunity to meet people, achievement, challenge, status/title, security, or self-esteem? John Ruskin said, "When love and skill work together expect a masterpiece." Do you truly love what you do? What isn't working for you now?

Work I disliked the most was work I wasn't suited for. My first job in high school, for example, was working at the Crystal Cave in Wilmette. My father said at the time, "That's like a bull in a china shop." Recognizing that I was not known for my coordination, he, of course, was right. How right, he couldn't have known until the end of my first day when, not only had I broken 2 very expensive Austrian crystal vases, by dropping them off the side of the glass pyramid structure on which they were displayed, but significantly damaged the display piece as well. I remember my boss, a very kind and gentle woman, pulling me aside at the time and telling me to be "a little more careful." I did not estimate the damage I did to the store or its contents in the six months I worked there, but I would venture to say -- I should have been paying them in order to work there! Not a good fit! We're all good at many things. That happened not to be one of mine.

Joseph Campbell coined the phrase -- Follow your bliss, incorporating the sense of living with passion into your work life. As I have found my niche working in early childhood, I have often thought of myself as an artist in a way, whose work is obviously a form of self-expression. As you apply yourself and hone your skills and come to know yourself, your work becomes your signature. Does your program have your signature on it? Does it reflect what you believe about how children and adults learn best? What could be done differently? What action can you take today to move you in that direction?

I had several of my colleagues over to my new house in Barrington Hills back in December. I had told them lots about the house and how pleased I was about how it had all come together. When they walked in the front door, one of them remarked with a smile, "It looks just like you." "It is me," I replied. I feel comfortable there because I know where everything is, I had a hand in organizing and furnishing it to my tastes, and the people (and animals) there care about me. Do you enjoy that feeling at your center? Creating a sense of place that creates and supports us grows out of a shared vision of what child care and childhood is all about. Consider what that kind of place would include for you.... Open space, soft space, hiding places, dark space. Together space, alone space, outer space, my place.

In conclusion, I have suggested that the director plays a vital role in creating an emotional climate in which staff can feel safe, nurtured, and challenged to grow. It all begins with you. In my work with directors, I have found that this issue of relationships is critical to their success as directors. Teachers overwhelmingly relate to their directors as people first and judge their behaviors from that perspective. Directors' efforts to get to know themselves and their staff go a long way toward cementing a relationship between teacher and director that is built on trust and good faith.

I think this issue of community may be at the heart of child care workers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their work. I am well aware of the Worthy Wage campaign and wholeheartedly support this important initiative and yet I am convinced that something larger is at work here. How else to explain the strong organizational climate of some centers as compared with others who pay a comparable wage. We are so much more than our salaries. Of late, there has been increased attention to the worker of the 90's who feels disconnected at work and horne from a purpose larger than herself. We need jobs big enough for our spirit. I think we need a sense of community.