Create a climate where teams can flourish

Cohesive Teaching Teams — What Makes the Difference

by Julie Powers

"I have to work with her?"

One of the unique features of our field is that we work closely with a diverse group of people. While most elementary schools have one teacher/one classroom as a model, preschool environments tend to have teaching teams. In fact, many of us "teach in a fishbowl," as boundaries between classrooms, office space, and playgrounds blur. The ability to work together to meet the needs of children and families is crucial. One of the greatest impacts we can make as directors is to create the atmosphere and organizational structures which allow adults to work together in teams.

What Staff Need

Leo Tolstoy said, "All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." We can learn from talking to happy team members. When members of successful teams are asked "What makes it work?," the common issues of caring and commitment are frequently cited.

1. Caring

A climate of caring is very important to many preschool staff. Many talk about wanting to work with people who care about the families they serve as well as caring about each other. Kindness, support, understanding, respect, concern, and trust are needed for staff to collaborate. Perhaps because early childhood settings are commonly thought of as female in orientation, the ethic of caring takes on added importance.

How can the director set a climate of caring?

Respect for the views of staff

• Provide the time and structure for group problem solving. As staff "co-construct" or invent the curriculum, they bond and construct the best solutions for them as a team. This process will take time. It takes discipline to keep daily crises from interfering with this process.

• Involve staff in administrative issues that impact their work; team decisions meet with a lot less resis-

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tance. Teams care about such issues as changing group size, moving children to a different class, and purchasing new inventory, and should be involved in these decisions whenever possible.

• Listen to staff before reacting to problems; don't assume that you have the whole picture. Sometimes a problem can be resolved by encouraging the team involved to talk about it. Action by the director may not be necessary.

• Make time to meet with teaching teams on a regular basis and encourage the team to set the agenda. Demonstrate to the team that their work is important enough for you to schedule time to talk about it. As a result, they will begin to view you as a resource and involve you in their teaching team.

Support and trust

• Encourage teams to address the problems that affect them and create solutions. Accept their solutions rather than employing your own unless there is a very solid reason not to.

• Set the tone by discouraging team members from complaining to you about each other. Teams typically go through a "storming" stage the first few months and are able to work through this stage with time and support. After relationships are repaired, it may be difficult to continue as a team if the director has taken sides.

• Encourage team members to take care of themselves and each other. Advising staff to take "mental health days" can help avoid the burnout that is so detrimental to teams. Set the stage for staff helping each other through the difficult times that may arise in their personal lives. The people we work

with become surrogate families in some ways, and we can offer each other assistance in unique ways.

A relaxed work environment

• Encourage playfulness at appropriate times. At our end-of-the-year staff party, staff members write humorous reports on each other's development in the same format we use for children's year-end reports. The reports also serve as a fun way of revisiting and bringing closure to our year together.

• Give team members the opportunity to socialize together. A director in Tokyo has arranged to take over classrooms with the help of parents to allow team members to have a relaxed lunch together from time to time.

2. Commitment to ideas and professionalism

People are more willing to invest the time needed to develop good working relations if they feel other team members are committed to the team and its goals. Dedication to the job and a sense of belonging create a strong work ethic on a team.

How can the director set a tone of commitment?

Similar philosophical beliefs

• Include team members on hiring committees. Team members who choose each other usually start out on a positive footing. Group interviews can be a little intimidating, but the friendliness of the interview team can help the applicant to relax.

• Organize classroom teams based on similar philosophies of members. People who have similar interests and approaches can energize and encourage each other. Similar philosophies can be more important

than arranging teams based on work schedule or special talents of members.

Common vision and goals

• Assure that the program's vision and goals are revisited with the staff each year to include everybody's input. The vision and goals of the school should be emerging and growing, not an archaic document.

• Give less confident or articulate members time to pull their thoughts together before speaking. Too often group goals are set by those who "think fast on their feet." Prepare staff members for topics to be discussed or decisions to be made before meeting.

Mutual work ethic

• Give people meaningful tasks. Distribute the "mindless" tasks among people and allow everyone a chance to take part in the fun and challenging tasks.

• Offer flexible work schedules. Assure individuals a reasonable work schedule and don't allow people to over-extend themselves. When team members take on too much, their work will suffer and the rest of the team will resent them.

A cooperative work environment

• Minimize hierarchical structures. A focus on what each individual enjoys and does well rather than rigid job descriptions helps to create a team climate. A teacher may be an exceptionally good writer; giving her time to work on the school newspaper, while you work with the children, can bring out the best in everyone.

• Recognize and communicate to all children and families the contributions of all team members. If

parents and kids treat teaching assistants as the important member of the teaching team that they are, the whole team benefits.

• Walk the talk. Set a tone of everyone pitching in for the greater good. Supervising a child in the bathroom to allow a staff member to take a phone call communicates a true cooperative environment.

• Examine how staffing helps or hampers teamwork. Staff need opportunities to plan together. Ask the staff to help you examine their schedules and duties to find optimal teaming time.

Support for professional growth

• Dedicate financial resources to training and education. Even a little bit of money spent on professional development communicates your appreciation of the increased knowledge and skill that staff develop. We have found resources to bring all or most of our staff to the NAEYC conference when it is not too far away. The excitement and feeling of professionalism cannot be duplicated by any other means. Team members roomed together and bonded through the disasters as well as the fun.

• Work with staff to make professional development easier. Offering flexible work schedules and leaves of absence can pay off in the long run.

• Encourage risk taking. Allow staff to try out new ideas even if you have your doubts. They may surprise you!

• Provide professional resources. A good library can be enjoyed by all staff members. Sometimes a well written article is more accessible and useful to staff members than a long book.

Acknowledge the Importance of the Teaching Team

In our competitive society, we haven't had a lot of training or experience in teaming. We can support the hard work and time it takes to build a good teaching team by the actions we take as directors. Good teaching teams model to children and families important values including cooperation, caring, and learning together.

"Martha and I want to work together next term!"

As the importance of good teaming is understood, programs put more time and resources into increasing team effectiveness. Children will experience a model of cooperation, parents will become active team members, and staff will be retained as work becomes a more satisfying experience. As directors, we can set the stage for learning for the teachers just as they do for the children.

For Further Reading

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