

# The Rights and Longings of Directors

by Margie Carter

"I think when we talk about the rights of children, the rights of teachers fall under the same broad stroke, and by that same broad stroke, those same rights need to be conveyed to directors. They are, after all, basic human rights. To grow. To learn. To be challenged. To feel safe in failure."

— Michael Koetje

Directors of early childhood programs all too often feel like failures. But perhaps it is we who have failed them. Our field offers inadequate recognition and support for the expectations of the administrator's job. Is it their fault that directors can't relieve the stress of working with a limited budget, the limits of a 24-hour day, and the tug of longing to see a slice of their dream come true? We should say to them, "You are remarkable. You have an impossible job and we recognize the huge effort you make. Thank you. For a moment, take off your

cape and put up your feet. You deserve so much more."

Oh, the stories directors could tell us. Most of them with common themes known all too well by those who do this taken-for-granted job and those who observe it: stories of being squeezed from the outside by those who want measurable outcomes, scientific proof that all their hard work is paying off; stories of the inside squeeze of working with inadequate facilities and finances,

staffing dilemmas, families in crisis, and life in an economic crunch.

Looking at a typical week in the life of early childhood administrators can provoke stimulating conversations about what they truly deserve. In contrast to how things typically are, directors deserve:

- a support staff or administrative team to handle the wide range of fiscal, operational, IT, and human resources



Margie Carter is the coauthor of *The Visionary Director: A Handbook for Dreaming, Organizing, and Improving in Your Center*. With her Harvest Resources Associates, Margie offers three-day Institutes "From Administrator to Innovator: Creating

Organizational Systems that Support Reflective Teaching."

Visit [www.ecetrainers.com](http://www.ecetrainers.com) to learn more about this work.

Margie thanks the following colleagues for their input for this article: Julie Bisson, Peter Blair, Kimberly Cothran, Anne Marie Coughlin, Julianne Exton, Donna King, Debbie Lebo, Michael Koetje, Kristie Norwood, Therese Visser, Liddy Wendell, and Janice Woods.



PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER

challenges of running an early childhood program.

- to be highly respected, paid well, and able to pay their staff well.
- an executive coach, just like any CEO trying to get a handle on the enormity of their job.

Thinking about the rights of directors, I posed the question to current and past directors and those whose jobs interface with them. I asked what they think ECE directors deserve and what would demonstrate that they are valued and seen for their worth. Such a heartfelt, thoughtful outpouring arrived in my inbox. Clearly, this is a topic worthy of an entire conference and series of action plans! I'll summarize here the themes that struck me most, the ones that speak to a director's deeper longing — the right to bring his or her full heart and eager mind to work each day.

## Directors Have a Right to Work with Clear Core Values

Several people spoke to the more significant outcomes that arise from a director working with a clearly defined set of values. Debbie Lebo offers this:

"Core beliefs and values are the clarification of what a program stands for: the constants in a changing world. Without a shared, consistent set of core beliefs and values, directors find themselves running on ice, in constant problem-solving mode, working towards minimum standards instead of a higher vision. Core beliefs and values should minimally include a shared understanding about how children learn, and what children, families, and staff deserve from the program. These beliefs and values should provide a sturdy foundation for how the center culture, policies, systems, teaching, curriculum, and assessment will look in the program."

Therese Visser adds, "A director has the right to, and deserves to, surround him or herself with staff who will assist in creating a value system for their particular learning community."

## Directors Have a Right to Challenge Conventions

In her foreword to the second edition of *The Visionary Director*, Paula Jorde Bloom (Carter & Curtis, 2010) says:

"Being a center director has never been easy, but it seems the increasing demands of the accountability movement — quality rating systems, accreditation, performance standards, credentialing — have created even greater pressure on program administrators. I believe the lopsided focus on school readiness and outcomes has had the unintended consequence of stifling directors' creativity and innovativeness, dulling their dreams and aspirations."

As coauthor of the *Program Administration Scale* (PAS) (Talan & Bloom, 2004), Bloom acknowledges, "Even the PAS will fall short as a blueprint for improving program quality if directors can't elevate their leadership mandate beyond just complying with standards."

Anne Marie Coughlin's assertion that "The evolution of our field relies on people who challenge conventions and try out new ways of being" echoes Bloom's belief that directors have a right to see themselves as change agents.

## Directors Have a Right to be Engaged in Discovery

Working as a change agent involves bringing values to life which, in turn, requires risk taking, experimentation, and innovation. Janice Woods understands this and reminds us,

"Administrators deserve support to make their vision regarding children

and families become evident in the classrooms."

Expanding quality isn't about directives from the top or a mission statement on your website or wall. As the person at the helm, you have to learn how to dream, scheme, motivate, and organize, but you don't have to have it all figured out in advance. "*Se hace camino al andar* (meaning: You can make the road by walking)," as Antonio Machado reminds us.

"This person with the peculiar role of bridging and leading all these different learning constituencies doesn't somehow have to know everything already," says Donna King, "but has the right to openly 'not know' and to be engaged in discovery and intellectual risk-taking."

## Directors Have a Right to be Stimulated to Grow

When directors are engaged in discovery and intellectual risk-taking, they are continually growing themselves. As Kim Cothran puts it,

"ECE directors deserve to get to know themselves in the context in which they work. They deserve the opportunity to slow down and pause to reflect on who they need to be in the programs they serve."

Most directors are ill-prepared for the demands of their job. This challenge, more often than not, sucks the life out of them as they struggle to keep up with everyone's expectations. Before long, administrators become defenders of the status quo, rather than change agents or intellectual risk-takers.

Peter Blair's experience leads him to say:

"Directors have the right to be stimulated in their thinking and pushed to their learning edge. Far too often



Directors are stuck in the muck of managing and overseeing the daily operations of an ECE school. These operations can be repetitive, tedious, and all-consuming if we allow them to be. Thus, directors have the right to learn, to grow, and to challenge their own thinking from within and through ongoing education.”

This implies, of course, that directors deserve to be surrounded by people who will keep expanding their thinking and encouraging innovation.

### **Directors Have a Right to Professional Company**

Several people have described the job of leading and transforming an early childhood program as akin to moving an elephant. If you try to undertake this work alone, you will likely find yourself stuck, overwhelmed, and exhausted. On the other hand, with

‘professional company’ directors gain support and a cadre of thinking buddies who help them unpack their problems and find the road they want to walk. Kristie Norwood says:

“Directors deserve the right to dialogue. Too many times, Administrators are hindered from sharing their own ideas and thoughts. I believe that it’s good to interject another way of thinking into the conversation . . . something might move them in a different way.”

Julianne Exton says her number-one top priority as a director is to have ‘professional company’ inside and outside the service. She seeks out “a mentor, supervisor, coach, and critical friend to ensure I am not alone in my thinking, wondering, and decision making.”

When you are part of a professional community of learners you are freed up to take risks, dream big, make mistakes, and try again. Directors deserve to

work like this, and when they do, they understand why they have to create this learning community for their staff.

### **Directors Have a Right to Create Professional Environments**

“One of the things that I love the most about my job is being able to put the resources and infrastructures in place that make it possible for teachers to do their magic with kids. So I feel strongly that directors deserve the authority to be able to make the purchasing, staffing, and budget decisions that allow them to put these resources and infrastructures in place.” — Julie Bisson

Julie is correct, of course. We can’t ask teachers to do more without giving them more of what they deserve. In today’s climate of accountability mandates, organizational infrastructures must be in place for staff to study what is unfolding with the children and how to plan meaningful learning experiences to address desired outcomes. It’s demoralizing for directors to ask teachers to adhere to professional standards in the absence of a professional work environment. When directors create supportive conditions for teachers to work as learning professionals, they unleash passions rather than complaints, excitement rather than gripes. Directors have the right to love coming to work, rather than dreading it.

### **Directors Have a Right to Imagine a Different World**

Executive coaches often help administrators with issues of human resources, financial management, or strategic planning, but when it comes to leadership they stress that imagination is as critical to success as acquiring skills. So much in our world dulls our thinking and keeps us from imagining something dif-

ferent. With all the tasks directors need to accomplish, they can easily neglect their hearts and creative instincts. Directors have a right to time away from the hubbub to reconnect with their dreams of change, to imagine how quality might really look if their program was centered on clear values about what children, families, and staff really deserve. When directors stop settling for the status quo, they can offer us a new picture of possibilities and demonstrate ‘evidence-based outcomes’ that exceed, not just meet, our current definitions of quality.

Marcy Whitebook suggests:

“Imagine the child care of our dreams, not just child care that’s good enough. Imagine if people working with young children received adequate professional preparation, opportunities for ongoing professional growth, and earnings equal to their investment in their careers.”

Every director deserves encouragement to take time to imagine a different world. As Liddy Wendell says,

“Directors have the right to be engaged with the same level of professional respect, expertise, and leadership as principals, heads of schools, and university presidents.”

## References

Carter, M., & Curtis, D. (2010). *The Visionary Director: A Handbook for Dreaming, Organizing, and Improving in Your Center*. St Paul: Redleaf Press.

Bloom, P. J., & Talan, T. (2004). *Program Administration Scale: Measuring early childhood leadership and management*. New York: Teachers College Press.

