

Have You Hugged Your Director Today?

by Robert Siegel

Many of you may remember the old bumper sticker from years past asking “Have You Hugged Your Child Today?” These were visible everywhere around the country for awhile and coincided with an awakening of the American public on the importance of early childhood education in our nation. They worked. Our consciousness was raised and hugging became the order of the day. However, many years later I ask a different question: Have you hugged your (child care) director today?

This topic leaped into my mind some years back when as a center director, I was attending a conference session on “How to Motivate Your Staff.” In the middle of it, one of my fellow session participants jumped up and exclaimed: “I’m tired of talking about taking care of everyone else all the time. What about ME?” Who’s going to take care of ME? Hopefully, each of us has people in our personal life who love us and sometimes take care of us (i.e., ME). At work, things are different for each of us as a director. The only one to take care of me is me — the director.

I do not know of any other industry where the manager on-site has such a profound effect on every aspect of the business; the **quality** of the product or

service, the **financial performance** of that site, and the reputation and interface with the **public**. And incidentally, what proportion of us had outstanding training in management helping us get to where we are? My career is dedicated to both training and coaching directors around management issues, and I can tell you that percentage is very low. Most directors were teachers, came up through the ranks, and one day got named the director. Please allow me to put our jobs in context, debunk a few myths, and most importantly, offer a number of tested strategies to help you *take care of yourself in the job*.

Another myth to debunk is that we have to be all-knowing and have the answer to every question if we’re going to prosper as a manager and site director. In my years working with directors, I have learned the value of saying “I don’t know, let me find out.” Or better yet, “Why don’t you and I find the answer to your question together?” Center Director, Nancy L. from Quincy, Illinois, used to say, “I’m a full-time

On particularly challenging days as a director, my friend and colleague from Florida, Sonia M., would walk around chanting “How did I end up here?” or “I never asked to be a director.” As in many of the helping professions, the people who are the best service providers end up as managers and initially feel unprepared. One of the best attributes of people working in early care and education is that we’re great nurturers. Therefore, the first myth to debunk is that a person with a nurturing personality cannot be a good manager. We’re much too nice. I believe that in many ways, being a good nurturer is a great attribute in developing into a great manager. Think about what we do: we spend much of our time bringing people along, building relationships, and helping others grow. Being nice is a good thing. Our problem is that we, and others, take nice behavior to mean that one is weak . . . a pushover. These are two very different things. We do need to learn how to be firm and mean what we say when dealing with others; but, doesn’t that also best describe a wonderful preschool teacher?



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Resource Lady, part-time Traffic Cop.” Isn’t that true? We keep things in positive motion. And again, aren’t exploring choices together another characteristic of a great preschool teacher? If I truly believed that I always had to have the right answer, I’d have departed from management positions long ago due to fear of failure.

The final myth I have to take on is one I hear all the time when speaking to directors. The belief is, “If I want to do a great job at work, I shouldn’t count on having a personal life.” Nothing could be further from the truth. You’re responsible here; creating an outstanding life balance is up to you. Although I will offer some strategies and suggestions later in the article.

Before I begin to offer some ideas on taking care of yourself and how to do it, I wish to present you with some important conditions and realities to consider:

- Unless you also own the center, most of us fall into the ECE Middle Management Trap. That is, we have an enormous level of **responsibility**, not enough **authority**, and a scarcity of needed **resources**. The next time you’re feeling emotionally drained, understand that this is part of the reason why. However, please realize it’s not about to change anytime soon.
- A main part of your job is balancing resources; we do it all the time, in so many different ways. As director, you know more about all aspects of the operation than anyone else — act like it. Manage those resources and do not apologize when you do.
- Nowhere is it more poignantly true that you can’t be friends with the people who work for you, with maybe a few unique or historical exceptions. I remember reading an *Exchange* article long ago that

recommended that we act in a friendly manner, but we can’t supervise through friendship. Doing that comes back to bite you in the end.

An example of what *not* to say:

“Andrea, you and I have been working together for many years and I need your help. Molly, our closer, quit this morning. I need someone to take the late hours for two weeks while I find a new person. Please, Andrea, do it for me.”

Two weeks pass, and I say, “Andrea, we’ve sure been through a lot together, can you give me just two more weeks? I can’t find anyone to close. Will you come through for me?” From this we sometimes add two more weeks, then two more weeks. Meanwhile, Andrea has begun to resent the pull on the heartstrings of friendship. She puts the resentment in her pocket . . . where it ferments until she releases it at some inappropriate moment.

- You are the most important, highest paid person on the staff — act like it.
- When you accepted the director’s job, you agreed to do the hiring and firing. If that’s not comfortable, look for a different job. Our strongest path to quality is getting rid of bad teachers.
- Finally, it is true that it’s lonely at the top. But . . . as my new son-in-law said to his bride a few months ago when she was complaining about work, “Hey, Woman Up.”

Taking Care Strategies for You

- **Don’t be a personal therapist for your staff.** Not only do we not know what we’re doing, but having been supportive and empathetic, how do you revert back to Boss mode when needed?

- **Many staff has been known to enter your office with a problem** — a veritable ‘monkey on her back.’ Be careful to avoid that monkey being on your back when the conversation is over. Simply do not accept her problem or challenge as your own. Who wants to spend the day with a monkey atop your shoulders?
- **Pursue your own professional development.** Don’t just make sure your teachers have this. Arrange your professional development around the responsibilities of your management position. Or perhaps, just a topic of your own passionate interest in the greater field that has no immediate bearing on the work. Indulge yourself professionally.
- **Negotiate your own salary as the first step in creating the final budget.** Too often, we draft a budget leaving our salary line open until the end. We try and take care of everyone else first, then fund some program initiatives, and end up taking what is left. After acting in this way, we end up not getting the increase we deserve or want and end up feeling cheated and angry the rest of the year. Remember my point above: You are the most important person there — act like it.
- **Once in a while get out of the center.** After a long meeting downtown, don’t return just to be there from 5:30 to 6:00 pm. Go home. Let your staff know the center functions well without you when necessary. Tomorrow, go have lunch at the beach.
- **When you need to, say “NO.”** Mean it when you do say “No.” You get to decide when the conversation ends; it’s a benefit of being the boss.

■ **Each one of our to-do lists is so long, it will never get done.** However, there is a tool to make it easier and shorter. That tool is delegation. And what shall be delegated? My suggestions for what to delegate:

- what you hate doing.
- what's most time-consuming for you to do.
- what others will commit to.

Share your burden and build staff investment.

■ **Time is a valuable commodity.**

Know what your top 3-5 goals are at all times. Try hard to assure that the majority of your time is spent advancing those essential goals. If it doesn't pertain to one of the goals, find a way to do it faster, delegate it to others, or get rid of it. Perfection is not necessary and is a time-killer. Instead, go for excellence. Understand the difference between efficient and effective use of time and know which one to go for.

■ **Decentralizing some operations is a great time-saver.** The areas I recommend for decentralizing are:

Purchasing — You don't have to choose and physically order every classroom item or kitchen supply. My experience has been that the people involved do a better job. Center director Leticia R. from Memphis, Tennessee, told me "My teachers are much better at buying stuff for their classrooms. They get wonderfully frugal when buying, even spend part of their weekend at the Dollar Store. When I say to them that your classroom budget this year is \$1,400, they know I mean it — no more. So, they pore through catalogs, go shopping on their own time, and decide what truly is not necessary. And after all that, I still have the final say because I pay the bills."

Decision making — You don't have to be in on every discussion or make every decision. Explore areas that can and should be decided by the key staff involved. Give them the respect of being responsible for those decisions.

Supervision — If you remember the television show "Eight is Enough," you're almost there. There is ample research in the Human Resources literature that you are at your best when your supervision load is not more than eight staff people. Any more than that, and it's hard to have the time to do a good job and still accomplish your own tasks. Move supervision closer to the loci of the work itself. For example, have each assistant teacher report directly only to her lead teacher. She probably knows more of the assistants' performance than you do. When doing this, you can help train and mentor these new supervisors.

■ **Find professional support for yourself.** You need not only a means of personal support, but professional support as well. Yours is a difficult and exhausting job. Share this burden. There are many ways to accrue this support: choose a buddy and talk often; have lunch with a colleague every other Friday; form or join a Director's Group; get mentored or mentor others. You cannot get your professional support from your staff or parents at the center. Hopefully, one or more of these ideas will get you there. Quoting Center Director Aisha D. from Oregon: "My other center director friend and I had a rule about our Friday lunches — no cancellations unless you could prove blood and an ambulance are involved." Talk about taking care of your needs!

These are some techniques for you. I hope they work as well for you as they did for the directors who shared them with me. A few final, important thoughts to take you forward.

- You are not responsible for everyone and their actions; stop trying to be.
- The best question to put to your boss as tasks and responsibilities are continually being added is, "What would you like me to drop?" I learned this from my first boss.
- Set your own goals, both personal and professional; be sure to pursue these with vigor.
- Don't compromise or let go of your passion.
- Please also let me touch on a growing trend: Asking staff to evaluate the director. Most staff don't have the slightest idea what 75% of your job is. Instead, I suggest these two areas to ask for feedback:
 - How well are your needs at work being met?
 - How can I help you do your job with excellence?

Celebrate Success — Then Celebrate Again

A final story for you on this topic:

I first presented this workshop session many years ago with my colleague, Sue Baldwin, from Minneapolis. We brought 100 handouts and went down to check out the room the night before our lengthy preconference session. We had been assigned a ballroom with a 900-person capacity. All I could envision was 23 people in the ballroom first thing in the morning. We arrived to set up at 8:15 for a 9:00 am session. The room was already full and overflowing with people who wanted to discuss the topic. It certainly was not because Sue or I were famous. The session was fantastic, very interactive with lots of great discussion. Everyone got new ideas to help them survive and prosper in the job. One major challenge was that we had only brought 100 sets of handouts with us for what turned out to be over 1,200 people. We made a plan. Sue had a place in the Exhibit Hall for her employer. We gave everyone there a password (Swordfish) and told them to give us two hours to make more copies, then to stop at booth #1131 anytime over the next three days of the conference and get their handouts. The result was three more days of delightful conversation, management sharing, and many expressions of gratitude for taking on the topic. My favorite was Ellen from El Paso who stopped by at the very end and said, "Thank you both so very much. I spent the entire conference going shopping for me and ignoring the conference entirely. My needs were met superbly." We apologize to the other presenters whose rooms were emptier, but we embrace an El Paso professional who returned to work smarter, relaxed, and revitalized in her job. Let it be you.