

CLIMATE CHANGE: A BAD THING?

Using Data to Improve the Work Climate of Your Program

by Jill Bella and Paula Jorde Bloom

The headlines forecasting dire consequences from climate change are indeed ominous — rising sea levels, erratic weather patterns, and crop devastation from too little rain. By now we're well-informed about the negative ramifications of global warming. Yet, in some cases climate change can be a good thing. In early care and education settings where conditions are stormy and unpredictable, climate change could definitely be a good thing. Even in programs where the conditions are generally sunny and the work climate friendly and predictable, understanding what factors contribute to those positive

conditions is important. This article looks at the dimensions of organizational climate and describes how data from climate assessment can be used to improve the quality of work life in early childhood programs.

What is Organizational Climate?

Over the years we've had the privilege of visiting hundreds of early childhood programs and have seen firsthand the subtle differences that distinguish one setting from another. This uniqueness reflects the collective competence of staff as well as the attitudes, beliefs, and values that shape their behavior. No two programs are alike because people's perceptions and expectations of their workplace environment differ and are influenced by their previous work experiences and the leadership that guides them.

Organizational theorists refer to the distinct atmosphere that characterizes a work setting as its *organizational climate*. The use of a weather metaphor seems appropriate because some centers are distinctly sunny, warm, and nurturing, while others are stormy, divisive, and unpredictable. Think of the weather conditions in

your program. Using weather terminology, how would you describe your center?

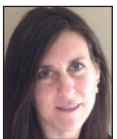
Now take a look at the ten dimensions of organizational climate described in the accompanying table (see adjacent box). What dimensions contribute to the general impression you have of your own center's work climate? As director, it is important to be aware of your program's organizational climate because it is linked to the staff's quality of work life, which in turn impacts the quality of care provided to children.

The Importance of Measuring Work Attitudes

As a program administrator, you probably have an overall sense that things are going well or not so well, but you may lack specific awareness of just which areas of the program contribute to those impressions. The information gleaned from assessing work attitudes will help you clarify those vague feelings and define more precisely how different aspects of the work climate in your center are perceived.



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numerous books, journal articles, and assessment tools focusing on leadership and management issues.

At the end of this article is an informal organizational assessment you are free to make copies of and use with your staff. This is the short version of the *Early Childhood Work Environment Survey* (ECWES). Remember, however, that this short informal survey provides only a global assessment of organizational climate; it should not be used to interpret organizational functioning in each of the ten dimensions separately. Periodically, you may decide to conduct a more systematic, standardized assessment of your center's work climate — one that provides a more comprehensive analysis of organizational functioning and a profile summarizing the aggregate responses of staff. If so, the long version of the ECWES may suit your needs. The ECWES is available online at www.newhorizonsbooks.net.

The Work Environment Profile that results from completing the online climate assessment includes information about how staff perceive their work climate, how their setting compares to what they consider to be their ideal, and how their center compares with other centers that have completed the ECWES.

Josephine's Story

Josephine is the director of a small nonprofit program. She describes her program as generally sunny but occasionally experiencing short bursts of rain and a strong head wind. When asked why she used these specific weather-related terms, Josephine said her teachers sometimes complained about inadequate space and resources and feeling rushed during team meetings and planning time.

The strong headwind Josephine described represented occasional heated conflicts over scheduling the use of the center's two computers in the staff lounge. The staff lounge was cramped and could only accommodate three to four teachers at a time. Finding adequate meeting and planning time was a recurring issue that fueled frustration among the teachers. Josephine's informal assessment of the 'weather' in her program touched on several dimensions: collegiality, opportunities for professional growth, and the physical setting.

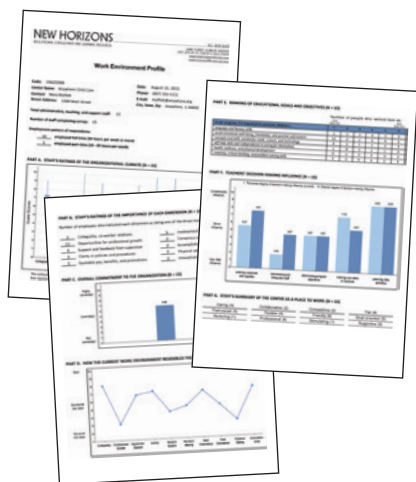
Josephine and her staff completed the ECWES online. The resulting Work Environment Profile supported her initial impressions of program functioning and provided a wealth of concrete data she could use to help shape an action plan with her teachers. Teachers rated opportunities for professional growth and the physical setting low on the formal assessment. However, the profile also showed items relating to collegiality and their commitment to the center were rated high. This was reassuring news to Josephine who hoped her teachers would be open to working together to improve the situation.

After meeting to discuss their collective perceptions of the program, Josephine and the teachers formed a committee to tackle issues relating to space, scheduling, and resources for planning. Their buy-in and commitment to the changes were instrumental in creating a more positive work climate.

Ten Dimensions of Organizational Climate

Dimension	Definition
Collegiality	The extent to which staff are friendly, supportive, and trusting of one another. The peer cohesion and esprit de corps of the group.
Professional Growth	The degree of emphasis placed on staff's professional growth. The availability of opportunities to increase professional competence.
Supervisor Support	The degree of facilitative leadership providing encouragement, support, and clear expectations.
Clarity	The extent to which policies, procedures, and responsibilities are clearly defined and communicated.
Reward System	The degree of fairness and equity in the distribution of pay, fringe benefits, and opportunities for advancement.
Decision Making	The degree of autonomy given to staff and the extent to which they are involved in centerwide decisions.
Goal Consensus	The extent to which staff agree on the philosophy, goals, and educational objectives of the center.
Task Orientation	The emphasis placed on organizational effectiveness and efficiency, including productive meetings, program outcomes, and accountability.
Physical Setting	The extent to which the spatial arrangement of the center helps or hinders staff in carrying out their responsibilities. The availability of supplies and materials.
Innovativeness	The extent to which the center adapts to change and encourages staff to find creative ways to solve problems.

From Bloom, P. J. (2016). *Measuring work attitudes in the early childhood setting* (3rd ed.). Lake Forest, IL: New Horizons. Reprinted with permission.



Lessons Learned

We've gathered data from more than 40,000 early childhood educators who have completed the *Early Childhood Work Environment Survey* over the past three decades. We've also spent time helping directors and their teachers use the data to create action plans to improve the work climate of their programs. Here are six lessons we've learned from those collaborations:

Share the results. When teachers are invited to complete a climate assessment, they want to know their feedback is valued and has meaning. Sharing the results honors their opinions and perceptions about their work environment. It is an important step in including them as partners in the program improvement process.

Balance your interpretation of the summary profile. Often directors' inclination when viewing the results of a climate assessment is to focus exclusively on trouble spots, but it is just as important to view data from an appreciative eye: What is going well? How can you and your teachers build upon your program's strengths?

Involve staff in decision making. Discerning the level of decision-making influence that individual teachers want in various organizational decisions

is essential for ensuring they follow through in centerwide improvement efforts.

Determine your priorities. In developing an action plan to improve the work climate of your program, resist the temptation to try and 'fix' everything at once. It is better to focus your action plans on just one or two dimensions at a time.

Implement change in small doable steps. Change can be overwhelming. Remember, small incremental change is generally more successful than bold, sweeping changes.

Don't get complacent. When the work climate is positive and your program is running smoothly, it's tempting to bask in the sun and think all will be fine forever. However, the dynamics of the work environment can change overnight. Instilling norms of continuous improvement will help ensure your program regularly assesses work attitudes to address any shifts in the weather.

A Final Word

With the intense policy focus on children's school readiness and program accountability, the needs of adults in the early childhood work environment are often overlooked. But designing work environments that address quality of work life issues for teaching and support staff pays off in rich dividends. Our experience confirms that programs that regularly measure work attitudes and tap into staff's perceptions about organizational climate have more stable, engaged staff. A center's work climate, its leadership and management practices, and overall classroom quality are inextricably connected. The research bears this out; programs with higher organizational climate scores have better administrative practices and classroom quality.

Most directors can use intuition and informal data to identify the weather conditions in their programs, but exemplary directors make it their mission to ensure they monitor the weather routinely and work with staff to facilitate climate change when necessary. They are not passive about the factors that influence organizational effectiveness; rather, they play an active role in changing the work climate for the better.

For Further Reading

Bloom, P. J. (2015). *Blueprint for action: Leading your team in continuous quality improvement* (3rd ed.). Lake Forest, IL: New Horizons.

Bloom, P. J. (2016). *Measuring work attitudes in the early childhood setting: Technical manual for the Early Childhood Job Satisfaction Survey and the Early Childhood Work Environment Survey* (3rd ed.). Lake Forest, IL: New Horizons.

Bloom, P. J., Hentschel, A., & Bella, J. (2016). *A great place to work: Creating a healthy organizational climate* (2nd ed.). Lake Forest, IL: New Horizons.

Early Childhood Work Environment Survey (ECWES): www.newhorizonsbooks.net.

Hur, E., Jeon, L., & Buettner, C. K. (2015, October). Preschool teachers' child-center beliefs: Direct and indirect associations with work climate and job-related wellbeing. *Child Youth Care Forum*. doi: 10.1007/s10566-015-9338-6

Lower, J. K., & Cassidy, D. J. (2007, Winter). Child care work environments: The relationship with learning environments. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 22(2), 189-204.

Early Childhood Work Environment Survey

(Short Form)

This survey is designed to find out how you feel about this early childhood center as a place to work. The success of this survey depends on your candid and honest responses. Please know that your answers are completely confidential; you do not need to sign the form. When you have completed the questionnaire, put it in the attached plain envelope, seal it, and give it to your staff representative. Indicate in the space provided the numeral (0–5) that most accurately describes how you feel about each statement.

Never 0	Seldom 1	Sometimes 2	Somewhat regularly 3	Frequently 4	Always 5
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- _____ Staff are friendly and trust one another.
- _____ Morale is high. There is a good team spirit.
- _____ Staff are encouraged to learn new skills and competencies.
- _____ The center provides guidance for professional advancement.
- _____ Supervisor(s) are knowledgeable and competent.
- _____ Supervisor(s) provide helpful feedback.
- _____ Communication regarding policies and procedures is clear.
- _____ Job responsibilities are well defined.
- _____ Salaries and fringe benefits are distributed equitably.
- _____ Promotions are handled fairly.
- _____ Teachers help make decisions about things that directly affect them.
- _____ People feel free to express their opinions.
- _____ Staff agree on school philosophy and educational objectives.
- _____ Staff share a common vision of what the center should be like.
- _____ The program is well planned and efficiently run.
- _____ Meetings are productive. Time is not wasted.
- _____ The work environment is attractive and well organized.
- _____ There are sufficient supplies and equipment for staff to do their jobs.
- _____ Staff are encouraged to be creative and innovative in their work.
- _____ The center implements changes as needed.

What three words describe the climate of this center as a place to work?

What do you perceive to be the center's greatest strengths?

What areas do you feel could use some improvement?

Thank you!