Conversations that Generate New Ideas

by Margie Carter

In your work as an early childhood professional, do you often find yourself on a treadmill or recursive cycle of dealing with the same problems over and over again? I see this so often in early childhood programs. While some of the reasons are systemic — for instance, staff turnover caused by budget restrictions on salaries — other reasons include bureaucratic thinking that stifles creativity and leads to stagnation. Einstein is often quoted as saying, "Insanity is continuing to do the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." No wonder early childhood administrators often say their job is driving them crazy! Dedication and hard work can only take you so far, especially if you're always exhausted and have lost any sense of excitement or joy in your daily work.

To get out of bureaucratic thinking or life on the treadmill, you have to

Margie Carter is the co-author of *The Visionary Director*, and six other books with Deb Curtis. Visit www.ecetrainers.com to learn more about the "From Administrator to Innovator" Institutes that she and her associates at Harvest Resources offer across the United States and Canada.

explore new ideas, new possibilities for yourself and your workplace regularly. While this can be done as an individual, it's far more rewarding to create a work culture that encourages creative thinking and the generation of new ideas. I'm always fascinated by directors who've created a work environment where staff members feel like they are always learning something new, deepening their understanding, and growing as professionals. Here are some elements of vibrant early childhood organizational cultures.

Make Agreements about How to be Together

Our New Zealand colleague, Ann Hatherly (2000) reminds us:

"Culture in the organizational sense is the unique combination of values, assumptions, and beliefs that builds over time when people work together. It is a set of informal expectations which shapes the way people think, feel, and act."

An important first step in creating a work culture that generates creative ideas is to establish some agreements about how you will be together. Trusting relationships have to be built, along with a desire to contribute ideas and grow as a professional. Debbie Lebo and her colleagues (2011) outline some initial conversations you can launch to help a group become a learning community:

■ Describe a group learning experience that inspired or invigorated you.
■ Describe a time when you helped a group overcome a barrier.
■ Describe some things that help you learn in a group.

Lebo goes on to say,

"Setting agreements for group processes is another key element in establishing trust and productive reflection between members. Agreements help establish expectations for group participation and remind members to consider others' learning needs. They help curb unproductive behaviors and serve as a 'grounding' place if discussions get

heated. Your agreements set the tone for your group's collaborative culture."

There are many ways to go about setting agreements. Members can simply list behaviors that support or challenge group learning and work together to draw agreements from those lists. Alternatively, members can write suggestions for agreements on index cards and compile those on a master list. However you develop your agreements, keep the list short, focused on essentials, and stated as commitments to act or behave in certain ways rather than as more general beliefs. For instance, rather than saying "We will show each other respect," describe what respect might look like: "We will show each other respect by listening thoughtfully and not interrupting."

These agreements aren't rules that are set in stone permanently. They can — and should — be revisited over time. Are your agreements serving you well? Are members upholding them? Are any changes needed? Used in this way, your group's agreements become a way of 'remembering' your shared vision and commitment to your community of practice.

With a set of agreements about how you will be together, work conversations will likely become more honest, productive, and creative. People will be willing to risk suggesting unusual ideas. They will likely listen more carefully to each other and find connections between ideas.

Ask "Why not?"

Jim Greenman was famous for not only asking "Why," but always asking "Why not?" He encouraged people to think of 'crazy' ideas that might have merit, even if they are outside conventional wisdom. Because of limited resources and sometimes tunnel vision, many early childhood administrators squelch new ideas their staff comes up with. During indi-

vidual conversations or group meetings, notice how you respond to ideas people offer. Try directing the conversation to explore, "How might we try this?" not just "Why wouldn't we try this?" Genuinely explore the issues these questions raise. Be open to seeing things in new ways.

Seek Different Perspectives

While conversations may go more smoothly when everyone is on the same page, be aware that similar thinking can lead to blind spots. In describing her role with the schools of Reggio Emilia, Tiziana Filippini says, "The Pedagogista works to promote within each person and between teachers, an attitude of 'learning to learn,' an openness to change, and a willingness to discuss opposing points of view."

When you lead conversations with your staff, make it a practice of seeking different perspectives, even if they aren't in the room:

■ How would Daniel's mom respond to this idea?

■ How might the landlord view it?

■ How would the perspective of an environmentalist, accountant, or neuroscientist add to your thinking?

Wildly different perspectives might open up a new way of seeing ideas you are considering. Explore different viewpoints to expand your minds, not to stall you out. Consider the validity of each point of view and try to find the 'third space' where you can draw on each perspective to recreate an understanding and new set of possibilities.

I've watched early childhood programs adopt new approaches to revamping their food program with children, to closing early once a month for professional development, and to creating more natural elements on their playgrounds. Each of these started with excitement about an idea, moved into considering opposing viewpoints, and uncovered a way forward that was enriched by negotiating different understandings.

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

Creating agreements about how you want to be together unleashes a willingness to take risks and generate innovative ideas.

Expand Ideas about Quality

If you are to get off the treadmill and truly generate ideas that propel quality forward, you have to find some reference points beyond the usual. Here's an illustration.

To inspire his teachers to create improved learning environments for their children from low-income households, director Michael Koetje didn't turn to the standard ECE resources on environments. Instead, he took his staff to a high-end grocery store with a beautiful display of produce. The conversation they held afterward drew upon everyone's immediate attraction to the aesthetics, their desire to explore with their senses, and their eagerness to learn about fruits and vegetables they had never seen before. From this they generated a long list of new ideas for how to create more attractive, engaging environments that go beyond improving scores on a rating scale.

Sometimes going outside the field for inspiration can generate more ideas than turning to tried-and-true early childhood resources.

On the other hand, we can draw inspiration from right under our noses by noticing the fresh approaches young children often bring to new challenges. If children don't know something, they lead with their imaginations. They don't hesitate to begin with what first occurs to them; often this is something that we adults would never have thought of.

In the business literature about innovation, a recurring theme emerges: Find something to challenge and question it deeply. I think early childhood administrators would do well to provoke conversations that challenge our assumptions and concepts about quality. Doing this will help us uncover our ideas about the kind of environments, experiences, and relationships we believe

children, families, and staff in our programs deserve.

■ Should children be moved up to a new room just because they have a birthday?

■ Does disaster preparedness really mean we require children to nap with their shoes on?

■ Should we cut down all the trees on our play yard because we heard that one blew down in a storm across town?

■ Will teachers become more professional simply by continuing to demand more of them without improved compensation or time and opportunities for reflection?

I think if we more regularly generated innovative thinking in our early childhood conversations, we could create a cultural shift — what Malcolm Gladwell (2000) calls a 'tipping point,' with expanded ideas and practices that children have a right to. You can turn to the Internet for a variety of resources and strategies on creating innovation. Try visiting www.creating

"... walking in our garden one night in Seattle, in the dark mist, I suddenly felt a presence. Then it hit me. Birds were sleeping in the hedges and trees, unseen. It occurred to me that they live all around us, yet not really with us — almost in a parallel universe — unless you look."

Richard Louv, *The Nature Principle* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2011)

minds.org to find principles, tools, and articles for generating new ideas. And perhaps we, as a profession, should seriously study Everett Rogers' (2003) 'diffusion theory,' which outlines the

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conditions that cause an innovation to spread like an epidemic, thus becoming the new norm. Rogers' work suggests that once a new idea is accepted by a group of 'innovators' and 'early adopters' (which together typically represent only 5-17% of the population), it becomes self-sustaining. With the tools of social media and the Internet, we could easily generate an early childhood movement of that size and change how our work is viewed and practiced. But first we have to have the conversations that generate those innovative ideas!

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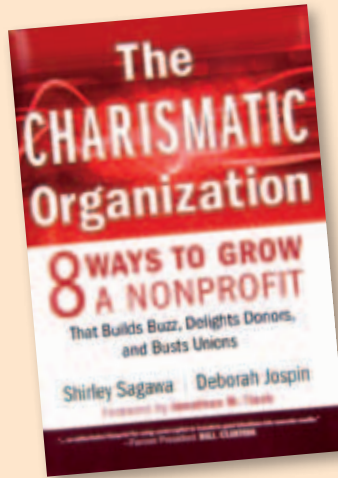
"Charismatic organizations attract people by achieving powerful results and building a community that others want to join. In other words, they build strong social capital. Social capital refers to a network of relationships that yield benefits to those who are part of the network. These benefits flow from the trust, norms of reciprocity, information flow, and cooperation embedded in these relationships. While high levels of social capital pay dividends to society as a whole, the organizations that build these networks experience more direct benefits. For a nonprofit organization, that means a committed community of staff, donors, volunteers, and friends who can provide access to other social networks."

Shirley Sagawa and Deborah Jospin, *The Charismatic Organization* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009)

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR

LEFT: From visiting a grocery store, teachers generated a long list of new ideas for how to create more attractive, engaging environments that go beyond improving scores on a rating scale.

RIGHT: Use props to practice generating new ideas. What can you do with a paper cup besides fill it with something to drink?