

# Growing a Vision: Growing Your Staff

by Margie Carter



Last week I walked into a child care center office and found a co-worker standing behind a seated director gently rubbing her shoulders and offering reminders to breath deeply as the director faced the computer. This comforting scene was quickly followed by an incessant ringing of the telephone, a teacher yelling for help with a child who had just vomited, and a parent in tears with the news of being “downsized.” I went off in search of a mop.

It’s no secret that child care directors wear far more hats than your average saint. No wonder that heavy weight frequently translates to a chronic stiff neck and tight shoulders. The program referred to here is regarded as one of the best in our city. They are accredited and have a highly capable director and staff and more financial stability than most small centers. Still they experience the ebb and flow of crises that plague most child care programs.

Somehow they manage to not only hold on during this roller coaster ride, but to enhance the quality of their program as they come over each hill. I want to pinpoint what accounts for this tenacity because what Hilltop Children’s Center and others like them have achieved is worth spreading the news.

## Working with a Vision

Programs that stand out are not only focused on checklists of quality indicators and best practices, but have their eye on the prize — a clear vision of where they want to be.

When I teach child care management classes, we begin by clarifying the difference between a manager and a leader. A manager is focused on the people, problems, and tasks at hand. A leader tends to these things, but brings them into focus through vision building. Susan Gross, in her article “The Power of Purpose” (*Child Care Information Exchange*, July 1987), describes it this way:

*“What we mean by purpose is the end or result at which an entire organization is aimed. Purpose is the organization’s driving force and reason for being. It is always translatable into vision — that is, an image shared by the organization of what the world or society or an environment or community would look like if that purpose were realized.”*

Gross is describing something different than uniting a center around the self-study for accreditation, as important and rewarding as that might be. She is suggesting using our imaginations, not our checklists, defining dreams that linger with us

as we move through our days of stress, chores, and “to do” lists. It has to do with how we cultivate our hearts, approach interactions and decisions. Gross goes on:

*“The most potent ingredient in organizational effectiveness is a clear sense of purpose shared by every member of the organization. Organizational problems, including nasty interpersonal conflicts and wrenching internal schism, can literally begin to dissolve when people in an organization rediscover the depth of their common vision.”*

Visions can’t be handed down like a mission statement or a memo. The ground has to be prepared, seeds have to be planted, and tender shoots have to be protected from destructive pests and early frosts. Here are some strategies toward that end.

## **STRATEGY:** Ask “why are we here?”

Over time people can lose sight of their real passion for this work, or overlook the idea of even working with a passion. During a meeting of community college field instructors, Jeannie Turner asked us to begin by briefly sharing why we first wanted to be a teacher.

I wondered if our answers would seem like old hat. To the contrary, the question sparked an outpouring of longing for continued play, spontaneity, and acceptance; desires to heal from negative experiences; hopes and dreams for changing the world by treating children differently. The energy in the room was electrifying and deeply satisfying.

Hilltop Children's Center asks this question of its staff in a number of ways throughout the year. Each time around the answers get deeper and more fully developed. "Why are we here?" is not a rhetorical question for these teachers. It is a simple but effective inquiry to explore and grow a collective vision over time.

### **STRATEGY:** **Interview parents**

Each family enrolling a child in our center has hopes and dreams for their children. This is easily overlooked as we negotiate schedules, fees, and lost socks. Find ways to coax it out of families. Put something in your application form that asks about their hopes for their child as they form relationships with caregivers. During intake interviews or orientation visits, respectfully raise questions that get to values and longings they have for their children.

At Hilltop there is a bulletin board that features different families every month. Interviews and photographs tell a story of what this family wants others at the center to know about them. During the winter holidays at Kidspace Child Care Center, the parents are given mat boards to create a visual story of how they celebrate the season. Each of these strategies involve families and staff in expanding the way we think about ourselves and the possibilities for our lives.

### **STRATEGY:** **Encourage keepers of the vision**

When programs are steadily building a vision, it seems worthwhile to listen to all the staff voices and find in each special elements of the vision you want to craft together. Rather than discouraging what sound like far-fetched ideas, flush them out for possible pieces that could be worked on. Encourage each staff person to be as passionate as he or she can in promoting and keeping that vision alive.

For years Hilltop teachers have bemoaned their lack of outdoor space and the limitations of their rooms located in a church building. During a vision building discussion this year, they offered the idea of tearing down walls or moving to a new building. Their director could have just rolled her eyes and told them to get real. Instead, she listened and nodded and encouraged them to keep generating ideas for how they'd like things to be.

Teacher passion to overcome the factors inhibiting their vision led them to knocking down some of the emotional walls they had constructed. Within a month, they moved to a new level of trust, respect, and collaborative teaching. Their physical space was reconfigured to create an art and discovery studio. They transformed their classrooms with a number of large plants, driftwood, rocks, art work, flowing fabric, and new lighting, creating a rich sensory environment that invites curiosity and discovery for both adults and children.

### **STRATEGY:** **Create maps, symbols, and representations**

Some people build a vision with words, while others work with

images, symbols, and concrete materials. Make sure you provide opportunities for your staff to express themselves in ways not dependent upon verbal expression.

A new addition to Hilltop this year are beautiful autobiographical display boards staff members made for their entry way. They were given a piece of mat board with their name and a photo of themselves and asked to create a representation of what they would like others in the Hilltop community to know about them. The results were stunning, both in content and aesthetic quality.

### **STRATEGY:** **Develop a vision statement together**

At a staff retreat this past year, Hilltop director Leslie Howle asked people to help her rewrite their mission statement. It became clear that what they really wanted was a public declaration of the vision they were building. People began tossing out some word associations and phrases that represented what they longed for Hilltop to be. From there we built sentences and a few short paragraphs.

Here's the statement that now guides their work and graces the comings and goings of each day.

#### **Hilltop Children's Center** *A Learning Community for Children and Adults*

*Where children are valued for their ability to do meaningful work, their wonder and curiosity, their perspectives, and ability to play —*

*Where families are valued for their bonds and traditions, their ability to play, their commitment to work, home, and community, and their dreams for*

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*their children —*

*Where staff are valued for their vision,  
their delight in children, their skill,  
heart, and knowledge, a commitment to  
families, and an ability to play —*

*We cherish what we learn from each  
other.*

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