

# Learning the Ropes

by Paula Jorde Bloom

**A** few months ago as part of a study I am conducting on directors' role perceptions, I interviewed a young woman named Deborah who had recently been hired as the director of a large child care center. Her center is part of an established social service agency. In her new role, Deborah functions as a "middle manager" — she supervises a staff of 30 and reports to the agency's director of educational programs.

When I asked Deborah how she would characterize her first six months on the job, she replied, "This has been a slow process of learning what ropes to pull and what ropes to jump." Her remark got me thinking about how directors are socialized into their jobs, particularly when they are caught in the middle, being tugged by demands from above as well as below.

Job socialization describes how individuals adapt to their roles — how they act on their beliefs and values and adapt to the beliefs and values

of others. As directors mature in professional competence, the kinds of social strategies they use to conform to different organizational and institutional demands goes through a subtle transformation. I believe four stages describe the thought patterns and belief systems of directors who work in an organizational context where they are middle managers reporting to a corporate office, a board of directors, or an agency executive director.

**Blind compliance** is when a director will comply with an authority

figure's definition of a situation and believe this conformity to be for the best. Individuals at this stage are willing to develop into the kind of person the situation demands. Listen to Connie as she reflects on her career. She states:

*When I first began as director, the agency CEO installed a punch clock for employees. He said it was necessary to keep people honest. He also suggested I prohibit teachers from using the office telephone and instead make them use the pay phone in the building next door if they wanted to make an outgoing call. I never questioned the wisdom of his suggestions. I just assumed his management philosophy was correct; after all, he was so much older and more experienced than I was. Now I look back and laugh. I was such an amoeba then — so obedient and compliant.*



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**Uncomfortable compliance** is when the director will comply with the constraints posed by a situation but retain private reservations about doing so. Individuals at this stage do not act in ways consistent with their underlying beliefs; their outward conformity is an adaptive response without the corresponding personal value commitment.

Many of the ethical dilemmas directors face reflect this kind of response. For example, some directors will comply with the demands of a board or owner to cut corners on quality. They will over-enroll classes, deny staff their entitled breaks, and even limit purchases of basic supplies essential for program functioning. They comply because they are intimidated by their superiors or fearful of the consequences of insubordination. They know their actions don't match their beliefs, but they comply nevertheless. As one director expressed in an interview:

*I find myself purchasing more and more workbooks for the prekindergarten group because the parents want some tangible proof that their children are "learning" something at school. I don't really feel this is the best way for children to learn, but I want to keep the parents happy.*

**Working the system** is when a director will make changes or maneuver around organizational constraints without the formal power to do so. Individuals in this responsive mode know how to cut through red tape and make things happen without being cast as a rebel. Letitia's story reflects this strategy:

*My agency had this ridiculous rule that no one could be in the building unless the custodian was also on the premises. In fact, the custodian had the only key to the building. The rule was implemented primarily as a security measure.*

*I know the intent was good, but it really conflicted with my work style. I like to do my paperwork after the center closes and occasionally I like to come in on weekends to redo the bulletin boards. I quickly learned how to get around the system. Once a week I bought pizza for the custodian. I also rented videos for him. Since he was a widower and had no one to go home to, the arrangement worked great. I got my work done; he got a free dinner and entertainment.*

**Redefining the system** is when a director is able to educate or influence a supervisor, board, or agency executive director into adopting new ways of thinking about organizational issues and perceived constraints. These individuals are adept at advocating for needed changes to make their programs more efficient and effective.

Kathy, the director of a large United Way program, is one such director. Over the past few years as her program has grown, so too have the demands on her time. A year ago, Kathy realized that if she was to maintain the high quality of her program, she needed to hire an assistant director. Her agency's board, faced with other fiscal challenges, did not want to create a new position.

In a non-adversarial way, Kathy was able to work with her board to come up with a creative win/win strategy to achieve her goal of increased staffing. She wrote a proposal and received a grant from a local corporation to buy educational materials. This freed up funds in the instructional supplies line item of her budget that she shifted to the personnel line item of her budget. She then persuaded her board to modify agency policy so she could rent out a large gym space to different community groups on the weekend. Together, the income generated from these two strategies

was sufficient for her board to fund the creation of a new assistant director position.

## Share Your Story

It is clear from the directors I have interviewed that being a middle manager presents many challenges. Directors in the middle need to carve out their own identity, yet must remain accountable to those to whom they report. Role ambiguity fueled by divided loyalties creates its own special type of job stress. Deborah described her job socialization as learning which ropes to jump and which to pull. Perhaps, like a circus performer, being a middle manager is also like performing a balancing act on a high rope connecting two worlds with differing demands and expectations.

If you function as a middle manager in your early childhood organization and if any of the job socialization stages described in this article resonate with your own experience, I'd love to hear from you. Join a discussion group in the *Time Out* section of the Center for Early Childhood Leadership's website ([www.nl.edu/cecl](http://www.nl.edu/cecl)).