

## *Strategies for Achieving Center Goals When You're Not the Highest Authority*

# Managing From the Middle

by Rita Collen

If you have ever lead the implementation of a new system or a fresh direction for your child care center, it may have seemed like a difficult — if not impossible — task. Now, imagine trying to lead the charge from the middle of the pack as a director who, although completely responsible and accountable for the quality and success of the center, may not be fully empowered to make every decision required to initiate this change. Add a layer or two of top management or perhaps even a board of directors and the process becomes even more complicated.

While the typical job description of a director may vary from center to center, the primary responsibilities will likely be similar. However, one group of directors faces a unique set of job factors. Directors who manage child care centers that are part of a larger organization such as a parent or umbrella organization, social service agency, or corporate-sponsored entity and those who report to a board of directors have a job within their job. In addition to handling the day to day operations of

the center, they must also relate these activities to the big picture goals of the parent agency.

Operating a quality center presents a broad spectrum of challenges, regardless of the program's organizational flow chart. Managing from the middle creates an additional set of considerations. For example, the child care program may find it needs to compete with other equally important programs for funding within the larger agency.

Perhaps the director, while accountable for the center's finances and operations, may not be authorized to make some global decisions, such as the salary administration plan or final sign-off on the annual budget. Or staff, recognizing that the director reports to at least one person of higher authority, may choose to go over their supervisor's head to air concerns or even attempt to reverse an unpopular decision.

These directors perform a balancing act that weighs the needs and desires of the child care program against the goals and objectives of the larger organization. When both sides are weighted fairly equally, the task is accomplished more easily. However, when the two sides are clearly off balance, it is usually the center that must compromise. This need not be the case. Centers can, and frequently do, thrive as a part of the

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whole. The broad base of support and the collective expertise that a large organization brings to the table can be used to create even stronger and more effective programs. The following strategies can help directors make the most of their status in the middle and leverage high level advocacy.

### **Think at Multiple Levels**

Let's start with the basics. That old cliché "If you want to catch a fish, you have to think like a fish" is not too far from fact if you want to achieve positive results from a middle position. When things are not going well, it is tempting to say, "Well they just don't understand what it is like here at my center." The truth is, they probably don't know your operation like you do. Accept this fact and understand that they probably shouldn't. One way to earn the respect of the top-level decision-makers is to remember that they do not always completely understand every detail involved in every product they oversee. That's why they hired a qualified director.

Before proposing your next idea, put yourself in the position of the person you will pitch it to. Look at the center from their point of view, then work from that point. Acknowledge that you probably don't know everything about their jobs either, but also understand that it is your responsibility to learn what is important to your company's leaders. Predict the questions top leadership will ask and be prepared to answer them. Anticipate and be prepared to address possible objections — in a non-defensive manner. Remember, this is an "educate to advocate" approach. Plan to stay objective at all times.

At the same time, take a step back to the days before you became the director. Your priorities and concerns were probably a little different then. Do not

underestimate the value of communication with your staff. Whenever possible, keep them informed of your current priorities, while reminding them that you are still looking after theirs. Remember how the top people in your company just don't understand? Be sure to convey an appropriate level of understanding to your employees. The staff buy-in you build at the beginning will prove to be a valuable resource when your proposed ideas become reality.

### **Examine the Culture of the Organization**

The key to advocating for any initiative within a larger setting is to examine its culture. It may be helpful to think about your organization as a corporate village with a rich history, traditions, established ways of doing business, and a built-in hierarchy (Bellmann, 1993).

Begin by asking yourself a series of questions about where you work. How are major directional decisions made? Are they from the top down, or does leadership seek the input of other departments and their directors? How often do suggestions from the field become corporate policies? The answers to these questions will provide good insight toward the process that will best lead to achieving the goals of your center.

Next, take a moment to look at how the center is perceived within the organization. Start by recording your thoughts about how you, the director, view your center on its own and also as a part of the agency. Follow this step by asking peers to share their honest perceptions. This is also a good time to talk with some of the teachers at the center. They will not only provide perspective from the field, but also help you to identify the areas where your vision connects, or does not connect, with the people you

lead. Again, the answers you receive will guide the steps you will take in formulating an advocacy position.

### **Align Yourself With Strategic Goals and Objectives**

Just as a prospective applicant researches the company prior to attending a job interview, the director can also reap great benefit from doing a little homework. Even if you have been with the same employer for years, putting some time into research may help you clarify your ideas before you take them to the top.

Most larger agencies or corporate bodies have a mission statement. The mission statement is generally a brief declaration of the products or services it provides, the clientele to be served, and the guiding principles for how these services are delivered. Chances are that if the agency chooses to sponsor a child care program, it somehow fits into the organization's mission. In some settings, however, this correlation may not be readily obvious. If this is your situation, begin building a compelling case to use when communicating how the center helps the sponsor achieve its overall goals.

Those who work in the child care field are well aware of the benefits of setting goals. Directors may have long term goals such as a targeted enrollment rate or attaining accreditation, along with short term goals that relate more to ongoing tasks. You may have set both for your center. If you are not already familiar with the short and long term strategic goals or objectives for your agency, spend some time with your supervisor or a trusted colleague to get in touch with what is truly driving your company. Chances are, these are the areas where your supervisor — and all of the other key leaders — are focusing

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their energies. Being aware of that focus and structuring your proposals in a way that helps meet those goals will not only help to buy support, but can also boost the level of respect your program receives as a team player.

Goals and objectives must be measurable in order to assess whether or not they have been achieved. The success of any organization must also be measured against a particular standard. How does your center gauge its success? Does this method match that of your parent agency? For example, the agency may use its financial statement or perhaps a total count of clients served as a tool to appraise its effectiveness. If the center uses a different measure, for example parent satisfaction, it may be difficult to draw a parallel. Consider adjusting your evaluation scale to match. Think about how the things that you really want to accomplish for your center will fit into the overall success of your company. Prepare yourself to communicate your goals in those terms. This will help you and the key stakeholders begin to look at things from a similar perspective.

### **Create a Positive Platform for Negotiation**

John Maxwell defines leadership as influence. We may never be fully aware of who or how much we influence (Maxwell, 1993). This is particularly true for those who lead from the middle. While a number of factors are beyond the director's control, one's attitude is a solely personal responsibility. Attitude is a choice.

An enthusiastic outlook can be a powerful tool in creating a positive platform for your ideas. Think about a time when you achieved something that you really wanted through negotiating. In a successful negotiation, both parties

usually start out knowing what they want, but also what they can and cannot live with. When pitching your ideas, know your bottom line, no compromise limits, but be prepared to be flexible as you work with your supervisor to find middle ground you can both accept. Do not view the need to compromise as failure.

Be patient with the process. It often takes time to reach decisions in large organizations. Suggest alternative approaches, keeping in mind that achieving a portion of your objective is often better than nothing at all. Your positive attitude, obvious preparation, and willingness to compromise may lead to more later. As you work through the process, it is helpful to define obstacles as either changeable or unchangeable. Focus on the changeable and choose your battles accordingly.

While managing from the middle offers many challenges for the director, consider the opportunities that accompany them. For every struggle to forge a new initiative, a potential advocate is created at a higher level. For each corporate speed bump, peers from other departments may be available to suggest alternative routes. Train yourself to use these resources to your program's advantage. Don't allow yourself to become discouraged. Sometimes it is the journey that is most important. Embrace the status you hold within your organization, then celebrate each victory, large or small.

### **References**

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