Reprinted with permission — Child Care Information Exchange
PO Box 3249, Redmond, WA 98073 • (800) 221-2864 • www.ChildCareExchange.com

Ideas for Training Staff

Indicators of Effective Teamwork

by Margie Carter

In the past few months I've received a number of calls from directors and teachers asking for help with team building on their staff. The problems they describe vary from site to site: a Head Start teacher with a decade and a half of experience finds she can't work with her new assistant; a director of a child care program is concerned that some staff are highly involved in decision-making, while others under participate and don't lend their voice or time; another director worries about constant bickering among her teachers over what seem like petty issues; a Reggio-inspired program is struggling to understand what the Italians really mean by this concept of collaboration among teachers, children, and families.

The language of teamwork and collaboration is taken for granted in our professional discourse, but walking the talk is quite another thing. These accomplishments require time to build relationships, an ability to take multiple perspectives, and a willingness to hang in there when tensions escalate. The typical child care setting has difficulty providing time for meaningful adult interactions away from the children. Directors and other program supervisors have many demands on their attention and find it difficult to be proactive in building a cohesive team. Many lack the experience to know how to specifically nurture the dispositions and mentor the skills of being a collaborator and team player.

Beyond the nice gestures of birthday acknowledgments and creating a secret pals activity, directors often overlook the importance of team building work until faced with a significant problem. Then the task becomes remediation, akin to weeding a garden that has gotten out of control, rather than a thoughtful plan of fertilizing and cultivating harmonious growth.

Working with programs to build strong teams and the ability to collaborate, I focus on recognizing key indicators that can be found in a program. Getting each person to identify what they look for in each of these areas begins an important dialogue where mutual understanding and accountability can be shaped.

Clear Communications

It goes without saying that people have different communication styles and skills, but these often go unacknowledged and become the source of growing tension on a staff. Part of our new staff orientation and ongoing development work needs to include guidelines for effective communications and clarity on the communication systems and policies of the program.

STRATEGY:
Develop, distribute, and role play communication guidelines

Take time in a staff meeting or retreat to brainstorm and develop written guidelines on what people want from each other in the way of good communications. Make sure each person states her or his view and that concepts such as listening, talking, writing, and body language are discussed. Choose the ideas that everyone agrees on to begin your list and then negotiate what to write for areas where there are different views. Remember to include something about how you want communication channels or protocol to work in your program.

To be sure everyone understands and agrees, develop some short role plays for people to practice using the guidelines. As you debrief the role play, review your written guidelines to see if they need more clarity. If your role plays reveal that staff need more communication skills, build that into your staff development plans.

Distribute, post, and periodically revisit your communication guidelines and make sure they become part of your

new staff orientation packet and are referenced in your annual staff evaluation process.

Respectful Interactions and Demonstrations of Trust

Respect and trust are words easily thrown about in conversations, but what do they look like in the day-to-day life of a child care program? Taking the time to identify the attitudinal and behavioral aspects of respect and trust is a wise investment of your precious staff meeting time.

STRATEGY:
Identify the elements of respect and trust

Using a process similar to the one described above, devote some of your staff development hours to getting everyone's views on what respect and trust specifically look like in given situations. To launch the discussion, ask people to first read and finish the following sentences with their own ideas:

A person who shows me respect is thoughtful about. . . .

A person I give respect to knows how to. . . .

I feel trusted by someone when she or he. . . .

I will trust someone after she or he. . . .

From the ideas generated, make a list of specific behaviors that generate trust and respect. Then present several short scenarios of typical encounters in a program where trust and respect can become an issue (i.e., arriving late to work, sharing personal information, giving a criticism, asking for help, ortaking a different approach than your co-workers).

Divide into two groups with one developing a list of things that a staff member could do that would erode the possibility of trust or respect in this situation, while the other group identifies actions that could build trust. As a whole group, compare your lists to give staff a mirror on how their own ideas might play themselves out in real situations. Review your beginning list one more time for any additions or changes before it gets written and posted as a reference point for future interactions.

Using Conflicts to Discover and Negotiate Different Perspectives

Whenever a group of people come together, especially with the conscious intent of influencing a group of children, the personal and professional growth available to them is enormous. This benefit of the work is worth stressing again and again, especially as you enter areas of conflict. Having some initial practice in consciously naming and working with different viewpoints establishes a foundation before the going gets rough.

In many early childhood programs, there are policies and practices that are taken for granted with little discussion or questioning. Someone in the past may have set these up according to a personal preference, or the policies may have been adopted from professional definitions of best practices. In any case, it is useful to periodically explore the assumptions underlying certain practices so that everyone is clear about why the program has specific policies. A chance to discuss these issues also provides an opportunity to identify and negotiate any conflicts of values among staff, and possibly between a teacher and parent.

STRATEGY:
Explore different values

Teachers and caregivers benefit from the opportunity to examine and name the influences on their own values and preferred practices. A simple way to do this in a staff meeting is to write on separate pieces of paper possible opposing viewpoints on policies and then post them around the room Ask everyone to find one viewpoint they wish to discuss, go to that paper, and talk with others there. They don't have to agree with the viewpoint, but they should at least have strong sentiments that they would like to discuss. Things you write on these papers could include:

- Children should primarily be allowed to make choices and negotiate with adults.
- Children should primarily be offered limited choices and non-negotiable guidelines from adults.
- Children should call adults by their first names.
- Children should address adults by Mr. or Ms. or Teacher with her or his name.
- Children should be separated from the group or put in time-out when they don't follow the rules.
- Children should be redirected and involved in other activities when they don't follow the rules.
- Children should be required to try at least one bite of all the food served.
- Children should be allowed to follow their own food preferences when eating.
- Children should be allowed to get messy and dirty when they play in our program.
- Children should be guided to keep their hair and clothes clean when they play in our program.

Some of these statements reflect or contradict prevailing views in our profes-

sional literature. This is a good place to acknowledge that our standards have been primarily shaped through a white middle-class lens. We need to open the dialogue and negotiate conflicting beliefs.

In the debriefing discussion ask whether people found similarities or differences with others in their group. Were they there because they agreed or disagreed with the viewpoint? When teachers are asked to carry out practices different from their own belief systems, the situation is ripe for resentment and subversion. On the other hand, when you create a climate to discover and negotiate different perspectives, you can often avoid the good guy/bad guy mentality and develop acceptable compromises.

STRATEGY:
Play with different communication styles

Sometimes people make judgments about each other based on differences in communication styles. This could be a personal or cultural issue, but in either circumstance, it's useful to understand what's happening. Here's a playful way to explore how we send and receive information and feelings.

Ask your staff to consider possible labels for acceptable communication styles and then choose four or five to work with. The term "acceptable" is a subjective one. Our intent here is to avoid negative labels such as caustic, attacking, manipulative, or defensive, and identify a variety of other styles that have a useful place in communicating. For instance, friendly, humorous, creative, decisive, analytical direct or indirect could be selected as styles for exploration.

Spend a minute defining what is meant by each of these styles. Then divide the large group into as many small groups as there are styles, and assign one style to each small group. Ask each group to generate a list of common phrases that you might hear someone from that style use. For example, the lists might look something like this:

Friendly Style:
- You have great ideas.
- I like what you said.
- They might not like that.

Creative Style:
- Anything is possible.
- Let's keep brainstorming.
- What if we flipped that around?

Decisive Style:
- Let's not waste time.
- We have to decide one way or another.
- I want to know what we're going to do.

Analytical Style:
- I think we should do a survey.
- The facts speak for themselves.
- We need more evidence.

Once you've given each group the time to come up with a list of three or four phrases, ask for a volunteer from each group and conduct a communications role-play. Choose a topic that isn't emotionally loaded for the volunteers to discuss. An example might be what color the center should paint its walls, what kinds of plants to get for the lounge, or what software should be purchased for your computers. As you facilitate the brief discussion, ask each volunteer to try to use as many of the phrases on their list as possible in the situation. Along with being able to laugh and get a new perspective on how style might look in a group setting, you can debrief this activity to explore the strengths and weaknesses of each style and the barriers that can occur when we judge a person's contribution by their communication style. Staff members might enjoy identifying their own style and exploring how it can potentially conflict with another.

Building on Each Other's Ideas and Strengths

As with children, adults need coaching on how to participate in collaborative thinking and work projects. It doesn't come automatically. Activities such as the above can help identify the strengths that each person's style brings to the process. These should be named and celebrated. From there you can practice finding ways to get everyone's perspective, experience and skills acknowledged and involved.

STRATEGY:
Pass the paper to build on ideas

Whatever the topic, you can divide your staff into small groups so that there is more time for everyone to offer their ideas during your staff meetings. Give each group an identical piece of chart paper, divided into three columns. If the topic is an anti-bias issue, a child guidance issue, health and safety, or a parent concern, label the three columns, Issues Identified, Immediate Response, and Further Plans.

Give each group a scenario related to the topic to discuss and write out their responses to the first column. After some time, have them pass their papers and scenario to the next group and, after reading what the previous group wrote in the first column, begin working on the second. Pass the paper and repeat this process for the third column. Then give each group their original paper to get the benefit of all the other groups' thinking and consider additional perspectives.

Reliability and Responsibility

You can be a thoughtful, sensitive person with terrific ideas, but if you don't show up on time for work, forget to fill out your paper work, or neglect to make that critical call to a parent, you can hardly be called a team player. Reliability and responsibility are the ultimate behaviors that indicate whether clear communications, respect, trust, negotiating different perspectives and building on each other's strengths are alive and well and reflecting effective team work in your program.

Margie Carter is on the adjunct faculty for Pacific Oaks College NW and Seattle Central Community College. She travels widely to speak and consult with early childhood programs. Her newest book with Deb Curtis, *The Art of Awareness: How Observation Can Transform Your Teaching*, is published by Redleaf Press.