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Letters to a Child Care Director

by James Levine

What follows is a series of letters that James Levine wrote to John DeLorey, the new director, in response to requests for guidance in strategic areas of administrative work related to a day care program. Mr. Levine's experiences written in and between the lines of his letters provide lively and thought-provoking reading for anyone embarking on, or involved in, the hazardous enterprise of running an early-childhood program.

April 18

Qualifications of a Director

You keep asking how you were ever given the fortune — or misfortune — of being the personnel committee's number one choice for executive director. I tell you that they had a pretty good idea of what the job required because they had previously hired an executive director — me. Certain abilities that I demonstrated they probably felt were important; others marginal; others undesirable.

In your case, the personnel committee had some pretty good guidelines as to what it wanted in experience, training, and certification. The rest had a lot to do with personality, and with a sense of how quickly you would be able to learn. Because the program is community-controlled, and because residents want to maintain influence on decision-making, either by the formal workings of the board of directors or by informal personal suggestions, they shied away from candidates with too much experience, which is a euphemism for candidates who might have too much ego staked in their already established careers and professional reputations to be able to respond "flexibly" to the programmatic preferences of the community.

Editor's note: This article is adapted from a piece which first appeared in Day Care and Early Education, January 1974. The advice and ideas presented engaged the heart and mind of Roger Neugebauer and led to the creation of Child Care Information Exchange magazine.

You say that it's extremely easy to be flexible when you don't know anything to begin with. And anyway, what sort of job qualification is "flexibility"? What about job training, on-the-job experience, a master's degree?

Head teachers or social workers are often moved "up" to the director's position, but in few instances have their line experiences prepared them for the role of the executive director. Consider that in a center of 60 children, where it is unlikely for the director to have an assistant, it is his responsibility to: secure operating funds from the government; pursue development funds from local foundations and businesses; negotiate bank loans when the welfare department is, inevitably, late in paying for services; maintain good relationships with at least half a dozen public (and disorganized) fiscal and regulatory agencies whose rules contradict one another; recruit, hire, train, develop, and evaluate staff; develop curriculum;

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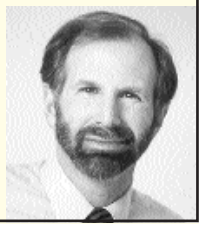
In 1995, he served as a consultant to Vice President Gore in drafting the new federal initiative on fatherhood. In May 1997, *Working Mother* magazine recognized him as one of the top 25 men in America who make a difference in the lives of working mothers — what Jim calls the "Y chromosome award."



coordinate the provision of health and social services; fill in, as a regular substitute, in the classroom; drive children to the hospital; and, on many a winter morning when the roads are too icy for other staff to travel, cook!

You ask how this is all possible for one person. I should have added stamina and the ability to delegate to the list of key ingredients. The day is never long enough to accomplish one's ends. Even when the nights aren't filled with meetings, the day care center will not leave your thoughts, for the center is a living, growing organism that demands the breath of life from every bit of your imagination, effort, and time.

You say that you are a perfectionist, that you like to oversee the details of your projects. Unless you learn to delegate authority to your staff members, you will be overwhelmed by the job, worn down more by the persistence of minor problems than by the necessary time commitment. Often you will be torn between the burden of taking on a task and the uncertainty involved in delegating it to a relatively untrained staff member. You will have to take risks and will, inevitably, make mistakes in judgment. But the greatest mistake would be to insist on doing everything yourself, or on having it done exactly your way.

There is little room for rigid perfectionism, except in adherence to certain basic standards of care and in respect for the individual dignity of every child and family. And, if you assume too much responsibility, you will never move towards that perfectly unique accomplishment that child care can be: a setting not just for the growth and development of young children, but for a multiplicity of interactions among people of varied age and background, interactions that, because they have as their overriding concern the growth of the child, tend to foster the personal development of all involved.

May 29

The Budget

When I spoke to you at 10 pm, you were still at the center preparing the budget. "All I see, hear, or think is budgets; I could work on this one for ten more hours tonight; I could work nonstop until Saturday, and I still wouldn't have everything done the way I want to," you said.

Budgets! The first time through, they bring out all of one's paranoia. They force you to put into narrative the description and justification for your services, and into figures the costs of all the benefits that you are providing to children, their families, and the society as a whole. Paranoia sets in because you are conscientious; you pay attention to detail; you want consistency in your program and its presentation; you want the program to cost a "reasonable amount." Because you examine things closely, writing up the narrative report that goes with the annual budget exposes all of the gaps between your ideals — what the program should be, could only be if . . . and the realities of the program.

Every single word that you write on paper is like the tip of an iceberg: it hints at so much more below. Take the most mundane example, the budget line for maintenance salaries. An incontrovertible program necessity: the place obviously has to be kept clean, and you've written in a figure that allows for the cost of obtaining janitorial services from any high school students in the area.

But as you write that item in, it brings to mind all the headaches involved with keeping the place clean; finding competent and responsible help; supervising, coaxing, urging, trying to get Eddie and Ralph, the "dynamic duo," to please show up on time and do a decent job because there's a board meeting tonight; wrestling — even in such a matter as maintenance — with the issue of hiring from within or without the community; swearing that if they don't do a better job you're just going to fire them; relenting because you realize that if you fire them you will have to advertise in the local newspaper for help and the budget really can't stand another $8 for an advertisement that may or may not bring in reliable help; relenting even more as you think of all those after 6 pm interviews with prospective maintenance men, knowing that it is essential to keep the place clean if you're going to keep staff morale up and wishing that there really was — as the advertisement says — a "janitor in a drum" — some little genie or miraculous cleaning compound that you could just unbottle at the end of the day to make the child care center — your home, after all — sparkling clean and beautiful once more.

But no one is privy to your fantasies or to your knowledge of all the human difficulties and complexities behind that small budgetary item for "maintenance." No one knows about the submerged part of the iceberg but you!

If you had to review a hundred proposals, and if you were not in a key decision-making position, what would you look for: a sense of general competence, staff/child ratios that conformed to the federal interagency guidelines, evidence of input into program design from consumers, evidence of staff training? How easily all of these are covered in a sentence, or a paragraph. And, how readily they hide all of the intricacies, the emotional tug-of-wars, the planning, fighting, crying, laughing involved in getting it all together.

It's hiding the iceberg that makes you feel hypocritical. You didn't come out and say that, but I think it's what you

meant. You said something like, "I'm writing all this stuff down, but I know it's not all like I'm saying." Well, you're selling the program; you're trying to present the image that best reflects the efforts of everyone involved. You realize how much there is to do, how far there is to go, how many hours will have to be spent getting there. And you start to question your own adequacy for the job. Am I the right person? Will we ever accomplish any of this under my leadership? How can "they" — all those parents, board members, community residents — think that I'll be able to pull this off? When you get down to it, the budget makes you question your own legitimacy.

September 9

Guidelines for Paper Pushing

The popular conception of administrator is "paper pusher." Friends and relatives who had known my involvement with children — three years as a preschool teacher — would question, with a raised eyebrow and a slight hint of contempt, "Oh, you're not working with the children any more?"

In the sense that you won't be working for a fixed number of hours per day, every day of the week, directly as a teacher of young children, you won't be "working with the children." But in another sense, you'll always be with them: your effectiveness will depend upon your ability to translate your classroom experience to help others work with children. Maintaining intimacy with individual children will be impossible, especially as the instability of public funding for child care forces upon you the role of proposal writer. But even when you have to translate your knowledge of children's needs into bureaucratese, you won't be a mere paper pusher.

"Facilitator" is the popular word these days for any administrative job with more than perfunctory responsibilities and your job will hardly be perfunctory; you will have to solve problems in institutional and personnel relationships that you never dreamed existed. But the word I like best, the word you might want to keep in mind as a sort of parenthesis to the fancy title of executive director, is helper. For it is your job, above all, to help children, teachers, and parents — the community of day care — grow together.

My urging to you to be a helper may not seem very helpful. You are eager to know, as I was, how to manage an office, keep records, stay up to date with administrative rulings. These procedural matters aren't that difficult and doubtless you'll improve on many of my office-management techniques. There are a few guidelines I can offer, however, for maintaining the helper's rule — guidelines offered because I've had the advantage of making mistakes.

■ Listen! When you're under pressure due to a million things, listening isn't easy. But the ability to listen — to receive information without filtering it through stereotypes — underlies all other skills necessary to the job. Only by listening will you really know where people are coming from, and only then can you be helpful to them.

■ Set aside a special time each week to meet individually with your supervisory staff members. This procedure is often hard to fulfill in practice, but it is essential to maintain the feeling that you value each staff member individually. The time you set aside doesn't have to adhere to a rigid schedule, but key staff members should know you want a chance to listen.

■ Encourage the staff to develop a sense of perspective. Child care is an all-consuming experience for everyone involved. Your schedule will be demanding, but still far more flexible than that of your classroom teachers. Try to build in a regular schedule whereby staff members can observe other child care programs in action. When feasible, release staff members to attend relevant conferences with their peers, and have them report at staff meetings. Sharing one's experiences with others in comparable positions breaks the feeling of isolation that can so easily develop.

■ Try to develop a sense of perspective about your own accomplishments. When weeks and months rush by as rapidly as seconds and minutes, it's difficult to measure program development. It may be impossible to keep a diary, but a time line — noting major events in the life of the center — will let you glance quickly at the record of progress. What a morale booster!

■ Remember that the volunteer is a staff member, too. All good child care programs depend, to some extent, on volunteer help. People with various skills — guitar playing, storytelling — are often willing to give a few hours per week; and with the colleges finally validating work experience and clamoring to get their students "into the field," you will be able to draw on a new pool of free, part-time staff. However, it is a disservice to take anybody on unless clearly delineated responsibilities exist; the presence of aimless, frustrated hangers-on won't help anyone. And remember: volunteers, like all staff, will only work to maximum ability if they feel that someone cares and is available to help them.

■ Don't pigeonhole the bureaucrats. I issue the warning because it's all too easy to do so. The inefficiency of the state bureaucracy can be pernicious and infuriating. But remember, you've been hired by the community to get through to these people, most of whom think

they're trying. You'll find most bureaucrats surprisingly supportive of your determination to correct the system, which is not to say that they pitch in. But their efforts can best be channeled in your behalf if they don't feel you've got them narrowly categorized as the economy. Your job is to educate them, to liberate them, not to pigeonhole them.

■ Try to stay politically aware. Child care is a political matter in America, though few who work with young children are aware of the extent to which this is true. The way we care for children is affected not only by the amount of money allocated in the federal and state budget for child care, but also by government policies that control the type of foods our children eat and the programs they watch on television. Try to develop your own perspective on how local, state, and federal policies affect children — in and out of day care. And get to know your governmental representatives. Although you can't lobby, you can help people to understand how their decisions affect children.

September 16

Dealing With the Welfare

Few people, especially your very own staff members, will comprehend why you spend so much time at meetings, away from the center. No matter how much you're around, some staff members, parents or board members are likely to feel that you're not accessible enough. And if you are constantly running off to meetings, the staff can easily get the impression that you've abandoned ship.

What's more difficult for them to realize is that you are trying to steer the ship in a sea of rulings, counter rulings, last-minute rulings, ever-changing rulings from the Department of Public Welfare, the Department of Public Health, and the local public housing authority. No small thing, these rulings. They affect the well being of every child and staff member at the center. They control the amount of money and space available to operate the program. They determine which children can be enrolled, and what social services they can or can't receive. And they regulate the qualifications of staff who work in the center.

Unless you keep abreast of these rulings, ward off bad rulings, and fight to have good rulings implemented, you fail to do your job, for you are the only one on the staff hired to do this work. But doing so takes time away from dealing with problems within the center, which is also your job. You are likely to be caught in a constant conflict between devoting your time and talent to the necessary work of keeping up with the government bureaucracy that funds the program, and keeping up the program to ensure its ever-shaky funding from the government.

At times it is easy to feel helpless, caught in the very center of a vicious circle that spins around you. The head teacher of the group child care program has been begging you for three weeks to buy more powdered paints. You ask her to keep doing her best with her homemade concoction of food coloring and pasty water, but you know that she has been buying the food coloring, crayons, and paper out of her salary check. Pennies mount up, and she has a family to support.

The coordinator of the after-school program needs the money for the punching bag that you promised over a month ago. It has been recommended by the consulting psychiatric social worker as a controlled outlet for the anger that storms in so many of the children. Powdered paints, a punching bag, the list could go on. You can do no more than repeat a familiar tale: "As soon as the check from the Welfare Department comes in . . . " It is now three weeks late.

In the meantime, you are using every last penny in the till to pay the staff their salaries, and using what seems like every minute in your day to find out why the hell that check is late. You make your ritualistic daily call to the Welfare Department to find out where the check is. The chief of the child care unit himself swore that you would have it, at the very latest, one week ago. The man who processes invoices says he could swear your invoice went through some time ago, but he can't seem to find any record if it and will have to start the whole process over again. It may take another three or four weeks before you get your check. Sorry, there's nothing else he can do about it. You do a little mental arithmetic and take your first two aspirins; another three or four weeks mean a debt of $13,000.

You spend the next hour on the phone to Boston, trying to impress your outrage on someone at the office of the Commissioner of Public Welfare, the Commissioner of Administration and Finance, and the Governor. You call your state senator. You call Teddy Kennedy. None of these calls guarantees that the check will come in faster. They do guarantee that your phone bill for the next month will be astronomical.

You spend the next several days away from the center, meeting with the officers of local banks to negotiate a loan. None of them will accept as collateral the invoices you have sent to the Department of Public Welfare. None of them will accept the letter you carry from the chief of the child care unit, swearing on a stack of Bibles that you are eligible for and will receive $7,000 in government funds. None of them trusts the government.

Finally, you locate a friendly banker, a fellow with real social conscience. For 11 percent he will advance the cash to keep the child care center operating. Of

course, the 11 percent will have to come out of staff training, or supplies, or food, because the government isn't about to pay for the price of its own ineptitude.

Eleven percent or no, you return to the center feeling like a hero. The head teacher of group child care is furious at you. Her assistant teacher is out sick. She needed a substitute teacher, but didn't think the program could afford it. She was counting on you to substitute for at least a few hours during the day. Where were you? Out to one of those meetings again? The coordinator of the after-school program is despondent. You said you'd try to find an extra hour to meet with her to discuss techniques for working with four-year-old Bruce, who keeps clobbering the other kids in the program. But you're never around. What good are you to the program anyway?

Explaining your efforts to the staff will mitigate their anger to some extent. The more they understand about your job, the more sympathetic they will be to you, and vice-versa. Explanation, however, is effective only to a certain point in dealing with the feelings of abandonment that staff members can experience when they really need you and find you away from the office. The time you do spend at the center becomes doubly important in establishing your role; and gestures — no matter how small — that communicate your support of their efforts can only help.

October 14

Staff Development

For me the most difficult, demanding, enervating aspect of running the program — aside from dealing with the welfare bureaucracy — was personnel development. With limited professional experience to serve as precedent for the resolution of the multitude of problems that can arise among staff, the neophyte administrator draws, consciously or unconsciously, upon his reserve of past personal experience and conflicts, resolved or unresolved, with parents, teachers, siblings, employers.

The past is a trap from which we do not escape; paradoxically, until new experience creates for us a new past, one richer in its backlog of successes and failures.

I continually found myself on the horns of a dilemma: critical evaluation was necessary if staff were to recognize shortcomings and learn to overcome them; but any criticism was, as likely as not, to be received as a vote of no confidence, lack of support, and to be counterproductive. The dilemma is especially acute when the employees involved have a history of rejection by teachers and other authority figures.

There is no easy solution to the dilemma. Although the contours of personnel problems do, in time, repeat themselves, each problem is as different as the individuals involved. There are, however, a few ground rules for avoiding the dilemma.

- Staff must understand that the program is premised on the belief that not only children but also adults continue to grow; evaluation as a regular feature of the program is a tool for such growth.

- Everyone should understand that evaluation is a two-way process. The director must be open to criticism, for staff will only accept criticism if they see the director is doing so.

- Directness in criticism is a virtue. Everything else muddles issues. Our cliché — simple and direct — makes it sound as if directness is easy to come by. This is not so. It is often much easier to be vague and indirect, for fear of hurting feelings.

- Evaluation is often difficult because one's criticism can imply so much more than a judgment about the carrying out of specific job responsibilities. Few human relations jobs allow us to separate job tasks from personality: criticism often conveys — or is received as — judgment of personal worth. While you must evaluate in terms of specific job functions, your criticism will more likely be received constructively if you are able to communicate a desire to see beyond the job, to understand your staff members' skills or potential skills in other settings.

- The preconditions for constructive evaluation is trust. In the classroom we strive to communicate our support of the child as a growing person, even if we don't sanction all of the child's actions. Should the goals or standards we set for ourselves be any less than those we set for our children? Staff can only be evaluated constructively if they feel supported as individuals, as persons whose talents may or may not be appropriate for the child care center, and as persons who are being given the chance to test the talents peculiar to working in a child care center and not to their personhood.

October 21

Conclusion: Hang in There, Baby!

You say you've never worked as hard in your life, never had as many difficult moments, and never enjoyed a job more! So what can I tell you? There are no simple formulas for directing a child care program. Perhaps the best words of advice I've encountered appear on a poster that hangs on the wall. A terrified pussycat dangles from a chinning bar, straining for dear life to maintain its frail grasp. The caption reads: HANG IN THERE, BABY!