



MARGIE CARTER with DEADRU HILLIARD

The Journey From Ho-Hum to Building a Dream

"It's far too late and things are far too bad for pessimism. And another thing I know: at such times, it is no failure to fall short of realizing all that we might dream — the failure is to fall short of dreaming all that we might realize."

Dee Hock, President Emeritus
Visa Corporation

When I come across a program that has visibly moved from mediocrity to a sense of pride and accomplishment, I'm eager to understand what has happened. So many of our early childhood programs, even those bearing the torch of NAEYC accreditation, are ho-hum, certainly not ones in which I'd enroll my own grandchildren. Why is it that some programs get in a rut while others get on the road to excellence? I'm delighted and extremely curious about a program which begins to transform itself, especially when this isn't the result of a new director or staff.

I became the visiting staff trainer at Martin Luther King Jr. Day Home Center about ten years ago, and those first few years were very discouraging. I began to understand why other trainers had left in frustration. But then, in the last four or so years, something happened — the director and two of the teachers began to work in tandem as a leadership team, almost in an unspoken fashion, and the program began launching toward something new. These two teachers got their CDAs, the program became accredited, and the director began circulating the Dee Hock quote above.

They are now in the final stages of a two year planning process and a capital cam-

paign for a brand new building, with very big dreams in mind, and remarkable attention to translating their values into even the smallest details of the design. Licensors have started recommending that other programs visit the MLK program to see what they are doing, and the teachers are getting requests to lead workshops in the community.

In a recent meeting with this leadership team I began probing and pushing them to name what they understand about these changes in themselves and the MLK program. Here is my understanding about some of the strategies that bring about such a significant turnaround.

STRATEGY:

Change your questions around

Michael Koetje, the director of the MLK program, describes a turning point for him during the in-service meeting when they found themselves complaining and questioning, "Why aren't parents listening to us?" (I wrote a bit about this in my November 1999, *Child Care Information Exchange* article "Developing Meaningful Relationships with Families.") In the course of this gripe session Michael says he realized the question should be changed around to, "Why aren't *we* listening to parents?" That began a series of changes, first in how the staff began to see themselves, and subsequently, in many of the specific practices they began undertaking with families. (See Deadru Hilliard's article in this issue of *Beginnings Workshop*).

Whenever I hear staff complaining about and labeling someone else as a problem, I ask them to consider a question for themselves. What are you *wondering about* in this situation? Can you suspend your irritation for the moment and try to take a different approach, moving from judgment to curiosity? How might this so-called irritating person be feeling at the moment? What is missing from your understanding? How might you find out more?

When we move from asking, "Why are they so bad?" to wondering "Is there something I could be doing differently?", remarkable changes begin to happen.

STRATEGY:

Get honest observations of yourself

Both Deadru Hilliard and Aurora Escano, the classroom teachers on this leadership team, confessed that they were initially unsettled by the written observations I frequently gave them. "I used to be afraid when you came in the room," Aurora said, "because I came to this job without knowing anything. But then I saw your sincerity. You saw me using my heart. You gave me a focus on the children. That was helping them, but it was helping me as well. You learn a lot from the kids. When you really observe them, they teach you what they need you to do."

Deadru added, "It first caught me up, but I realized that in getting feedback, I shouldn't take it personally. Instead, it began to give me a sense that there had

to be much more to learn to make this go better and feel better. I realized that we could have this atmosphere where, even if I felt like a failure and something didn't work out, I could embrace it and try to understand. This started getting me interested in learning more."

Over the years I've used a variety of strategies in observing and giving feedback to teachers. I try to concentrate on writing down specific details of what I am seeing, without judgments, (or words like "inappropriate") and then formulate some questions for myself and the teachers. I try to use a mindset of "wondering," rather than criticizing, which can open up a dialogue. My goal is not to get the teachers to handle something the way I would, (which is especially important in cross-cultural relationships), but instead, to encourage them to be thoughtful and intentional about what they are doing. I want them to assess how they are feeling about their work and its impact.

It's often difficult for directors to find time to observe teachers in their classrooms, given the many demands on your time. But when this does happen, and it's done thoughtfully, you can have a significant impact on teachers' understandings. Deadru said, "You need to get an honest observation of yourself in different situations — not just what do you do for the child — but for yourself." This sentiment should compel directors to get into classrooms for regular observations and feedback.

The other kind of observing I do in classrooms is with a focus strictly on the children and what they are doing. Capturing some particular details of a child's activity provides an opportunity for meaningful discussions with the teachers. Keeping the focus on the children makes the teachers less nervous, more curious, and often motivated to do this themselves. The walls of the MLK

classrooms are now full of observation stories posted by the teachers. The children and their families take delight in this, and it has furthered all of their relationships.

STRATEGY:

Get out to other programs

A powerful form of in-service training can be visits to other programs. One of two things typically happens: the teachers get inspired and eager to try new ideas, or they get a sense of how far along they are in their own development.

Deadru commented on her experience with this: "When I go to other centers I see some of these teachers acting like they have no hope, like they are finished with dreaming. Maybe their director doesn't supervise them or motivate them; but at the same time, either you move yourself away from this profession, or you keep pushing to improve yourself.

"On the other side, a turning point for me was visiting the Chicago Commons program. It wasn't only how they had made their environments so beautiful, but how the teachers talked about their changes and the sense of pride and hope they had. That really motivated me to come back and do things differently."

When visiting other programs as a form of training, it's important to help teachers clarify their focus before going. It might be useful to develop some informal observation sheets for this. For instance, if teachers are looking for ideas about how to help children work through conflicts, the observation form might include places for them to make note of how the environment is set up to help children with conflicts, how the teachers might have chosen to intervene or not, and what values and beliefs seem to be implied by these choices. Taking time to discuss what they saw and noted

is essential for the reflection process. Part of the growing dream for Deadru, Aurora, and Michael, is to have their program become a model for others to visit and learn from. This idea is starting to shape their efforts at in-service training for their own staff. They are discovering that whenever you have the task of teaching someone what you have learned, you get more clear about what you are doing and why. The process creates a climate of continual self-reflection.

STRATEGY:

Think in terms of values and beliefs

One of the most striking changes I've seen at MLK is a shift in how Aurora and Deadru think through their interactions with children, families, and new teachers who begin working in their rooms. Rather than knee-jerk reactions or habitual old ways of doing things, they now think in terms of the values and beliefs they want to be guiding their work.

Recently, I've encouraged them to more explicitly name this as part of their ongoing staff development work in the center. A large chart is now posted across the wall of their staff room with five columns under the heading, "Defining Our Beliefs and Values" and this is steadily guiding their discussions.

With this in mind, Michael, the director, in planning a presentation for the capital campaign, chose to emphasize how the center's values and goals are reflected in the new building design. This focus stands out from the typical *needy* tone that characterizes most fundraising efforts for low income children and families. It engenders more genuine interest and a desire to learn more about the program.

STRATEGY:

Redefine your program for its long term impact

Michael told the staff that his mentor, Joe Garcia, reminded him that the MLK Center’s dream is not just about a new building for their program, but about children and families for generations to come. Joe said that when his parents came from Mexico their hard work was always focused on their grandchildren yet to be born. This same sentiment is expressed in a number of cultures, reminding us that our visions and decisions should always have future generations in mind. Thinking about this, Michael noted that graduates of the infant program opening in their new building will be future grandparents and they will be influencing generations into the year 2200. “How can we make what our MLK program does worthy of that image?”

This kind of vision and dreaming seems fitting for a program named after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I was thinking about that one evening when I took my little sixteen-month-old grandson, Jesse, to an evening social event at the MLK program. Jesse has never been interested in nursing or eating and has been put in the “failure to thrive” category by his doctor. As he toddled around with the older preschool children, I was mentioning our family’s concern about this to several of the staff and parents. We turned to take a closer look at him, and I marveled to see Jesse eagerly accepting crackers given to him by one of the preschoolers.

“Take a look at that, Margie,” Michael remarked. “And remember that quote from Dee Hock — ‘the failure is to fall short of dreaming all that we might realize.’ ” Indeed, there was Jesse, the wee little guy, taken in tow by several other little boys, sitting him down at the snack table for the fullest feeding he has ever accepted. Dr. King would be smiling.

Defining Our Beliefs and Values				
Our beliefs and values for children and childhood	Our beliefs and values for families	Our beliefs about the teacher’s role with children and families	Our beliefs and values for the learning environment we create	Our beliefs and values about the teaching and learning process

Margie Carter has worked as a staff trainer at Martin Luther King Center where Deadru Hilliard has taught for eleven years. Deadru has been working hard to continuously grow in this profession. Her future studies include working with other early learning teachers just entering the field and providing them with a solid foundation right at the start. Margie lives in Seattle where she teaches at Pacific Oaks College NW. She travels widely to speak and consult with early childhood programs. She is co-authoring a new book on environments with Deb Curtis. Contact Margie through her web site with Deb Curtis at www.ecetrainers.com.