

# The Director's Link

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## When Conflicts Arise

Ann Hentschel

If you've been an early childhood director for even a short time, no doubt you've experienced a day or two when conflict came knocking at your door. I remember one emotional encounter like it was yesterday. Michelle, one of the preschool teachers in my program, came into my office and slammed the door behind her.

Her arms tightly folded and tapping her foot, she was clearly furious and on the verge of tears. She exclaimed, "That's it. I have had it! I can't work another day with Kelly! You have to do something about her. She is useless in the classroom. She always expects me to do the dirty work like clean out the paint cups, soak the brushes, and wash down the tables and chairs. It's all on my shoulders! You need to talk to her or move me to a different room. I'm tired of her lazy attitude."

Ah, the life of a center director. So much time can be spent dealing with conflicts around work ethics, educational philosophy, interpersonal relationships, and cultural differences. On the one hand, I was glad Michelle felt comfortable enough to share her frustrations with me. Clearly my open-door policy was working and I had established a level of trust with the teaching staff. On the other hand, I was uncomfortable with the idea that as director it was my job to go in and fix every conflict that surfaced in the center. I needed to make a shift in our organizational culture to promote open, direct communication.

### Building a Community that Fosters Open, Direct Communication

Quality early childhood programs teach young children problem solving skills. How many times have we heard teachers tell

children to use their words? Yet, often as adults we avoid confronting issues with our coworkers. The issue of dirty paint cups seems relatively minor. Nonetheless, these irritating minor issues can add up, leading to major resentment and anger.

A valuable tool in creating a climate for open, direct communication is offered by Roger Fisher and William Ury in their book *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In*. Their book offers a concise, step-by-step strategy for addressing conflicts in the work place. Fisher and Ury offer four principles of negotiation: separate the people from the problem; focus on interests, not positions; invent options for mutual gain; and insist on using objective criteria. Let's explore each of these using my situation with Michelle and Kelly as an example.

#### • Separate the People from the Problem

When people are in conflict, emotions run high. Out of fear or frustration, it is easy to want to personally attack the other person. It is important to remember, however, that in any conflict, both parties have deeply held values, different backgrounds, and points of view. Conflict resolution begins by clarifying each person's perceptions of the situation and the underlying values or beliefs that are prompting specific behaviors.

*Continued on page 2*



Michelle clearly valued a clean, orderly classroom environment. But what does Kelly value? She was more invested in fostering nurturing relationships with children, so taking time away from interactions to clean was less important to her. So which is the more important value? Actually both are important in creating a quality program for children. By facilitating a meeting with Michelle and Kelly I was able to help them see one another's perspectives and express their deeply held values.

#### • Focus on Interests, not Positions

According to Fisher and Ury, the basic problem in a negotiation lies not in conflicting positions, but in the conflict between each side's needs, desires, concerns, and fears. Desires and concerns are interests. Interests motivate people. Your position is something you have decided upon. Your interests are what caused you to decide. Focusing on interests instead of positions leads to solutions.

What are Michelle and Kelly's shared interests? Do they have common goals for the children and families in their classroom? How might those interests lead to a solution about keeping the classroom clean? One thing they discovered during our meeting was that they both wanted the classroom to be a place where children and their parents felt welcomed and wanted to spend time. Michelle accomplished that by keeping the room neat and presentable. Kelly achieved that by warmly greeting parents and children. She devoted a great deal of time talking to parents at departure about their child's day. Naturally, this is the same time when Michelle is busy cleaning up the classroom.

#### • Invent Options for Mutual Gain

In their book, Fisher and Ury encourage brainstorming for generating mutually gainful options. They share the tale of two sisters fighting over an orange. After agreeing to divide the orange in half, the first sister took her half, ate the fruit, and threw away the peel, while the other threw away the fruit and used the peel from her half in baking a cake. Too many negotiations end up with half an orange for each side instead of the whole fruit

for one and the whole peel for the other. After a variety of proposals have been made, the parties can begin to evaluate ideas.

A quick-and-easy solution in my example was for Kelly to simply agree to help more often with cleaning the classroom. However, by investing time in creative brainstorming, other options and solutions emerged. These two teachers actually had a fun time thinking outside of the box. Some of their ideas included paying the cleaning service more to do additional maintenance (not really a viable option) or assigning a parent volunteer the art clean-up task (we'd have to recruit a parent volunteer first). These were obviously not quick or easy-to-implement solutions, but the very act of brainstorming created a sense of collaboration in solving the problem rather than pointing fingers at one another.

#### • Insist on Using Objective Criteria

The final step in the conflict-resolution process is to commit to reaching a solution based on principle, not pressure. This can be done by developing objective criteria. Frame each issue as a joint search for objective criteria. Be open to discussing which criteria are most appropriate and how they should be applied.

In my situation with Michelle and Kelly, we turned to the NAEYC accreditation criteria and the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale* as possible criteria for guiding our decision making. Using objective criteria certainly took some of the emotion out of the situation. Both of these sources provide a sound rationale for the importance of maintaining a clean, healthy learning environment. But they also stress the importance of promoting positive relationships with children and parents.

In the end, Kelly agreed to be more conscientious in keeping the room clean and Michelle felt validated for the important contribution she made in maintaining an orderly environment. Our conversations, however, yielded

Continued on page 5

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#### Our Mission

The McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership is dedicated to enhancing the management skills, professional orientation, and leadership capacity of early childhood administrators. The activities of the Center encompass four areas: training and technical assistance, program evaluation, research, and public awareness.



## **Commitment to My Colleagues**

The following contract can serve as a statement of commitment by your staff to establish and maintain open honest and trustful relationships with one another.

***As your colleague, with a shared goal of providing outstanding child care services, I commit to the following:***

### **I Will**

- admit when I make a mistake and be honest about what I need to do to prevent the same mistake in the future.
- not engage in the B's (bickering and back-biting) and will remind you to do the same when/if you initiate it.
- not complain about another team member to you. If I hear you doing so, I will ask you to talk to that team member.
- accept you as you are today and forget and forgive past problems.
- follow the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as I wish others to do unto me."
- respect your ideas as evidenced by listening to them and talking about them with you.
- never harbor resentment. If we do disagree, we will come to the best possible outcome. I will not hold a grudge against you for having differing ideas.
- trust you with my personal and professional material possessions.
- greet you with a smile and warm hello each time I see you.
- help you with your job when I can and when I am needed.
- remember that neither of us is perfect and that human errors are opportunities, not for shame or guilt, but for forgiveness and growth.

***I will affirm my commitment to the mission of our center by taking part in the following activities:***

### **I Will**

- commit to finding solutions to problems, rather than complaining about them or blaming someone for them.
- make every attempt to create a fun and enjoyable workplace by adding a sense of humor to the work environment.
- use the center's materials wisely and always put materials back when finished with my shift.
- report any errors to the appropriate supervisor and not place blame when something goes wrong at the center.

In addition to my commitment to the above, I have read NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct, and agree that I will follow this code to the best of my ability.

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Employee Signature

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Date

*This Commitment to Colleagues was developed by Joleen Patton, Director of Blessing Hospital Child Care Center, Quincy, IL.*

# Planning Ahead

## Professional Development Opportunities

### Getting Started with Desktop Publishing and Digital Marketing

Learn how to design effective promotional materials for your program using Microsoft® Office Publisher 2007 and strengthen your ability to distribute publications electronically via today's "hot" Internet-based communication tools. This workshop will be offered twice during the coming months.

#### **Friday, April 17, 2009**

**Location:** Location: John A Logan College (Building/Room F111), Carterville, IL

**Time:** 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. A lunch break is provided.

**Fee:** \$45

#### **Friday, June 5, 2009**

**Location:** Illinois Central College's North Campus (Birch Hall/Room 32), Peoria, IL

**Time:** 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. A lunch break is provided.

**Fee:** \$45

### Taking Charge of Change

**Summer Institute: August 3-8, 2009 • Follow-up Retreats: November 12-14, 2009 and May 12-15, 2010**

Join the ranks of over 450 directors in Illinois who have taken part in this extraordinary professional development experience. *Taking Charge of Change* is guaranteed to transform how you think about your role as an early childhood leader. Topics focus on individual and organizational change and the director's role as change agent. Through interactive learning, group discussions, guided reflection, reading, and visits to exemplary programs, participants explore the components of quality programming and how to implement change to achieve program excellence.

The training begins with an intensive six-day residential summer institute. A follow-up

retreat in the fall is held to report on progress in implementing a program improvement plan. The training culminates with attendance at the Center's national Leadership Connections conference. Mentors are available for consultation during the year to assist participants in implementing their program improvements. The deadline for application is June 1, 2009. Notification of acceptance will be made June 15, 2009.

Space is limited to 28 participants. Priority is given to directors whose programs serve IDHS-funded children.

**Location:** McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership National-Louis University, Wheeling Campus Annex

**Fee:** \$425, includes full participation in the summer institute and follow-up retreats, all texts, lodging, food, and materials



*For an additional fee, individuals may receive six semester hours of credit from National-Louis University (ECE525, Strategies for Supervision and Staff Development and EPS526, Group Dynamics and Leadership Applications).*

## Professional Development Opportunities

### Program Administration Scale—Assessor Reliability Training

September 21-24, 2009

The Program Administration Scale (PAS) measures leadership and management practices of center-based early care and education programs. Assessor Reliability Training includes an overview of the instrument, how to rate indicators and score items, the protocol for interviewing and collecting data, and procedures for verifying documentation. Individuals who successfully complete the training are eligible to become certified PAS assessors.

This four-day training is designed for technical assistance specialists, quality monitors, management consultants, researchers, and other professionals interested in using the PAS to reliably assess early childhood leadership and management practices.

**Location:** McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership National-Louis University, Wheeling Campus Annex

**Fee:** \$850, includes all texts, materials, and meals

**For more information about these professional development opportunities, please contact Debra Trude-Suter at (800) 443-5522, ext. 5056 or [debra.trudesuter@nl.edu](mailto:debra.trudesuter@nl.edu). You can also visit us online at <http://cecl.nl.edu>.**

## TAKE TIME OUT TO JOIN A DISCUSSION ONLINE

The Center hosts a series of online discussions moderated by nationally recognized early childhood experts. These online discussions are open to the public. Join the conversation to chat with the people who have written the books and helped shape early childhood policy and practice.

### How Sensory Impressions Produce Learning Expressions

Monday, May 18–Saturday, May 23, 2009

As the young child develops, natural learning outcomes are influenced by information received through the five senses. The amount and delivery of this information creates the child's unique learning thumbprint. Throughout the week we will discuss the learning thumbprint and ways to facilitate its fully integrated development. In this straightforward exploration into the influence of the sensory-motor system on cognition, participants will take part in extending the functional interpretation of Einstein's statement "Learning is experience. Everything else is just information."

**Guest expert:** Latrice Walker, founder and CEO of Pre-Fit, America's premier sports, exercise, and health systems for children. Dr. Walker is a certified CDA trainer and a MOST trainer for Action for Children's community partners.



*Continued from page 2*

something even more powerful in strengthening this teaching team. Michelle expressed that she did not feel entirely comfortable talking with the parents and acknowledged Kelly's strength in this area. They agreed to have Kelly assume a more prominent role in parent relations.

### Valuing Differences

As early childhood educators we deeply value individuality among children by embracing their unique perspectives and dispositions.

Yet, as adults we grapple with such differences in the work place. "If only Kelly could be more like me. If only she did things the way I did them or valued the things I value, we would get along just fine." Isn't that what Michelle was implying?

By applying the four principles of negotiation offered by Fisher and Ury, I was able to help Michelle and Kelly find common ground and resolve their conflict. For me, this example was a good reminder that the teachers and support staff in my

program have different abilities, needs, values, and expectations. In creating a safe process to openly discuss differences, we establish a work place built on mutual trust and respect for one another.

*Ann Hentschel was a center director for several years and is currently a training and technical assistance specialist at the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership.*

Join us at the luxurious Westin Chicago North Shore for this highly acclaimed professional development opportunity especially designed for center directors, lead teachers and supervisors, trainers and consultants, technical assistance specialists, and family child care providers. Three stimulating days of training, exhibits, networking, and fun! Meet and learn from national experts in leadership and program management. Keynote speakers include Ben Glenn, James Garbarino, and Bill Campbell.

Total conference package is only \$400 before May 1, 2009.

**Conference Package Includes:**

- **Thursday:** Opening Luncheon and Keynote, Launch of Aim4Excellence National Online Director Credential, Public Policy Forum, Networking Reception and Marketplace, Spotlight on Best Practices, and Pamper Yourself Activities
- **Friday:** Continental Breakfast, Skill-Building Clinics, Box Lunch, Marketplace, Meet the Authors, and Afternoon Ice Cream Treat
- **Saturday:** Continental Breakfast, Seminars, and Closing Luncheon and Keynote
- **Plus:** Great conference bag, Yellow Pages of Professional Resources, and LOTS of Raffle Prizes and Gifts



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