

# Commitment and Motivation: Keys to a Program's Overall Success

BY: JANE HUMPHRIES

With fall and the “back to school” feeling in the air, you may be among the many leaders in the field of early care and education who are rallying new and existing staff. Staff commitment and motivation are critical to sustaining or improving your program’s day-to-day work and its overall direction. So, how can you deepen staff commitment and bolster motivation? Let’s begin by addressing commitment.

## COMMITMENT

Organizational commitment is the relative strength of an educator’s identification with and involvement in a particular program (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979; Bloom, 1988). It is characterized by at least three related factors: a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values, a willingness to exert oneself on behalf of the program, and a strong desire to remain working at the program.

To a large extent, the success of organizational change depends on the degree to which individuals can integrate the goals of the program into their own structure of needs and values. This sense of belonging represents the anticipation that one will be able to achieve personal satisfaction within an organization. It is the essence of organizational commitment. Interdependence through achieving a common goal leads to relationships of trust and respect.

The challenge for leaders is to help educators develop a strong sense of personal ownership and responsibility within the context of an organization. According to Hall (1988), three conditions are essential to achieve this: impact, relevance, and community.

- **Impact.** People need to know that what they are doing makes a difference. Teachers, in particular, may feel like they make a difference in the lives of young children and may derive a great deal of personal satisfaction from their work each day. But, they also need feedback that the work they do has a positive impact on what happens in the program. Impact relates to our personal feelings of importance.
- **Relevance.** Particularly in early childhood work settings, people need to expect that their talents are being used appropriately and the time they spend on important tasks helps move the program forward in achieving its mission. Many times, staff perceive they are stuck with meaningless, time-consuming tasks. Hall (1988) found that irrelevant tasks undermine the sense of purpose that is so critical to commitment. They spawn

Revised: 8/20/2018

frustration and resistance. They stifle motivation.

- **Community.** Hall (1988) noted that for relevance to become a shared experience, and for the sense of personal challenge and contribution to become a collective feature of the organization, there must be a norm of interdependence and mutual reliance. Little (1982) calls these norms of collegiality. Collegiality and interdependence foster mutual respect and a sense of shared responsibility for each other's well-being. Community refers to the sense of oneness or a spirit of belonging. It is the belief that people can depend on one another.

As a leader in an early care and education program, you are keenly aware of differences in your staff's levels of commitment. The individual with a strong sense of commitment demonstrates active involvement in the program and in the field of early childhood. That educator arrives early to prepare the classroom, turns in requested paperwork on time, and takes an active role in external professional activities.

Conversely, the educator who does not demonstrate a strong commitment may not be eager to initiate or participate in personal development opportunities. It becomes your responsibility, then, to address this lack of commitment if you feel it is interfering with job performance. Perhaps there are basic unmet needs. Or, perhaps the educator is confused about your expectations or the organization's vision. Helping such individuals build greater self-awareness of the factors that contribute to their personal and professional satisfaction is a start. Determining the degree of fit between an educator's needs and expectations and those of the program will help you determine whether the individual should continue to work at your program.

## MOTIVATION

Commitment to a program is directly related to the level of motivation an individual exhibits. Leaders frequently find themselves asking why some staff show a lot of initiative and a strong desire to contribute to the organization while others do not. Leaders also wonder why certain incentives motivate peak performance in some staff and not others. Put simply, there is a difference between the *can do* and *want to do* factors that regulate behavior in all employees. The first has to do with level of competence, the latter relates to attitude. The attitude part of the equation rests squarely on one's level of motivation.

Motivation results from the expectation that one's efforts will lead to anticipated outcomes. Numerous theories of motivation have been proposed over the years, but perhaps the most well known in the education field is Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954). The fundamental premise of Maslow's theory is that higher-level needs become activated as lower-level needs are satisfied. For example, if children come to a preschool program not having had breakfast in the morning, hunger presents itself as the prime motivator. It will be difficult for them to attend to

Revised: 8/20/2018

other higher-level needs like achievement. Likewise, if teachers feel there is little job security where they work, they may be unable to focus on other goals.

A director reported that one of her most enthusiastic and dedicated teachers resisted attending staff meetings scheduled for late afternoons. Upon a closer look, the director discovered that this teacher, a single parent, did not have the financial means to cover the child care costs that would result from her attendance. She also found that the teacher was too embarrassed to admit to her colleagues how financially strapped she was. Lower-level needs must be largely satisfied before higher-level needs can be felt and pursued. An understanding of Maslow's theory can assist directors in considering whether an individual's basic needs are met and whether that person is able to focus on higher-level goals relating to self and the organization.

Frederick Herzberg's (1966) landmark research on motivation supports Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Herzberg distinguishes between the positive aspects of an individual's job that are *satisfiers* and the negative aspects of the job that are *dissatisfiers*. The two categories, Herzberg asserts, are quite distinct as they relate to motivation issues.

Dissatisfiers include such things as salary, working conditions, status, job security, technical supervision, and organizational policies. Satisfiers, on the other hand, include the nature of the work itself, the individual's degree of responsibility, opportunities for growth and advancement, and a sense of achievement. Herzberg believes that eliminating dissatisfiers seldom improves an individual's performance; it merely reduces the irritations and frustrations in doing one's job. To motivate individuals to higher levels of performance, changes in the structure and nature of the work itself (the satisfiers) need to be addressed.

One resource to explore these concepts and ideas for enhancing commitment and motivation is the McCormick Center's online module, *Promoting Peak Performance*, which is based on Paula Jorde Bloom's *Blueprint for Action* (2015). This module is part of our online national director credential, Aim4Excellence™. You can [learn more about the credential](#) on our website, or directly access the *Promoting Peak Performance* module [here](#).

*Dr. Jane Humphries serves as a Professional eLearning Specialist for the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University. She has written curriculum and facilitated online learning in graduate and undergraduate level courses since 2004. She is currently the curriculum developer of the Aim4Excellence™ program, an online National Director Credential recognized by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Accreditation and several states' quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS).*

Revised: 8/20/2018

---

## REFERENCES

- Bloom, P. J. (2015). *Blueprint for action* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Lake Forest, IL: New Horizons.
- Bloom, P. J. (1988). Factors influencing administrators' decisions regarding the adoption of computer technology. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 4(1), 31-47.
- Hall, J. (1988). *The competence connection*. The Woodlands, TX: Woodstead.
- Herzberg, F. (1966). *Work and the nature of man*. New York, NY: World Publishing.
- Little, J.W. (1982). Norms of collegiality and experimentation: Workplace conditions of school success. *American Educational Research Journal*, 19(3), 325-340.
- Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Mowday, R., Steers, R., Porter, L. (1979). The measurement of organizational commitment. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 14, 224-47.

Revised: 8/20/2018