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Planning Staff Meetings

One of the biggest challenges child care programs face is finding a suitable time, space, and budget for all staff meetings. With all the varying work shifts in a program, getting everyone to attend a meeting and paying them for this time requires a logistical genius, not to mention slippery budget configurations.

Surprisingly, large agencies often seem to have a better time of it than smaller programs do. School districts, Ys, and multi-service agencies tend to plan their annual calendars with staff development and meeting days in mind, and they don't renege in spite of the inconvenience this may cause the families they serve. Large or small, the programs most successful in carving out regular meeting time for staff set their calendars for the year and have persuasive rationales and policies for parents, along with clear expectations for staff attendance.

Some do this with a consistently scheduled early closure once a month, while others close quarterly for a staff development day. When programs hold evening all staff meetings, they often make use of a floating substitute for the week of the meeting so that each staff member gets comp time for these required extra meeting hours. A consortium of child care directors serving low income families decided to collectively close their programs the last few days of the week before the Labor Day weekend to do some individual program and community-wide staff training.

However we configure it, the gyrations required to gather our staff together for a

meeting creates an imperative to consider this time as precious and to use it well. In my view, thoughtful planning and organization of our meeting time and space should parallel the process we want the teachers to bring to their work with children and families. The *process* we use in gathering our staff together can be as significant for our staff development as any *content* we might hope to cover during the meeting. When directors create a thoughtful model for adult learning, teachers experience first hand the deep respect and thoughtful planning we want them to offer the children.

Be clear about the purpose and structure of your meetings

Sometimes we gather our staff together to review important program considerations, make decisions, or strategize on how to best support a child, family, or staff member. Other times our meetings have the structure of a workshop focused on a particular topic, for instance, health and safety practices, promoting literacy, or child guidance. There are occasions when we gather together primarily for social time, perhaps celebrating an accomplishment, holiday, or person we want to honor.

It seems a terrible misuse of our precious gatherings to use them primarily for the business details of staff schedules, reminders of regulations, or important announcements. This information could be better delegated to smaller team meetings, bulletins, or routing slip

memos. There are occasions when staff input or involvement in important decisions works best in a meeting where all points of view can be heard and differences negotiated. (Paula Jorde Bloom's little book *Circle of Influence: Implementing Shared Decision Making and Participative Management* offers great ideas for how to think about this.)

In our book *The Visionary Director*, Deb Curtis and I offer a triangle framework for thinking through and organizing your work as a director into three comprehensive areas: managing and overseeing resources, systems, policies, standards; teaching and coaching with a focus on your staff as learners; and building and supporting community within your program and between your program and the wider community. You can plan staff meetings with the triangle framework in mind.

Managing and overseeing tasks for meetings:

- Creating a system for agenda development and the meeting structure
- Arranging the schedule and environment
- Creating the development of and coaching system for your Code of Conduct or Ground Rules for Meeting Behaviors
- Managing a system for recording and documenting meeting discussions, decisions, and activities
- Monitoring the group process and dynamics

- Tracking responsibilities, decisions, tasks, odds and ends
- Using evaluation systems and planning needed changes

Teaching and coaching tasks for meetings:

- Using staff meetings for learning and development (rather than business announcements)
- Focusing time with hands on, meaningful learning experiences
- Providing for individual learning styles and collaborative thinking experiences
- Coaching with developmental stages and milestones in mind
- Using facilitative questions to promote self-reflection

Building and supporting community tasks for meetings:

- Creating a climate for all voices to be heard and respected
- Providing opportunities to get connected through shared experiences
- Practicing the recognition and valuing of different perspectives and communication styles and negotiating differences
- Exploring ways to connect with the wider community
- Celebrating significant events

Planning meetings for learning and connecting

You can provide effective training during staff meetings if your primary goal is to offer a learning process for the adults, rather than trying to convey information. Time devoted to active learning in staff meetings conveys the importance you place on thinking and growing, and develops your program as a learning community for adults as well as children.

Strategy: ***Do skits rather than announcements***

I saw a wonderful example of a director turning *reminders* into a playful learning and community building activity. Concerned that some new staff hadn't been working during the summer in her program, director Susie Eisman at Hilltop Children's Center wrote headings of key topics she wanted to review on pieces of paper, i.e. field trip safety, summer sun health issues, playground first aid, communications with families. Small clusters of staff members were given one of these topics, asked to brainstorm a list of concerns to plan for, and then weave these into a skit to present to the whole staff.

Rather than a yawn-filled hour of a long list of guidelines, teachers were treated to a fun-filled time of discovering their creativity, shared knowledge, and values. Months later they were still talking about that hilarious way Lisa played the devil's voice in Jason's ear trying to get him to ignore the safety guidelines for transporting children on field trips, and how Kit reminded the child stung by a bee how to avoid trauma for the bee as well.

Strategy: ***Explore different values***

Teachers benefit from examining and naming the influences on their own values and preferred practices. It is useful to do this in a context stripped of a *right or wrong* tone. A simple way to do this is to write on separate pieces of paper possible opposing viewpoints on policies and practices 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 have strong sentiments they want to discuss. Possible ideas for the papers include: children should call adults by their first names; children should primarily be offered limited choices and non-negotiable guidelines from adults; children should have to try at least one bite of all food served; parents should be immediately told when their children break a rule.

In the debriefing discussion following the talk at the different papers, acknowledge that sometimes teachers are asked to carry out practices different from their own belief systems, or there may be a difference between a family's practice and that of the program. Exploring the values and belief systems underlying practices with children can result in new learning and a willingness to accommodate a different viewpoint without judgment or negation.

Strategy: ***Invite neighborhood kindergarten teachers and principals***

In today's climate of outcomes-based education and high-stakes testing, it is easy for schools and child care programs to point a finger at each other. Why not, instead, try to build a relationship and some mutual understandings between your staff and that of the schools your children typically move on to? Invite the kindergarten teachers and principals to come hear stories of how your children are learning through play. Share documentation of in-depth projects, transcriptions of children's conversations, and other evidence of their learning process. Ask to hear the teachers' and principals' frustrations and concerns and ideas for building stronger connections between your programs. Consider including parents and some of your graduates to contribute to this meeting as well.



Strategy:
Do a self-assessment of recent meetings

To explore this idea of having your staff meetings parallel what you want the teachers to be doing with the children, reflect on your last three meetings. Creating three columns on a paper with the dates of each meeting as the headers, quickly jot down the agenda for each and a summary of how time was spent, the tone, focus, and primary voices that were heard. Consider these questions as well:

- Was the space well-organized, comfortable and inviting?
- What kinds of choices did the staff have about how time was spent?
- In what ways were people able to deepen their relationships and experience being part of a community?
- How were staff given opportunities to construct their knowledge about something worth learning?
- In what ways was their learning or experience made visible?

Looking over your answers, do you feel your staff had a meaningful learning experience and deepened their connections with each other, the program philosophy and vision, or possibly the value of their work to the wider community?

Margie Carter has co-authored with Deb Curtis numerous early childhood books and staff training videos which are described on their website at www.ecetrainers.com.

**Order Margie's books on-line by visiting our web site:
www.ChildCareExchange.com.**