

How to Stimulate Creativity in Your Staff

by Roger Neugebauer

"In every mind there are widening regions of creativity if once the spark has been allowed to generate the fire."

– Gardner Murphy

Creativity is a vital ingredient of any successful child care organization. Creativity is needed in the classroom in planning a responsive curriculum, in designing a stimulating environment, and in providing exciting interactions with the children. The management of a center requires creativity in stretching scant resources, in devising fundraising strategies, and in training and motivating staff. A center must be able to respond creatively to changing populations, changing needs, and changing opportunities.

But can a director truly summon forth a flow of creative ideas from the staff? Aren't there a limited number of creative people in the world and if your staff doesn't have one you're out of luck? Management consultant Peter F. Drucker answers that creativity is not in short supply:

"Creativity is not the real problem. There are usually more ideas in any organization than can possibly be put to use. . . . What is lacking is management's willingness to welcome ideas, in fact, solicit them."

Starting with the assumption that creativity is a valuable untapped staff resource, *Exchange* surveyed current management literature for ideas on how to unleash this resource. The following guidelines on how to promote creativity were extracted from those works listed at the end of this article.

Guideline #1 Clearly communicate the task to the group.

It serves no purpose to get the creative juices of staff members flowing if they are all working on solutions to the wrong problem. At the outset, therefore, it is vital to discuss the problem to be addressed with staff members so that everyone shares a common view of what the group's task is. If the problem is slumping enrollments, for example, everyone should understand that the task is to come up with ideas for recruiting more children. Implicit in this common view is not only a consensus on the specific problem at hand, but also a shared understanding of the overall goals and philosophies of the center.

Guideline #2 Provide group members with rich and varied experiences to draw upon.

Creativity seldom involves the creation of a totally new idea. In their classic treatise on organizational theory, *Organizations*, March and Simon acknowledged that "most innovations in an organization are a result of borrowing rather than invention." Put another way, creativity involves combining conventional ideas in unconventional ways.

Staff members are more likely to come up with creative combinations of ideas if they have a large store of ideas to draw upon in the first place. According to Gardner Murphy, the first two stages in the creative process are the "immersion in some specific medium that gives delight and fulfillment," and the "acquisition of experiences which are then consolidated into an ordered pattern." The director, therefore, needs to provide staff members with opportunities to immerse themselves in the issue at hand, and to acquire firsthand experiences with it.

There are many ways in which this can happen. For example, let's say the task at hand is to develop a non-sexist curriculum for the center. The director could pull together all available literature on non-sexist childrearing and education for staff members to read. Staff members could be encouraged to attend workshops and take courses on the sub-

ject. They could experiment with non-sexist curriculum ideas in their classrooms. They could visit other centers known for their non-sexist curriculums. And the director could bring in an outside expert to brainstorm with the staff on the subject.

Guideline #3 Provide staff members with whatever support and encouragement they need.

There is much that a director can do to provide support for the creative efforts of staff members. She can demonstrate confidence in the abilities of staff members by delegating significant responsibility to them to come up with a solution or innovation. A lack of confidence is communicated when the director retains tight control over the entire process.

Support can be provided through demonstrating a genuine interest in the efforts of staff members. If several staff members are experimenting with a new curriculum approach, the director should take the time to see how it is working. Nothing kills the enthusiasm of an individual in developing a new idea more quickly than the realization that no one else is interested.

Support can be provided by protecting the creative process from interference. If some staff members are meeting during nap time to brainstorm about a problem in the center, the director should see to it that they can proceed without interruption. If teachers need to visit other centers or to attend workshops, the director should bring in substitutes when necessary to free them to go out.

Wherever possible the director should provide budgetary support for the creative process. He should not be a scrooge when it comes to acquiring resource materials needed to explore an issue in depth. She should recognize that new innovations, such as a family day care

network for infants or a drop in program, will not be given a fair trial if they are restricted by too tight a budget at the outset.

Peter Drucker argues that pennywise budgeting can cripple innovative efforts:

"Budgets for ongoing businesses and budgets for innovative efforts must not only be kept separate, they should be treated differently. Instead of asking 'What is the minimum level of support needed?', ask 'What is the maximum of good people and key resources which can productively be put to work at this stage?'"

Finally support can be provided in the form of rewards. When staff members are successful in coming up with a creative solution to a problem, their efforts should be rewarded. This reward could take the form of a special commendation in a staff meeting, a special notice to the board of directors or corporate officers, a monetary bonus, or a private word of appreciation.

Guideline #4 Be realistic in your expectations.

Peter Drucker cautions that "the assumption must be that the majority of innovative efforts will not succeed." If the director or staff members are operating under the unrealistic expectation that every idea they come up with will be an instant winner, they will soon be surprised and discouraged. If those participating in the process recognize at the outset that maybe 9 out of every 10 ideas they come up with will not reach fruition, they will be more patient in waiting for those rare successes.

Guideline #5 Foster a permissive atmosphere for crazy ideas.

One rule in brainstorming sessions is

that participants are not allowed to make negative comments about ideas proposed by other participants. The reason for this is that if participants have their ideas shot down in the group, they will become more defensive and stop offering ideas at all or offer only cautious non-controversial ideas which they know won't be attacked. With negative judgments being withheld participants are more likely to offer a wide range of ideas.

A director interested in tapping the creative resources of staff members needs to develop among center staff the same openness to ideas which exists in a brainstorming session. Staff members need to feel that their suggestions and ideas are welcomed and valued. They should not be reluctant to share their thoughts out of fear they will be ridiculed, criticized, or ignored.

The director should provide staff members with multiple channels for offering their ideas. Ideas could be sought in staff meetings with a brainstorming format. For those intimidated in group discussions the director may want to solicit their views in private conversations. Others may not want to share their opinions in public at all, but may need the impersonal avenue of a suggestion box.

Guideline #6 Expose ideas proposed to critical examination.

The vacation from criticism should not last forever. Once staff members are secure enough to risk unlimited speculation, there needs to be a point where ideas proposed are evaluated with a critical eye. "The creative process," explains William J. J. Gordon, "stems from the total personalities, and an attempt to deny the critical element can have no lasting productive effect."

However, there are constructive and

non-constructive ways to offer criticism. For example, if in a staff meeting all suggestions for redesigning the outdoor play area are being reviewed, the tendency of group members may be to select the best suggestion and to reject all the others. In this process, the useful elements or germs of ideas in the non-winners are often missed.

To avoid this "all-or-nothing" criticism, a number of techniques can be employed. One is to require group members to point out the good aspects of a proposal as well as the negative ones, when offering criticism. A related approach is to expect critics to offer suggestions on how they would modify a rejected proposal. Finally, an opponent of an idea could be expected to offer an alternative to the idea she is opposing.

Guideline #7 Allow staff members to concentrate on problems that especially interest them.

According to Harry Levinson, an organization is best served when it "permits people to seize and develop those challenges and problems which most excite their curiosity." A director, for example, could hold a staff meeting at which all staff members brainstorm about the center's major problems to be solved and opportunities to be seized. From this discussion a priority list of tasks to be addressed could be compiled, and each staff member could be allowed to choose one or two tasks to focus attention on.

One consequence of this approach, Levinson notes, is that staff members may be interested in an issue that "may not, at the moment be of major concern to the organization." This drawback is compensated for by the fact that "the freedom to follow one's interest stimulates a flow of ideas." This flow of ideas on a range of issues would be far more useful to the center in the long run than the trickle of ideas that might result if all staff members were required to be creative about a crucial

problem that did not interest most of them.

Guideline #8 Allow staff members to proceed at their own pace and in their own way.

Individuals cannot turn their creative process on and off like a faucet. Everyone has their own pattern or pace for evoking creativity. One person gets a mental block about problems while on the job, but finds that ideas come to him in a flood when he is jogging. Another has no success until late at night when she relaxes in her favorite chair with a cup of tea.

Most people need to take a mental vacation somewhere in the process. They need to follow a period of intense immersion in a problem with a totally new activity where the conscious mind focuses on something different. As often as not the solution that did not come when a person was deliberately trying to think of it, will pop into her mind when she is thinking about something else. This unpredictable, highly individualized nature of the creative process must be taken into account by a director seeking to make it happen.

Guideline #9 Don't foil brainstorming sessions with preliminary termination.

Guideline #8 applies to the creative process as it occurs in individuals and Guideline #9 applies to the creative process as it occurs in groups. The rules for these two settings differ considerably. In a group setting it becomes more important to force the process along somewhat. After an hour or so of intense concentration in a brainstorming session, many staff members will be showing signs of fatigue and may look for an end to the session or at least a prolonged coffee break. William J. J. Gordon, however, argues that generally such a break

should be avoided. He contends that it takes a long time for the creative process to get rolling. To take a break in mid-stream "would interrupt the continuity of thought . . . and would allow the subconscious imaginative energy to congeal." To reach a satisfactory conclusion, Gordon finds, brainstorming sessions must often continue for three hours.

One means of combating fatigue without terminating the meeting is comedy. When the energy level is dropping, a group member can make a satirical or offbeat suggestion to allow the discussion to digress from the intense level for a few minutes. According to Gordon, "after a few minutes of laughter group members are usually ready again for rigorous and energetic performance."

Gordon also sees some advantage to fatigue setting in. It can force participants to let their guard down and to abandon themselves to taking longer chances. Group members may start "swinging for the fences." Such a swing can be the culmination of protracted imaginative effort, not merely a wild blow, but a highly concentrated mental act tending to reveal a creative solution."

Guideline #10 Don't underestimate the value of success.

Nothing will help the flow of creativity along better than some early and continuing successes. If a director sets out to foster a creative spirit, staff members may initially react with disinterest or pessimism. If the group experiences an early success, if it comes up with a creative solution to a problem, this early uncertainty may be replaced by interest and excitement. If success is long in coming the uncertainty may deteriorate into frustration and cynicism.

With this in mind directors might want to focus on problems of minor magnitude early on to improve the likelihood of success. Gordon also suggests that until the

initial success is realized, no meeting should end on a note of defeat. The director may want to hold off on some promising suggestions until the end of a session if it is not going well. Or he may want to summarize at the end all the promising leads which were brought up during the session.

Having tasted early success, staff members usually will be more patient in waiting for additional victories. But these victories must occur from time to time if participants are going to maintain faith in the effort. One frequent shortcoming is that lots of creative ideas are proposed, but none of them are ever implemented.

Gardner Murphy identifies "hammering out" as the final stage in the creative process. When the group comes up with a creative solution to a problem, its work is not done. The solution must be worked out in detail, adopted to the center's exact needs, and implemented. The creative process does not end in success when the solution is created, but only when the problem is in fact solved.

CREDITS

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