

Leading a Program Through Change

An Interview with Peter Blair by Margie Carter

I'm always on reconnaissance, seeking examples that go beyond the ordinary stories of early childhood directors improving their programs by achieving accreditation or moving up the STARS rating scale. As I visit programs, my mind is always seeking to understand how to account for what I'm seeing. To be sure, few programs have adequate resources, but that alone can't explain a low-quality program or mediocre one.

I've met some energetic directors who have found inspiration beyond what's typical, but then flounder when it comes to getting their staff to embrace change. Some try issuing mandates: "We all need to start doing things this new way," while others talk of 'empowering' their staff to try new things. Without some insight into how to guide the change process both directors and staff can spiral into demoralization if not dysfunction.



Margie Carter and Peter Blair share a commitment to developing early childhood programs into places that offer children, families, and staff what they deserve. Their work fosters robust dialog to uncover the values manifested in our programs, and close examination of how administrative systems can support our educators in engaging in learning and growing with young children and each other. To learn more about Margie's work visit www.ecetrainers.com and Peter's work at www.jccoc.org/preschool.



When I meet directors who are having success on their leadership journeys, I wonder, "Have they been explicit about the guiding values underpinning their actions, or is the staff left to puzzle out the *why* of these changes?"

Peter Blair will tell you that in our first year of knowing each other, I hounded him with these kinds of questions. He had taken over as the director of one of the Jewish Community Center (JCC) early childhood programs in my area and I had been hearing about the impressive changes underway. When he first toured me through their large, complex program, I could see they were definitely in the midst of a big shift:

- Some of the walls had beautiful documentation of children's investigations, while others had rows of look-a-like-craft activities reflecting another curriculum approach.
- While some rooms had children all seated at tables listening to the teacher, others had the teachers scattered around the room listening to the children.
- Signs of the old and the new intermingled with Peter's description of activities he had been engaged in with his faculty.

While not all of Peter's ideas were well received by his staff, there was clearly a current of thoughtful engagement visible in the program and that impressed me.

In subsequent years I toured visitors through this center and pressed Peter to further articulate his leadership approach, which was obviously making a significant impact. Whether a reflection of humility or as yet undefined strategic planning, Peter often shrugged his shoulders. I was sure he had some important insights that could benefit others and trusted he would eventually share these with me.

Some years later, Peter is now transforming a third center, and our dialog has picked up steam. I'm impressed with how he describes what he's learned on his journey and the principles and strategies he's identified from ongoing self-reflection on his work.

Leading with Values and a Vision

Margie: I'm curious, Peter, how you would describe what you know now that you didn't have so well formulated in those early efforts to transform your first program. Just jump in with the first thing that occurs to you and you can count on me to probe further.

Peter: Well, I have definitely learned a lot over the past 10 years. When I first began directing, I knew from my time as a teacher that teachers need to feel invested in not only their daily work, but to also feel a part of working towards a vision of something different as a school.

Margie: So what were your first efforts at giving them a vision of something different?

Peter: I know that I didn't fully realize the importance of a shared vision and shared leadership when I first started directing at Mercer Island. We had spent the prior year before my directorship engaged in a discussion to rewrite our mission statement. What I know now is that this was vital. While everyone (teachers and leadership) didn't share every value or every piece of the new mission as a shared value, we did all engage in the process. What it unearthed was the raw emotion behind what we all believed and thought about children and families. It energized some of us to really take inspiring new ways of thinking and run with them. Some faculty began to realize that old ways of thinking, those rows of look-alike art projects, for instance, were not going to fit into our new vision.

I now understand the importance of these heady dialogues. For what happens in those discussions is that you begin to establish the foundations of strong relationships. You begin to identify what we share as thoughts, as emotions, as ways of living with young children and families. What we were doing at Mercer Island in the late 1990s was not rewriting a mission, but rather establishing a new vision for what we dreamed would be possible for young children and families through a new philosophical approach. We established our core values in those discussions, articulated these values (i.e., play, aesthetics, reciprocity, listening), and then

began living into that vision and those values.

Years later, upon arrival in Orange County, I knew that we needed to start with this conversation. I also knew that we needed to argue, to disagree, to unearth all that had not been said for many years prior to my arrival. For in order to know what you believe in, you have to identify the actions and behaviors of those around you that you don't like, that stick in your gut as wrong for children and families.

Margie: So, you stirred things up by getting folks focused on discussions of values, rather than regulations, and in that process, people's hearts and minds opened up. I know you also began to make some shifts in the organization's structures and support systems as part of your change process.

Peter: Yes, I tried to think about ways to get change moving, in areas where the outcome would have a direct effect on teachers. For instance, I focused on teacher planning time. When I took on directing the first JCC center on Mercer Island, teachers had one hour of individually scheduled paid planning time per week (separate from their co-teacher). By the time I left, we had advanced to 3-5 hours of planning time per week with co-teachers meeting together. This process was not instant; it took 3-5 years to reach those levels and involved teacher input and self-change to make it happen.

Changing Begins with the Self

Margie: What kinds of self-change are you referring to and what motivated your teachers to start down that road?

Peter: I think that all change begins with the self. It is an internal investigation about "Who am I?" I strongly believe that you have to know what baggage you bring with you to your work with children. You have to know

what buttons get pushed and how you respond to behaviors that you don't connect with or like. Equally important, you have to know what inspires you about working with children. Thus, I thought with teachers about how are we together as co-teachers. How do I respond to my fellow teacher in the room in front of the kids? Do I want to collaborate? If not, do I really belong at this school anymore? This self-change became raw in these initial teacher planning times and small age-group meetings as we further explored what we were doing and how it mapped back to our new vision (or in most cases how it didn't map back). Simple discussions like: "What on earth does a handprint turkey have to do with Thanksgiving?" became emotionally-charged discussions about what we believed about children and artistic representation.

Margie: You are describing powerful challenges to decades of standard early childhood practice. I'm understanding that you kept people motivated and engaged in this change process because you were simultaneously creating structures and support systems that directly benefited them as individuals and also pulled them into an identity of being part of a larger team and vision for children, families, and ultimately, themselves as educators.

Coming Together to Collaborate and to Argue

Peter: I think that the core was that 'we' were creating the systems and structures together. We, as a faculty, were partners in creating structures that worked within our context of an early childhood center. For instance, I created transparency about the business side of our center and connected it to the 'on the ground' experience for teachers. I explained we had constraints with costs, like the labor costs associated with paid planning time. I helped faculty understand that despite these

labor costs, I wanted to invest in our expanded paid planning time as a priority. I also tried to make transparent that the goal of meeting in 'age group pods' was to sustain our collaborative discussions. It became clear that by operating as one faculty, rather than 15 classrooms operating in isolation, we would move our practice forward more quickly.

As a result, the old paradigm of teachers who were content to simply come into their classroom, do their job, worry about their own group and then go home, was not only undesirable, but simply no longer an option. Teachers began to call in sick less often and to enjoy their work more because they saw the movement and knew that they were a part of it. They, too, began to embrace the idea of broadening the conversation beyond individual teaching teams. These age-group pod meetings became a place where we would begin to challenge one another. As these meetings began to shift away from benign topics and administrative agendas, I pushed the conversation into thinking about articles, ideas, and things we had seen in visits to other centers. Looking back, I see that I was promoting collaboration, encouraging hidden conflicts to come out in the open, and pushing us to think about what we were doing.

Margie: So, as we continue this dialog, I want to cull some principles for transforming a program from what you have been saying.

- Get people to dig into their values and ideas about the larger purpose of their work in order to build a shared vision.
- Start with changes that directly benefit teachers so they become invested in the change process.
- Create structures where people can come together to argue their way through to articulating how their

practices connect with shared core values and teaching ideas that inspire them.

Creating a Change Theory and Call to Action

Peter: At the time, I was really working from my gut and moving intuitively, rather than from a set of principles. For instance, I thought that since the overall effect of implementing paid planning time would be in the teachers' self-interest, it had the potential to engage them in the change process. This was the beginning of a systemic approach to change. For example, if I didn't put structures in place that would support the teachers' work, the overall goal would not be fully realized. Our goal was to create a community of learners, a place where the work of the children would inspire the adults (teachers and parents) to reevaluate our ways of thinking about children's potential. With each passing year we felt more strongly that by creating meaningful learning environments for children and a real dialogue about what they were doing, we would begin to shift the paradigm of thinking about early childhood.

I remember on one of your first tours you said something to me like: "Wow, you are really trying to move mountains." My reply was almost instant: "Yeah, you want to push with me?" I didn't know back then that I was trying to create a system for thinking. Once I read Peter Senge's book, *The Fifth Discipline*, I started to think in those ways. I now clearly understand that creating a system for collaborative planning requires that we (teachers and administrators) work together as partners, think of our school as a community where everyone's actions affect one another, think structurally about the day, and stay focused on the children as our core value. As I was pressed by those

around me to articulate my thoughts and the 'whys' behind what I do as a leader, I kept returning to these thoughts, perhaps what you are now calling principles:

- Make change collaboratively.
- Make the factors that are at play in the change transparent.
- Create a call to action (a crisis that we all feel or a consensus that things are not going right).
- Make a path to the end visible to all.

This change process or change theory became my working premise going forward.

Margie: Say more about this idea of creating a call to action around an agreed-upon crisis. What do you mean?

Peter: As humans we inherently seek comfort. When you are comfortable, you never seek change. However, when things start going wrong, you see who will take initiative and begin to move towards a better place. Whether this place is born from seeking safer and healthier environments for kids, or whether it is from a philosophical standpoint, it is a mindset of seeking something different. When we argued, it brought out the true issues. As directors, we all know when the time has come to 'coach someone out of the field.' When this happens, we should seize upon it and not wait because it only gets worse. The same is true in our practice with children. When something is wrong, when it doesn't feel right in our gut, we have to create a call to action, a time for discussion, a 'calling-it-like-it-is' moment. We have to foment the discussion and not let it pass.

Investing in Professional Development

Margie: When we first met and I toured your center, I was quite struck

by something you said. You mentioned that many directors start the change process by improving the environment, purchasing a lot of new things to create a new sense of possibilities. I've seen many cases where this is an effective launching pad for change. But in some cases, it has been done without any deeper understandings or investment on the part of the teacher. You said you decided, instead, to invest your resources in professional development, both sending teachers out to Reggio-inspired conferences and study tours around the country and setting up in-house professional development for all faculty. Then, if your teachers started requesting funds to change their environments, you would support that initiative. I was really struck by the wisdom of this. "Invest in ongoing systems for professional development" is a principle I now shout from the rooftops.

Peter: About five years into our change process, I would say, "Give me an empty parking lot with my teachers and we will have a robust program." I truly believe that quality is all about the teaching faculty in a school. If you have all the pretty stuff in the world and you don't know how to use it, several things will happen:

- The materials will not be respected and will be lost, damaged, or destroyed.
- The teachers will bury the new materials in the cabinets because they don't know how to use them and the money is thus wasted.
- You will simply have a pretty shell void of any heart.

By investing in my professional development, I saw the potential to create

real, lasting change. By thinking with others about their own thinking, by questioning, by seeing other inspired teachers, leaders, ways of being with children, you begin to see that you are not alone. This investment in professional development begins the call to action. Your inspired teachers begin to see that it is all possible, achievable. I can't stress the importance of professional development enough. It is the catalyst for getting the thought process moving. However, you have to invest in real, quality, professional development, opportunities to think, to question, to debate, to unearth your own questions and have those moments where you pause and say, "What do I believe in?" and "How is it present in my work?" If there is anything I realize now, it is that change is a process; it can't happen overnight. The way to achieve change is to engage the entire community in 'thinking about thinking.'

The first thing we established here in Orange County was our shared values: respect, community, love, peace, inquiry, and social responsibility. We then delved further into our identity as a faculty comprised of teachers who have a basis of understanding about child development, the experience in the field and, most importantly, passion. When people who visit and tell me they love what we are doing, I push them to articulate why. What usually comes out is our passion. I am blessed to do something that I love every day and I guess it shows. I love continual growth and I am never satisfied with where we are. So I leave you with this, dear reader: "Where are you? Are you happy with that place?"

Creating a Call to Action

Peter Blair, Merage JCC of Orange County

Some programs suffer from too few resources, but ours suffered from excess. When I arrived, I got the impression someone had opened a catalogue and ordered 15 of every item without any intention. Crunching the numbers, I found \$2,000 in tempera paint, over \$500 in construction paper, and so forth. I was very put off by this waste and excess, which didn't seem consistent with the values we want to pass on to children. So I decided to create a call to action around getting clear about priorities for our allocation of resources. I wanted to make sure that everything we put into our environment and every purchase we made was done with intentionality.

During our two professional development days at the conclusion of my first school year, my staff and I emptied into the hallways everything in the classrooms except for tables and chairs. Literally everything. I told the teachers to take home any materials that they purchased with their own money and had not been reimbursed by the school. This strategy had many purposes:

- See all of what we had.
- Dispose of the broken stuff.
- View resources as the school's not 'mine' or 'my classroom's.'
- Think intentionally about what we would put back in the classrooms.

We spent one whole day sorting, organizing, and cleaning. This really established a value of organization (Gambetti), showed us the excess, and revealed that most of our stuff didn't align with our core values. We threw away three dumpsters full of garbage and broken stuff. Day two was spent thinking together about "Schema theory" (Piaget) and then putting items back into the classroom that supported this theory of understanding children's learning.

I had also purchased some new items that better reflected the core values we had spent the year discussing. I went to the teachers with the new items and proposed a trade: "You give me two of those commercial plastic trucks and I will give you one of my new beautiful, wooden, handcrafted trucks."



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