

Looking for Core Values

by Margie Carter

During a recent conference-study tour — “From Administrator to Innovator: Creating Organizational Systems That Support Reflective Teaching” — one of our Canadian delegates shared an important ah-ha moment. As we prepared to leave our hotel conference meeting room to tour centres, we asked the delegates to look for the core values of London Bridge Children’s Services. Trying to be diligent, Betty said she started sifting through her conference folder to find a paper with ‘Core Values’ in the heading. She knew her own organization had such a paper and was disturbed that she couldn’t locate one called “London Bridge Core Values” in her packet. She decided this paper was probably going to be distributed at the centre and eagerly got on the bus.

As delegates disembarked, the London Bridge centre director welcomed them with an overview of the program and then gave everyone a paper as they set about visiting classrooms. Betty said, “I was relieved at first, thinking I was getting the Core Values, but all I got was a map!” Though anxious that she had failed her assignment, Betty gave up looking for the Core Values paper and set about touring the centre. “Then it hit me,” she said. “Everywhere I looked I saw a consistent set of values being expressed — in the arrangements and materials in the environment, in documentation displays on the walls, on the play yard, and in all interactions. In my organization, reference to Core Values is only on paper. Here I find them unmistakably throughout the life of the centre. What an eye opener!”

Betty’s hilarious telling of this story provoked some serious thinking as well. I was reminded of Jim Greenman’s consistent mantra that if we are doing our job well as administrators, our mission statements will be off the wall and in the minds and actions of everyone working in the building. For most administrators and educators, however, mission statements or core values aren’t alive and consistently expressed in their centres. Instead, programs are managed with a primary focus on licensing regulations, risk management, and budget constraints. What stands out for me is how easily this limited focus results in mediocre quality for children and families and minimal job satisfaction for staff. On the other hand, when leaders work with bigger dreams and carefully crafted core values, I see a different spirit in a centre: an excitement about possibilities, engagement in creative and critical thinking, and eagerness to take on new challenges. Peter Senge (2006) puts it this way:

“If any one idea about leadership has inspired organizations for thousands of years, it’s the capacity to hold a shared picture of the future we seek to create. . . . When there’s a shared vision (as opposed to the all-too-familiar ‘vision statement’), people excel and learn, not

because they are told to, but because they want to. But many leaders have personal visions that never get translated into shared visions that galvanize an organization.”

Galvanizing an organization

In preparing the second edition of *The Visionary Director*, Deb Curtis and I (2010) again reflected on the management practices we’ve encountered in the wide range of early childhood programs with whom we’ve worked, and also reviewed recommended literature on management practices in the business world. We looked for patterns in administrative practices that motivate and lead to excellence. Invariably we saw these as organizations with people who view themselves as leaders, not just managers or teachers. They are innovators who focus on clarifying core values and aligning all aspects of the organization with these values to grow their vision.

A vision for an organization can’t be just one person’s idea. Visions grow by involving people in activities that help them name and create what they find most meaningful and memorable from their own values, family, and community experiences, and what they long for in a workplace. While I know many early childhood leaders are hard at work in this endeavor, I’ve been particularly inspired by three early childhood organizations who’ve undertaken the arduous task of transforming themselves into a living vision.

n London Bridge Child Care Services

- London, Ontario, engaged in an 18-month leadership development program drawing inspiration from business, philosophy, art, and child development theory. (For a summary of their process see Carter & Curtis, 2010.)
- Chicago Commons Child Development Program, in Chicago, Illinois, crafted a remarkable organizational structure to support a growing exploration of Reggio-inspired ideas, starting with a small group of teachers and administrators volunteering to participate in study together, which over time engaged all staff and sites. (For details see Scheinfeld, Haigh, & Scheinfeld, 2008.)
- Hilltop Children’s Centre in Seattle, Washington, steadily identified a set of core values and created an organizational culture with administrative practices to bring their vision to life. (Two valuable resources with details of their process include Pelo, 2010 and Hilltop Children’s Centre, 2010.)

Strategy: Create a process for identifying core values

An important starting place for moving your program beyond the ordinary to extraordinary quality is developing an agreed upon set of values to guide your work. A quick web search will yield suggested resources to guide organizations in developing core values. In *The Visionary Director* we describe a number of strategies that can be used in staff and board meetings. A favorite is to work overtime to explore what you believe children, families, and staff deserve in your program. To maintain a visionary mindset, the

operative word here is deserve. Focusing on what people deserve, keeps you from reducing your vision to merely meeting minimum standards. As you go through the process of getting agreement, push yourself to flesh out more specific understandings. For instance, general statements like “Children deserve to be loved” or “Families deserve to be respected” don’t paint a clear enough picture of what you are striving for. You might practice with some contrasting images of environments, posing the question, “What does this image suggest about the teacher’s view of what children deserve?”

Strategy: Align your practices with your core values

In *The Visionary Director* we offer an assessment and strategic planning tool to use once you have identified your core values. The idea is to systematically examine your organizational systems, policies, and allocation of resources to see if your current practices reflect your core values. We suggest looking at the details of your systems and policies with children, families, and staff, examining your use of space and the design of your environments, and how time and money are allocated as resources that reflect your values. When you identify changes you want to make, develop specific goals with action plans.

Here’s an excerpt from Hilltop Children’s Centre’s (2010) *Right from the Start* DVD resource which offers an example of how a program can begin to align its financial and human resources practices with its core values.

“Over the years we’ve come to understand that administrators have the important tasks of keeping operations humming along with a well-trained staff and fully enrolled classrooms, all in accordance with licensing and/or accreditation requirements. How administrators accomplish those tasks, however, is a reflection of the organization’s culture and priorities. For us, the establishment of culture rests first on the shoulders of the administration, then each person on staff is assumed to have something to contribute to the culture. How could we be certain that the administration is practicing the values teachers are asked to have and implement in their practice? It is simple and perhaps trite, but the Golden Rule applies for us each day. We treat others the way we intend to be treated. For example, consider a school that describes itself as a ‘School of Inquiry’ but then doesn’t ask staff a single question; the inconsistency is obvious. Living our vision starts from the first day of a new hire. “We know that there are three values that define our Hilltop culture: relationship, reflection, and transparency. We achieve each of those by instilling business and pedagogical practices that are congruent. We designed an orientation process that values relationship by pairing teachers with other teachers and administrators rather than merely offering our handbook to read. Reflection is present in the questions asked of new hires about their own observations. Teachers experience transparency when they are told exactly what is expected of them. “Over the years we’ve come to understand that administrators have the important tasks of keeping operations humming along with a well-

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“Our administrators make it a priority to look below the surface at the institutional patterns of staffing; for instance, what we value and honor, how colleagues treat one another, and most importantly, how the children are honored and valued. As an administrative team, we want to mirror the respect and honor that we expect for the children. To that end, we make sure that staff are given the time they deserve to become members of our learning community.

“In our thinking, business orientation refers to information about how to be an employee with the centre. But for teachers to be reflective practitioners and not just technicians, they need and deserve a pedagogical orientation and ongoing support for their learning about teaching. We have discovered that making an upfront investment by giving teachers a pedagogical orientation right from the start has tremendous payoffs and is good preventive medicine. To effectively orient a new teacher, we have to budget for initial time out of the classroom with a mentor or pedagogical leader, aligning our use of resources with our values.”

Strategy: Assess staff views

To begin developing a useful staff orientation system, conduct a needs assessment of recent hires to determine how supported they felt and where the gaps in their orientation might exist. Create a survey to ask questions such as these:

- If you could tell a new hire the three most important things about working here, what would they be?
- What were you most nervous about in your first few days here?
- What role did the centre and staff play in dealing with those worries?
- How confident do you feel as a teacher here?
- What role do you, as a co-teacher, play in orienting a new member to your teaching team?

Reflecting on our Canadian colleague's story about looking for core values has given me a clear focus for my work with early childhood centres. When something delights or disturbs

me, I want to explore the core values that are being reflected. An easy place to start this exploration is with snapshots of your environment. But don't stop there. Begin to look for core values in every aspect of your organizational culture, policies, and use of resources.

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