

Helping Employees Cope with Change

by Lorraine Schrag, Elyssa Nelson, and Tedi Siminowsky

■ In response to community demand, the ABC Day Care Center opened a room for infants. The new program was an instant success and soon had a waiting list. However, staff in the preschool rooms were less than excited. The director spent so much time in setting up the new room that she barely had time to help the rest of the staff with their problems. In addition, budgets for classroom supplies were cut to the bone in order to equip the new room.

■ The head teacher in the four year old room quit after ten years of teaching at Happy Days Nursery School, and was replaced by a new teacher. The rest of the teachers were upset that they were not considered for promotion, and were threatened by the new teacher who arrived with lots of enthusiasm and new ideas.

■ The arrival of the computers was greeted with delight by the children and with despair by the teachers at the Elm Street After School Program. The teachers were intimidated by the computers, and were afraid that their rapport with

the children would disappear in a rush of arcade fever.

These are three typical examples of change, and its impact on staff, in child care centers. We teach children in our centers to be flexible, open, and creative. But when change occurs at the center, we often find that it is the adults who are the most inflexible, and the most resistant to change. This resistance may manifest itself in anger, anxiety, bitterness, or despair.

Staff members who are unable to adapt to changes in their work environment may react by complaining to their co-workers, thus chipping away at staff morale. They may vent their frustration by refusing to go along with the change. Their anxiety or anger may cause them to perform below their ability. Or they may just quit, or perform so poorly that they end up being fired.

As a director you would like to avoid these reactions to change, but you know also that you cannot avoid making changes. Whether your program is an

expanding multi-site system or a small stable nursery school, you will inevitably be introducing some magnitude of change into your organization. So the question is, how can you introduce change without upsetting your staff?

The following are five suggestions on helping staff cope with change. They deal with ways to select and develop change-oriented staff members, and they offer some non-threatening ways to introduce change. But implicit in all of them is the message from director to staff, "I value you so much that I'm going to do whatever I can to bring you along with this change."

#1. Building a Resilient Staff

The most direct way to minimize staff resistance to change is to build a staff that looks upon change as a challenge rather than as a threat. This involves not only including openness to change as a criteria in the selection process, but also using staff development opportunities to strengthen the commitment of staff members.

Openness to change is not, of course, a trait that can be readily measured during the selection process. But there are some fairly reliable indicators to watch for. For example it may be helpful to get candidates talking about what they did and didn't like about their previous jobs. If dealing with changes comes up in the negative category, this may be a meaningful clue as to what to expect. Also, candidates who are very interactive, who are free flowing in their thinking, and who have many ideas to talk about other than that they really love kids, are likely to be able to deal well with change. Exposing candidates to even a small deviation from the norm in the selection process can also demonstrate how they deal with change. For example, having candidates participate in a group interview as opposed to the expected one-on-one interview can show how they handle the stress of the unexpected.

It is important, once a teacher is hired, to carefully observe her during her probationary period to see how she handles change in practice. Observe how well she deals with small changes, such as being asked to change rooms to fill in for absent teachers. Another factor to observe is how comfortable new teachers are in discussing the problems and successes they are experiencing. Openness in discussing such issues is a positive indication that a person is open to change.

On an ongoing basis, any staff development efforts that get staff members more committed to the goals of the organization are likely to yield positive benefits in times of change. The more that staff members believe they are an integral part of the team, the more willing they will be to put up with any discomforts brought on by changes. On the other hand, staff who have little commitment to the organization, who are just along for the ride, will react strongly to any inconvenience or stress.

#2. Avoiding Leadership Blind Spots

When the director of the Elm Street After School Program decided to buy the computers for her program, she was sure the idea would succeed. She had researched the educational implications of computers; she had read hundreds of software reviews to be sure she selected programs that were truly educational as well as entertaining; and she tried these programs out on the computers she planned to buy to make sure everything worked as described. She even prepared carefully for breaking the news to the staff by pulling together the statistics and research to bolster her case. When the teachers greeted her presentation with misgivings, she set up a computer and, with great enthusiasm, showed them "Speller Kong" and "Math Invaders" in action. Two weeks later, with the computers gathering dust on the shelves, the director wondered what had gone wrong. Why had the staff opposed her great idea?

What went wrong was that the director had blind spots which prevented her from seeing what was happening. She was so preoccupied with launching her baby that she became oblivious to what was bothering the teachers. When teachers showed signs of resistance, the director responded by rolling out more artillery to win them over to her side. Instead, she should have tried to understand their concerns, to see what was happening from their point of view.

More often than not, when teachers resist a new idea, they are not so much opposed to the idea itself, as they are anxious about the social consequences of the change. They may be concerned with how this change will affect their relationship with the children, whether it will keep them from working closely with teachers they enjoy, whether it will force them outside their comfort zone to

work in an area where they lack expertise.

If the director is so preoccupied with the logistics of implementing the change that she fails to see such social and emotional impacts of change, no amount of haranguing on the merits of the idea will overcome teachers' resistance. When signs of resistance appear, the director may find it helpful to talk to concerned staff members on a one-to-one basis to explore their feelings about the change. An alternative is to pull aside teachers who have already bought into the change and ask for their views on what it is that is causing some staff members to fight the idea. Only when the director has overcome her blind spots and seen the root causes of resistance can she begin to work toward successful implementation of the change.

#3. Keeping Staff Informed

A large measure of the anxiety aroused during a period of change is caused by fear of the unknown. If a director decides to add an infant component and only announces this in a cursory way, staff members may well be consumed with a host of uncertainties: Will teachers be taken from our classrooms to staff the new program? Will this new program receive top priority for any new money for equipment? Will salary increases be put on hold while the new program is getting started?

Most of this anxiety can be dissolved by keeping staff informed both before and after the change. There may well be a temptation to withhold disclosing a plan until it is finalized, with the reasoning that there is no need to get staff all worked up ahead of time. However, more often than not, inklings of this plan will have leaked through the grapevine anyway. So rather than let these rumors build erroneous fears, it is usually best to keep staff up to speed

from the start on developments that will affect them.

When informing staff about an impending change, it is best to fill them in on the big picture. Let them know what has prompted you to think about making the change; how this change fits in with your center's current goals, or how and why you are shifting your goals; and what the advantages and disadvantages are to making the change.

Then, viewing the change from their perspective, describe how you anticipate this change will impact the day-to-day operations of the center and how it will impact them personally. Try to be as candid as possible in addressing any concerns people might have. If there may be some negative or unpredictable consequences, don't try to gloss over or conceal these. When staff find out later that you were less than honest with them, your credibility will be damaged, if not destroyed.

Sometimes it would appear that a new idea or a change in plans or policies is too complex to fully explain to all staff members. When economic pressures force a center to increase enrollment in the preschool rooms from 18 to 20, a detailed budgetary discussion of all the factors and alternatives may well be beyond the grasp of staff members who aren't versed in accounting. So the director may be tempted to say simply, "We need to do this for budgetary reasons. Trust me!" If staff members are being forced by this change to work harder for the same pay, they may view this explanation by the director as somewhat less than satisfactory. While the director should not try to razzle dazzle the teachers with fancy charts and figures, she should take the time and trouble to translate the reasons into terms that all staff members can understand.

Helping staff fully understand changes is not simply an act of professional courtesy. In general it is in the best interests of the

program to have teachers who understand what they are doing. A person who does not fully comprehend what she is doing will not be a fully productive worker. She will not be able to exercise informed and intelligent judgment on what she is doing. If the After School teachers do not really understand how the computer programs the kids are using work, they will be handicapped in their efforts to help the children learn through computers.

#4. Involving Staff in the Change Process

An even better way to bring staff along with a change is to have them participate in the process of change. There are two advantages to inviting participation. First, staff who are involved in planning a change have an ego investment in seeing that it succeeds. They will work hard to make their plan work. Second, by including staff in the planning process, you are multiplying the size of your solution pool. By having more minds focused on solving a problem, particularly minds of people whose work is central to the purpose of the organization, the chances of arriving at a successful conclusion are increased dramatically.

However, for participation to be effective, it must be true participation and not just a gimmick. Including teachers from the preschool room on a committee to plan the new infant room does not constitute participation if the director has already drafted the plans and just wants a rubber stamp approval. Asking for teachers' opinions on the new staffing structure in a staff meeting is not true participation if the director doesn't intend to take seriously what they have to say. Participation only works if those asked to participate feel like they are participating, and not simply playing a game.

There are myriad ways to get people involved in the change process. One

common way is to appoint staff members to serve on a task force. If a new head teacher is being selected, having other teachers participate on the screening committee can be very helpful. Having the support and agreement of the teachers who will be working with the new teacher minimizes feelings of resentment and promotes teamwork.

In other instances, however, appointing a committee is a poor excuse for participation. Unless they are given a very specific, achievable charge, committees often become cumbersome and indecisive. When confronted with a thorny problem, a director may achieve the best results by picking staff members' brains on a one-to-one basis, or by conducting brainstorming sessions at regular staff meetings.

Other informal types of participation can have valuable results. If a new head teacher is coming in, you can team her up with one or two of the more experienced teachers and ask them to teach her the ropes. If you are moving to a new space, you can take field trips to the new space ahead of time so that teachers can start planning how to use it. If you are adding an infant component, you can assign different staff members to be in charge of selecting equipment, buying books and materials, and designing the space.

#5. Providing Support

During a period of change, when staff members typically are most anxious or angry, the director is often the most distracted and, therefore, least available to relieve this tension. An integral part of the process of planning for change should be thinking through how extra support will be provided to staff during this period.

The most basic form of support that can be provided is to publicly acknowledge at the outset that staff members are likely to feel anxious, ignored, angry, or disoriented. Let them know that such feelings do not reflect a weakness on their part,

Who Can Cope With Change?

Some people have the ability to adapt to change, others do not. Larry Wilson, head of the Wilson Learning Corporation, has identified five attitudes shared by those who are best able to deal with change. If your center is likely to experience considerable change, you may want to keep these attitudes in mind as you select and develop your staff.

- **Challenge** – an openness to change. People possessed with this mind-set view change as an opportunity, rather than as a threat.
- **Commitment** – a high degree of involvement in what one is doing. A staff member who believes in what the organization is doing, who is committed to the goals of the organization, is likely to be supportive of changes that improve the performance of the organization.
- **Control** – a sense of personal impact on external change. If staff members, through their ongoing relationship with the organization, feel as if they are not powerless in the face of change, that they will be able to influence the course of change, they will be more accepting of change when it occurs.
- **Confidence** – the recognition that no situation puts your personal worth on the line. Confident people are comfortable with who they are, with their faults as well as their strengths, and with others. They tend not to read into activities (such as organizational changes) implications about their worth. They are less inclined to avoid things that they may not do well, and they are more willing to take risks.
- **Connection** – the extent of interpenetration you are willing to establish between yourself, others, and your environment. Interaction with the external environment, or making connections, somehow appears to allow a parallel process to take place internally, enabling a person to develop an increasingly sophisticated system of adaptability to change.

but that they are an inevitable result of a turbulent uncertain period. Assure them that someone will be available to listen to their concerns, to answer their questions, and to help them in any way they need to survive this traumatic period.

To underline your support, you should strive to maintain, even to increase if necessary, the frequency of staff meetings. You should schedule specific times when staff members know that they can talk to you on a one-to-one basis. If you disappear from the face of the earth, and if standard communication forums are cut off during this period, staff will have limited productive means of expressing their feelings.

You may also need staff members to take on increased responsibilities as you may be distracted and unable to be as involved in the day-to-day operation of the program. If you see this happening, you should not let it occur by default. To avoid feelings of resentment, let staff members know ahead of time that they are being entrusted with increased responsibilities. Let them know that you are available if they have serious concerns, but that basically you expect them to act independently, and that you trust they can succeed. Then let them go. Don't be a Monday morning quarterback, second guessing all of their decisions. This is not the time to be hypercritical.

You will inevitably find that having laid all the above groundwork there will still be some individuals who will need even more direct support. Most individuals do want to deal successfully with change. It's all a part of growing up. As much as they may overtly resist change, there is a spot in them that wants to grow.

What you need to do is to go for that spot, to find a way to get them excited about some aspect of what is going on. Encourage them to take that risk, and

let them know that you are supporting them all the way.

If you can't get a teacher to work with the computers in the classroom, maybe you could get him to take a computer home to mess around with over the weekend. If you can't convince the cook that the new vegetarian menu is a good idea, maybe you could get her to cooperate if you were able to work a kitchen aide into the budget.

Unfortunately, you will not be able to find that spot with all people. There will be some people who will not be able to deal with change no matter how much preparation and support you provide. They may not give you much feedback about how they are feeling or why they are having a hard time. They won't provide you with anything to hook onto to turn them around. Or they may be passive resisters. They may agree with everything you say, but then go out and perform as they always have, totally disregarding the changed expectations.

Before investing too much time, you need to decide whether it would be in the best interests of the program to keep trying to turn these individuals around or to let them go. Sometimes those who are having a hard time with change will

recognize that the stress is too much for them, and they will select themselves out of child care. Others will lack such self-insight and will need to be told that both in the interests of the program and of their career they are being asked to leave.

Throughout the process of change, your attitude as the leader in the organization is critical. If you approach change with enthusiasm and confidence, this spirit can infect your staff. If you maintain your focus on the goals of the organization throughout a period of change, people will not lose sight of the ultimate purpose of change. If you view your role during change as being a facilitator, one who carefully prepares the way, who keeps channels of communication open, who provides support wherever it is needed, you will make the change easier for everyone. If you respect your employees, you will take the time and effort to bring them along.

Lorraine Schrag is director of the Centinela Hospital Child Care Center in Inglewood, California. Elyssa Nelson is co-director (with her husband, Eric) of the Child Education Center in La Canada, California. Tedi Siminowsky is child development services coordinator for the US Army Child Development Services in Berlin, West Germany.