

If the Director Isn't Direct, Does the Team Have Direction?

It's Anywhere, USA, and the Child Care Directors' Support Group is gathered to share concerns. Jane presents her current dilemma for analysis: how to get a veteran teacher to expand her repertoire of behavior management strategies beyond time-out.

"Why don't you try to get other members of her team to stop using time-out and maybe she'll use it less," Dana recommends.

"You don't want to upset her; she's so loyal to the program," observes Tony.

"Tell her you like the way she uses positive reinforcement," suggests Camilla

"Isn't she going to retire next year anyway?" asks Taneesha.

"You could send out a memo to everyone about it and maybe she'd get the hint: she knows she shouldn't use it so much," says Terry.

"When she went to school it probably was the way she was taught," conjectures Bryanna.

Milagros frowns, "Wouldn't anyone bring her in for a supervisory conference and address the issue directly? What's wrong with telling her that she can't use time-out for every little annoying behavior that kids do?"

The oxygen level in the room suddenly thins as Directors suck in air.

"Oh no, I'd never feel comfortable with that direct approach. She's been doing it so long it's part of her style—she believes in it. I don't want to hurt her feelings. I'd rather live with the problem than get into a fight about it," replies Jane.

Unspoken agreement to drop a hot subject prevailed. Gemma discreetly asks where the next meeting will be held.

"Be pleasant, avoid conflict, model correct behavior, exercise caution and hope more time will help resolve the situation," is not only Jane's mantra, but it is also familiar unwritten code of behavior in the field of early care and education. Most directors use an indirect mode of communication, leading to the question, "If the director is not direct, does the team have direction?"

Two Wheelock College graduate seminars for child care directors incorporate personality inventories to help directors learn how others see them and to develop skills for greater leadership effectiveness. "Leading the change: Family friendly programs," the newest of the seminars, was developed with funding from the American Business Collaborative for Quality Dependent Care and W/FD (formerly Work/Family Directors) and includes the Birkman Leadership Inventory in the curriculum. "The child care organization: The human side of management," one of the original courses begun over 20 years ago by Gwen Morgan, features the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).

Roger Birkman's goal in the creation of the Leadership Inventory was to help people appreciate each other's differences rather than fighting to eliminate them. Used primarily in the corporate world, this measure has been administered to over one million people with highly touted success (Birkman, 1995). "The Birkman" is useful in helping directors identify their communication styles.

The MBTI, used more often in the field of early care and education, is also highly validated. Based on the work of the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, Isabel Myers, and her daughter, Catherine Briggs, developed the MBTI to identify work and communication style preferences. Their goal parallels Birkman's: appreciating differences can eliminate warfare (Barr & Barr, 1989; Kroeger & Thusen, 1992). The MBTI helps directors identify their different management styles.

Data collected across the country on over 400 child care directors using the Birkman Leadership Inventory and over 300 early care and education leaders using the MBTI revealed strikingly similar patterns. Birkman data for the general public show that about half the population used direct means of communication, such as preferring face to face interactions, being frank about problems, asserting opinions, and valuing competition; they used phrases such as "calling the question," "cutting to the chase," and "getting everything out on the table." Child care directors are different; only 20% use this direct approach. The other 80% have an indirect communication style which is more reserved, nondirective, consensus-building, preferring suggestions to demand and requests to ultimatums; they use the phrases found in the opening vignette of this article.

MBTI data patterns were equally clear. Fifty percent of the millions of people who have taken the MBTI prefer to make decisions using the personal "feeling" approach and the other half use the impersonal "Thinking" approach (although 65% of women make "Feeling" decisions and 65% of men make "Thinking" decisions). But 80% of child care directors prefer to make their decisions using the "feeling" approach as opposed to the "Thinking" approach, which means that they concern themselves with the impact their decisions will have on people, in contrast to "Thinking" leaders who make less time-consuming objective decisions. "Feeling" directors have a tendency to personalize issues and feel guilty.

Together, these MBTI and Birkman data suggest that the field of early care and education is replete with directors who have an indirect, personally vulnerable style of leadership. And here, the dilemma emerges: If half of the people prefer direct communication and half of the director's tasks require objective decisions (hiring and firing; soliciting funds; advocating for children and families; speaking in public; convincing the board; etc.), what is an indirect director to do? The daily round of interactions required of a director rarely allows the luxury of being indirect or taking all stressful situations personally.

Today's director can learn three essential skills from direct communicators who use the "Thinking" approach to decision-making: timely decisiveness, clear communication of expectations and effective confrontation.

Time Decisiveness: Birkman results show that many directors are “selectively sociable.” They are choosy about who they will use as sounding boards and coaches, resulting in their solving problems alone. Because they see many sides of the issues and thus do not want to limit their options, many directors have trouble making timely decisions. MBTI results show directors tend to take things personally, and spend time worrying about how others will react rather than being decisive.

One way for indirect leaders to gain skill in timely decision-making is to join a directors’ support group which is facilitated by a skilled leader who takes responsibility for promoting a productive group dynamic (unlike the vignette group, which lacks a professional facilitator). When the group has developed a high level of trust, the climate becomes safe enough for the indirect communicator to practice direct communication through coached role-plays. Group participants can emerge from meetings bolstered with new approaches, encouragement of peers to face issues directly and courage to take the risk of trying new behavior. Support groups can also remind “Feeling” directors to take things less personally and to move beyond their sense of vulnerability.

Clear Communication: Indirect, “Feeling” directors often have a heartfelt commitment to children, families, staff and programs which includes an unwritten set of rules for conduct. Making the program mission explicit rather than implicit will help both direct and indirect communicators on staff. When people can refer to a written mission statement of NAEYC’s *Code of Ethical Conduct*, which is publicly displayed, expectations are clearer and staff can spend less time trying to guess what the director thinks and feels and use more time for solving problems.

This exercise is recommended to help the indirect communicator safely communicate her unwritten, but powerful, expectations to her staff.

1. The director asks herself: What are the three most important behavioral expectations I have of staff? Which, if any, are non-negotiable? What do I stand for? What is my vision for this team?
2. At a retreat or staff meeting, the director asks staff members to answer the same questions (individually, in pairs or in small groups).
3. Once the staff’s responses are articulated and posted, the director can build upon the list while stating her own views. At this point, the conflicting expectations are acknowledged for possible discussion at future meeting.
4. When a final vision statement is agreed upon, it should be simple and direct, and posted in every classroom.

Effective Confrontation: Indirect communicators are so uncomfortable in conflict that they have a somatic response: They feel sweaty and nauseous as their hearts pound.

Directors around the country have found practicing these five steps helpful:

1. **Focus on the behavior.** Behavior is easier to change than an entire personality. If the director focuses on the behavior, she leaves the staff member room for growth, but if

she personalizes and accuses the same staff member of being flawed as a person, she leaves little room for change. For example, “Your contract stated that you will open the center at 7:00 a.m.; arriving at 7:20 today and 8:00 on Monday is not acceptable,” has a better chance of affecting change than does, “You are an irresponsible person.” Once a staff member feels labeled as a “bad person,” her only options are to wilt from shame or plan revenge. Indirect communicators are apt to use nonverbal means of displaying their disapproval of the staff member’s being late which may have no effect at all or may create a sense of shame.

2. **Name the inappropriate behavior.** Say it directly, concisely and immediately: “John, yelling at Sammie is not appropriate.” “Jane, accepting personal phone calls at work is not acceptable.” Clear, focused, factual statements are more easily heard. Enmeshing a direct statement in a tangle of cotton candy niceties makes the message sticky and the outcomes unclear. The “Feeling” director is apt to say, “I know that your cat died this week and you are having a rough time, but...” which obfuscates the problem, which is the yelling or the phone calls.
3. **Name the acceptable behavior.** Use specific facts and avoid vagaries. “You need to do better,” is a classic indirect way of telling a staff member to improve performance, but it offers no measurable behavioral objective. How does the staff member know what the director expects? “Lunch must be served at noon,” is clear and measurable. Now the staff member can make choices according to whether or not she wants to improve her performance or lose her job.
4. **Enlist staff “buy-in.”** “Quality is everyone’s responsibility,” is a key principle of the Total Quality Movement, which applies directly to the field of early care and education. The director simply cannot be the only person solving problems in the center, although the “feeling” leader often falls into this trap. When all staff feel responsibility for the quality and success of the program, they will come up with solutions the director hasn’t thought of or couldn’t implement single-handedly. One center custodian noticed that the director and teacher were assisting a child with an asthma attack, so he got down on his knees to greet a new family whom he showed around the building until the others were free.
5. **Contract for success.** Confrontation can so stress an indirect communicating, “Feeling” director that she feels ready to collapse after telling what’s inappropriate and what’s expected. One final step is essential; both parties must leave the meeting with the same understanding. A follow-up appointment, in about a week, should be scheduled at this point to evaluate performance progress. There is little hope that the behavior will change unless the staff member can articulate what is expected, or she has it written down (Bruno, 1996).

Despite the proclivity toward being indirect communicators who use a “Feeling” mode, directors can learn to be direct enough to give their teams direction. The key is to acknowledge the preferences for being indirect and subjective, along with the limitations of this style, and practice being direct and objective when necessary. All teams need direction.

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