Techniques for Avoiding Director Burnout

by Roger Neugebauer

An article in the September, 1979, issue of ***Child Care Information Exchange*** *explored the reasons for the alarmingly high burnout rate for child care directors. This article will be presenting ideas directors can use to avoid burning out. Ideas in this article were adapted from writings on stress from the field of organizational psychology, particularly from works by Harry Levinson, Hans Selye, and Richard Bolles (see "Helpful Resources" below).*

THRIVERS AND NON-THRIVERS

Elizabeth Prescott has focused considerable attention on children who are thrivers and non-thrivers in child care centers. But just as there are children who seem to thrive in centers and others who don't, there are also directors and teachers who are thrivers and others who are non-thrivers. The scant attention that has been paid to this issue in child care research seems to indicate that as many as one in three directors are non-thrivers – persons in the process of burning out. Another large segment of directors, the marginal thrivers, are exhibiting early symptoms of burnout.

Only a minority of child care directors clearly appear to be thrivers. The box below, "Characteristics of Thrivers," provides a simplified picture of what these thriving directors look like.

To get an idea as to whether you are a thriver or a non-thriver, and whether you have a need for the burnout solutions described below, it might be helpful for you to test yourself on the burnout quiz at the end of this article. While this is not a scientifically-tested instrument, it has been field-tested on a wide variety of directors with the following implications:

If you scored six or less, you are clearly a thriver – you should probably be writing this article, not reading it. If you scored between six and fourteen, you are probably a marginal thriver – you need to make some moderate adjustments in your lifestyle. If you scored fifteen or more, you are clearly a non-thriver – you probably won't survive in your current position without radically adjusting your lifestyle.

THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

Experts on organizational stress acknowledge that work stress is not necessarily a negative force. Without a certain level of stress to challenge us, our jobs would be boring and unrewarding. Stress only becomes a problem when it builds to such an extreme that we are unable to cope with it. The solution to burnout, therefore, is not to eliminate stress altogether but to maintain it at a level where it is still a positive motivating force.

Stress overload can occur in many ways. It may occur simply when the volume of work to be done requires far more time than is available. It may occur when a person's tasks require a higher level of skills or ability than he possesses – such as when a director with no financial training, must complete detailed accounting or tax reports. It also may result when the interpersonal requirements of a job force a person to relate toward people in an unaccustomed manner – such as when a shy, soft-spoken director must continually meet prospective parents or contend with belligerent bureaucrats.

Given the complex nature of work stress, there is no single simple answer to the director burnout problem. Rather, there is a wide array of solutions. These have been organized into four levels, ranging from the most routine to the most profound. Note: the numbers in parentheses after the description for each level are the question numbers from the burnout quiz. If you answered "yes" to a majority of them at a particular level, you may need to concentrate attention on the solutions at that level.

Level 1: Improve overall body condition and develop ability to truly relax (1-5).

Level 2: Manage time effectively (6-10).

Level 3: Develop feedback and support

systems (11-17).

Level 4: Promote professional growth and stimulation (18-24).

The remainder of this article will describe solutions at the most critical levels – three and four.

DEVELOP A FEEDBACK SYSTEM

People do not aspire to be child care directors because of the prestige or economic rewards of such positions. Typically they are in the field because they want to accomplish something beneficial for children and families. What brings them satisfaction, therefore, is evidence that they are accomplishing those objectives. Unfortunately, in the normal course of events, most directors seldom see clear cut indications that their efforts make a difference in the life of the center or in the lives of the children and families they serve.

By making a deliberate effort, directors can increase the flow of feedback on the effects of their performance. Such feedback can inform the director of the immediate impact of her actions within the center as well as the long-term impact of her efforts on children and families.

• **Invite Informal Staff Feedback.** The best source of information about the effects of your performance is the people who see the most of you – your staff. In most cases they cannot be aware of everything you do when you are away from the center and often even when you are working at the center. But they are directly affected by the style of your leadership and supervision, by the decisions you make, by the expertise you share, and by the resources you marshal for them. On these issues they can provide you direct feedback. Such feedback can bring you satisfaction when it is positive and can help you identify where to make changes when it is negative.

The simplest way to receive such feedback is to routinely share with you their reactions to your efforts. To do so you must prove to your staff that you truly want this feedback in order to improve your performance, and that you won't punish bearers of bad news. You must develop your listening skills so that you don't react emotionally and defensively to negative feedback. Also, if you do act on this feedback and make changes that the staff can see, they will know you take it seriously.

• **Initiate Formal Feedback Systems.** Normal staff feedback, as discussed above, can take place in casual conversations and in staff meeting discussions. Directors can also ask staff members to rate their performance in specific areas more formally by using a list of functions and a rating scale developed by the center.

To use a formal assessment tool effectively, you should fully discuss it with the staff beforehand, staff members should complete it anonymously, and the results of the survey should be reported back to the staff. Some programs have benefited by having the director and staff jointly identify the areas where they would like to see improvement and develop approaches for making this improvement happen. Ideally such an assessment should be performed periodically to determine if progress is being made.

• **Set and Monitor Short-Term Goals.** To help provide a gauge of your accomplishments it may be helpful to quarterly list what specific activities you hope to accomplish in the upcoming three months and to set a deadline for each activity. Post this list on a prominent place in your office and record the dates you actually complete the activities. Hold on to these three month lists so you can see if you are becoming

CHARACTERISTICS OF THRIVERS

- Have a sense of what they hope to accomplish and how they plan to do it.
- Set moderately difficult goals and work with persistence and patience to accomplish them.
- Continually reassess their organization's goals and the progress toward meeting them.
- Project an image of competence and confidence.
- Look at everything with the view of improving it.
- Exhibit initiative and decisiveness.
- Take moderate risks – are open to new ideas and ventures.
- Set priorities among tasks and stick to them.
- Continually seek feedback on their performance.
- Regularly seek out expert resource people for advice and assistance.
- Continually broaden acquaintances in their own and related fields.
- Surround themselves with competent, responsible co-workers, and delegate major work to them.
- Invite participation of co-workers in organizational planning and decision-making.
- Care about co-workers and build bonds of trust with them.
- Operate with complete openness and honesty.
- Exhibit a sense of humor, enjoy work, keep problems in perspective, and don't take themselves too seriously.

This profile of thrivers was developed based on observations of effective child care directors, as well as on relevant findings from research in child care, psychology, and business.

more or less effective in meeting your deadlines.

• **Conducting Center Evaluations.**
Since directors often do not work directly with the children, they do not receive the direct satisfaction of seeing an individual child respond to their teaching. But directors are ultimately responsible for everything that goes on in the center, for seeing to it that the center achieves its goals for children and families. One valid indication of the effectiveness of the director is the performance of the center as a whole.

Directors have a variety of methods available to them for evaluating the center's program. They can hire outside consultants to perform the evaluation. Staff members from various centers can form a team to evaluate each others' centers. A committee of parents and teachers from the center can perform a self-assessment.

Centers can utilize any of a number of formal evaluation formats or develop their own. One informal method that centers have found to be useful is the "critical incidents" technique. Interviewers ask parents or teachers to list three incidents, major or trivial, that made them satisfied with the center in the past month and three that made them dissatisfied. All the pro and con incidents are then compiled to identify patterns where many interviewees cited similar incidents. These patterns point to current strengths and weaknesses in the program.

No matter what methods are employed, certain ground rules should be observed. The evaluation should focus on the center's own goals. It should not collect more data than will be used. Finally it should not be a one-shot effort but should take place periodically so that trends and progress can be followed.

• **Avoid Frustrations.**
Hard work does not necessarily cause burnout. Hard work which results in success can be exhilarating. On the other hand, hard work which results in frustration can be emotionally and physically damaging. Since man does not have an endless supply of strength to bounce back from such failures, Hans Selye argues strongly that "... we must, at all cost, avoid frustration, the humiliation of failure; we must not aim too high and undertake tasks which are beyond us."

Directors should set moderately difficult goals for themselves and their center – goals which are challenging but not impossible. They should analyze their responsibilities and find other means of accomplishing the tasks that they are ineffective at – employing part-time or volunteer aides, for example – so they can devote more time to responsibilities at which they excel.

• **Increase Sources of Satisfaction.**
According to Harry Levinson, one hedge against stress overload is having a variety of sources of gratification. A director whose entire life is consumed by her job is prone to becoming overwhelmed when that job is going poorly. One who has a reasonable variety of other interests is much more likely to have frustration on the job compensated for by satisfaction drawn from her other interests.

• **Seek Recognition.**
Surveys have shown that the vast majority of child care teachers and directors believe they are not respected as professionals in their communities. Every once in a while, however, there will be a center that is highly regarded in its community. The staff members in those centers are visibly proud to be a part of the center and are motivated by this pride. For the most part these centers make a deliberate effort to publicize the strengths of their centers in the community. Directors should not shy away from promoting the image of their center. Not only will improved public image raise staff morale, it will also make fundraising and recruitment easier.

DEVELOP A SUPPORT SYSTEM

The burned out directors interviewed for the September issue of ***Child Care Information Exchange*** all commented on the extreme isolation of the director's job. When they experienced stress over staff conflicts or bureaucratic hassles, they seldom had anyone they could turn to for a sympathetic ear. When they were struggling with difficult legal, financial, or interpersonal problems, they often had no one to turn to for advice. Directors who are thriving have developed informal support networks such as the following:

• **Participating in a Directors' Support Group.** Once a month, directors in Chula Vista, CA, meet for a noon luncheon where they hear a guest speaker and discuss child care issues. Such a phenomena is occurring in many communities as directors seek to exchange ideas and complaints on issues they all confront. Directors who participate commonly find these groups to be useful places for letting off steam, receiving moral support, and receiving helpful advice. Those groups that appear to be most effective have the following characteristics: they are informal – no name, no by-laws, no dues, no officers, and no guilt trips for failure to attend; they meet regularly but not frequently – once a month is common; they meet in a social or leisure setting; and they have no purpose other than to share ideas – those that become involved in projects such as lobbying start requiring time and effort and thus become another source of stress.

• **Cultivating Relationships.**
It may seem unusual that directors feel isolated, since most of their day is spent interacting with others – parents, bankers, teachers, children, students, bureaucrats, doctors. But most of the interactions are brief, involving only an interchange of business information. Directors could add to their network of support by converting some of these casual business relation-

ships into personal friendships. Rapport could be established by inviting outside contacts to visit the center without a specific business objective, by taking an interest in the non-child care side of parents and teachers, and by arranging occasional informal social gatherings among center people. According to Selye, we can attain stress without distress if we "greedily hoard wealth and strength, not in the form of money or domination of others, but by earning the goodwill, gratitude, respect, and love of those who surround us."

• **Developing a Group of Advisors.** Some directors have solved their need for technical advice by establishing a group of advisors. The only commitment these advisors make is to be available a few times per year when the director has a problem requiring their expert advice. They are not required to attend any meetings or functions. In this way the expertise of those who are unwilling or unable to serve on a board can be tapped.

PROMOTE PROFESSIONAL STIMULATION

Many directors who have quit did so because the challenge and excitement of the job disappeared. They experienced the feeling common to middle-aged business executives...that one has reached an occupational dead-end, that one has done all one can do, and that one is destined to remain in the same rut for the rest of one's life (Levinson). Before a director's attitude reaches this low point, there are several alternatives which should be explored:

• **Reassessing Personal Goals.** "To give meaning and direction to life," contends Selye, "we need a lofty long-range purpose." He further argues that this purpose must have two salient characteristics: "It must be something that requires hard work, and its fruits must be sufficiently permanent to accumulate as life goes by."

As stated earlier most directors chose this profession because of a goal relating to helping children and families. Oftentimes, as years go by and people become consumed with the endless hassles of keeping the center alive, they begin to lose sight of their original goal. Organizational survival becomes their subconscious goal.

That is why it is important for directors periodically to reassess their personal goals in life and whether their current position is moving them closer to the accomplishment of their goals. Quite possibly a director will find her goal has shifted somewhat or become more refined so that her current position is no longer relevant. Her goals may shift from helping preschool children develop to helping children with special needs. Or a director may find that her goal has remained unchanged but that her current position has turned out to be an ineffective place for promoting that goal.

• **Restructuring Current Position.** Sometimes when a person's goals and position are not in harmony, it is possible to restore a better fit by restructuring the job. One director, for example, found that the part of his job that directly related to his long-term goals was researching the state of the art in delivery systems. Yet this was only a tiny part of his job as structured. Therefore, he hustled a research grant to pay for three-fourths of his salary and used the money left over to hire an assistant director to carry out his daily responsibilities. Now, 75% of his time is spent on research. Other directors have met with their staffs and redesigned the overall organizational structure to more nearly suit everyone's current interests.

• **Expanding the Organization.** Some directors have been able to revitalize their jobs by exploring alternative ways their centers could meet existing child care needs. In some cases this involved starting new components such as infant or after school programs. In other cases it involved opening up additional spaces by adding satellite centers or networks of family child care homes. In still others it resulted in new services, such as parenting workshops or babysitting referrals, being offered to families. In all these instances directors are challenged by the opportunity to better serve local needs.

• **Seeking Additional Professional Outlets.** Often directors find their talents, skills, and interests are not and cannot be fully challenged in their current jobs. As a result, they seek to explore various outlets for their abilities. Examples of such outlets include writing books or magazine articles, consulting to less experienced centers, teaching courses at community colleges, and putting on workshops and conferences. In some cases, directors have been able to pursue these professional challenges as part of their jobs, in others they have done it on their own time.

• **Changing Jobs.** Sometimes no amount of tinkering with one's current job will make it work. Possibly there is no way to restructure the job to avoid burnout. Or maybe it is not possible to reconcile one's personal goals with the demands of the job. In either case a job change is in order.

Deciding what new job to pursue is not often easy. Even being the best child care director in the world doesn't necessarily qualify a person to do anything else. Levinson suggests analyzing what it is about your current job that you really like to do the best. Then find someone you respect who is doing those things and look to her as a model, especially if it is someone who started out as a child care director. Talk to her about the pros and cons of her job, how she prepared for it, and how she got it.

If you do decide to quit being a child

care director, don't be concerned that you are somehow failing.

You can probably do more good by starting a new career with vigor and commitment than by continuing half-heartedly in your current position.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Levinson, Harry. *Executive Stress.* New York, NY: New American Library, 1975.

Selye, Hans. *Stress Without Distress.* New York, NY: New American Library, 1974.

Bolles, Richard. *The Three Boxes of Life and How to Get Out of Them*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1978.

Are You a Candidate for Burnout?

How do you rate? Answer "yes" or "no" whether the descriptions below apply to you. Then count up how many "yeses" you recorded. To interpret this score, refer to the "Thrivers and Non-thrivers" section in the preceding article.

___ 1. I am often tense and anxious and/or I often experience tightness in my leg, back, or neck muscles.

___ 2. I often have trouble getting to sleep and/or I seldom feel truly rested when I awake. I can't keep work problems from my mind at night.

___ 3. I can't stop my nervous habits, such as biting my nails.

___ 4. I am more and more prone to negative addictions – smoking, overeating, drinking, using drugs or tranquilizers.

___ 5. After an intense effort to meet a deadline or handle a crisis, it takes me more than a day to recover my stamina and alertness; and/or I often feel worn out during working hours.

___ 6. I often work more than 50 hours per week.

___ 7. I often bring work home on evenings and weekends.

___ 8. I seldom have time to work on my really important tasks such as planning, evaluation, and training.

___ 9. When I try to relax, I feel guilty about important unfinished work.

___ 10. I seldom control how my time is used. It is controlled by crises and outside parties – bureaucrats, parents, teachers, and children.

___ 11. No one fully understands what I do. Many people understand little parts of my work, but no one has the complete picture.

___ 12. Few people truly appreciate my work.

___ 13. I feel isolated. I have no one to let off steam to, no one's shoulder to cry on.

___ 14. I'm supposed to have all the answers. I often have no one to turn to for advice in dealing with especially difficult problems.

___ 15. I seldom get feedback on the effectiveness of my efforts.

___ 16. I do not feel respected as a professional in my community.

___ 17. My job consumes my life. I seldom have time to pursue other activities, interests, or hobbies.

___18. I spend most of my time on parts of my job that I don't enjoy.

___ 19. I don't keep up-to-date on current trends and future directions in the field.

___ 20. I'm not sure what my long-term goals in life are.

___ 21. My current work is not moving me closer to accomplishing my long-term goals.

___ 22. My best skills and talents are not being fully utilized or tested in my current work.

___ 23. My job is not the spice of my life. I am no longer challenged or excited by it.

___ 24. I seem to be in a dead end career. There are few positions I can advance to.