

The Case for Bull Dogs and Mother Hens

by Bonnie and Roger Neugebauer (with illustrations by Charlie Loving)

When Michael Jordan returned to basketball last year, everyone assumed that this would guarantee another championship for the Chicago Bulls. But it didn't happen. It didn't happen because Michael Jordan tried to do it all himself . . . and failed. A successful basketball team not only needs a shooter, it also needs strong rebounders, shot blockers, passers, playmakers, and defenders.

All teams — be they in the world of sports, business, or social service — need role players in order to be effective. In child care centers, having effective role players is no less important.

In our experience, every center needs the following types of role players.

As you read this, you should be noting the individuals on your team who play each of these roles.

Instigator

Every center needs a staff member to propose new ideas, to surface problems, and to point out opportunities. The Instigator's role might be as simple as saying, "We need to solve the problem of parents arriving late" or as complicated as "We seem to be getting a lot of pregnant parents — isn't it time we start thinking about offering infant care?"

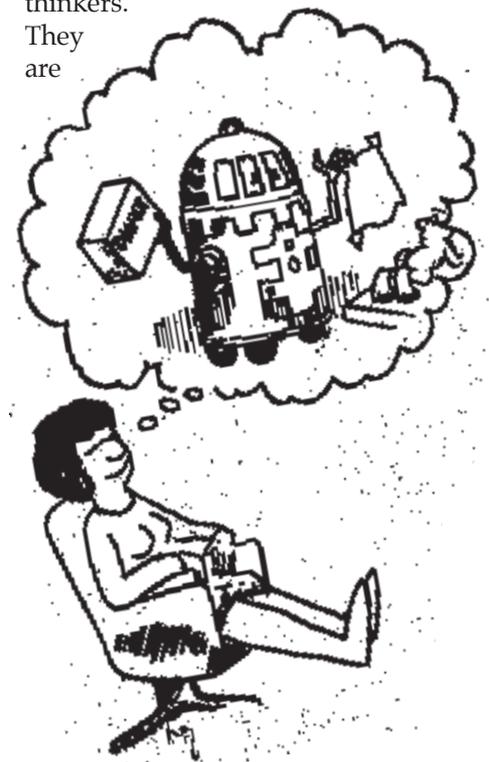
In early childhood programs, the Instigator is often

played by the director, but in a well-functioning team, the Instigator can be anyone. As staff members become more comfortable in a team, they will feel more confident in playing the role of Instigator. In fact, as a team develops, each member should assume responsibility for playing this role.

Day Dream Believer

Day Dream Believers are free thinkers.

They are



not bound by reason or reality. When a center is faced with a problem or presented with an opportunity, the Day Dream Believer comes up with a creative solution.

When a center is faced with a cash flow crisis, the Day Dream Believer forgoes the standard bake sale solution and proposes sponsoring a 10K run. When the center is experiencing high staff turnover, a Day Dream Believer might propose reorganizing the center into a partnership where each staff member holds equal ownership.

Jester

When tension is high, the Jester on staff can provide welcome relief with a timely joke. A person with a sense of humor can help the team by . . .

- taking the edge off staff conflict;
- keeping things in perspective; and
- reminding people that early childhood centers must be joyful places.

But humor can be a two-edged sword. Not only can it have a positive impact, but it also can be damaging. It can be cutting and it can be cruel. While light-spirited humor can bring a team together, mean-spirited humor can drive a team asunder.

Every team needs a Jester, because a center without laughter is a dreadful place for adults and for children. But every center needs a Jester with a developmentally appropriate sense of humor.



Mother Hen

The Mother Hen is the person on staff who makes sure that people don't get done in, used up, overlooked, or underappreciated. She keeps an eye on all staff members to make sure that everyone who wants to gets a chance to participate and that everyone is treated fairly.

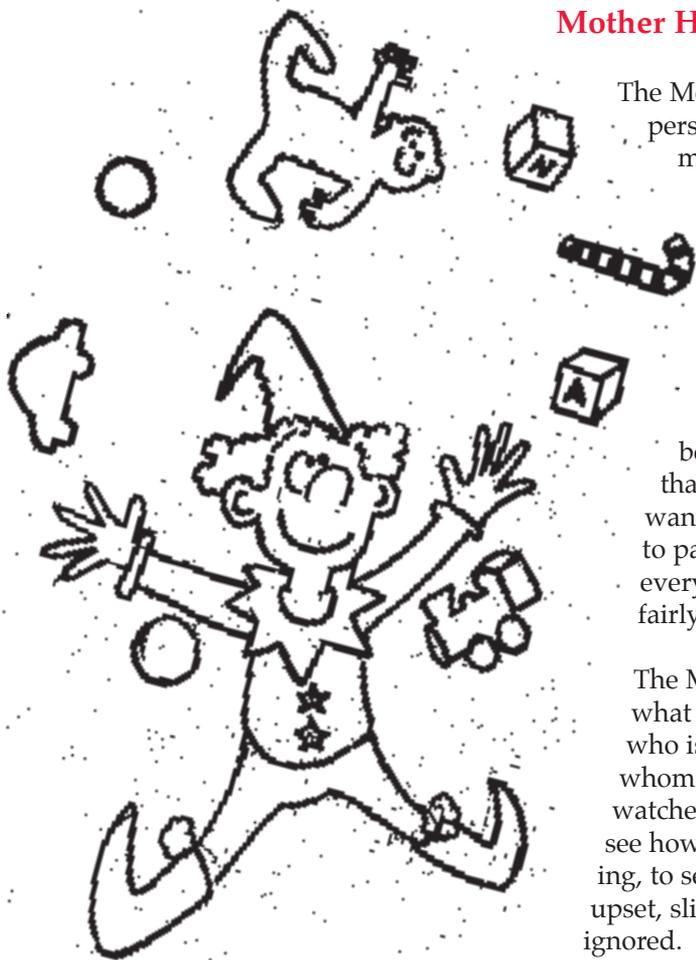
The Mother Hen follows what is being said, and who is saying what to whom. In addition, she watches body language to see how people are reacting, to see if someone is upset, slighted, offended, or ignored.

Not only does the Mother Hen observe human dynamics, she also acts to right wrongs. She may act openly, or she may work on solutions behind the scenes.

We tend to assume that all people who work in early childhood centers are caring and sensitive. Hopefully, this is true in all adult interactions with children. But when it comes to interactions among adults, this is not necessarily true. For that reason, every team needs a Mother Hen.

Nervous Nellie

When you enthusiastically tell the staff about your imaginative idea for launching a school-age component, Nervous Nellie takes the wind out of your sails with 20 reasons it won't work. Your Nervous Nellie is a wet blanket, a perennial pessimist. She is the one who always looks at new ideas with an eye toward what can go wrong, why things won't work.



While Day Dream Believers incite joy, Nervous Nellies incite fears and tears. While Day Dream Believers see a silver lining in every cloud, Nervous Nellies see a thunderstorm about to rain on your parade.

When a Nervous Nellie asks questions that reveal the Achilles heel of an idea that everybody loves, people can take their frustrations out on the bearer of bad news. For this reason, you should put your Nervous Nellie on your team's endangered species list as someone to be protected.

As frustrating as a Nervous Nellie can be, she can save your center from foolish mistakes. While Day Dream Believers enable your team to fly, Nervous Nellies prevent your flights from crash landing.

Whistle Blower

For most early childhood professionals, child care is a cause, not a job. We tend to set no limits on how hard and how long we work. Because of this, people who work in child care are prone to stress and burnout.



Every
child



care
team needs a
Whistle Blower
who can stand
up and say,
"This is too
much! We
are
already over-
worked. Even

though this is a great idea, we can't do it."

We don't mean a Whistle Blower in a traditional labor versus management sense. Directors tend to expect a lot of staff, but they also tend to set no limits on what they expect of themselves. The Whistle Blower needs to look out for the interests of all staff — the teachers, the cooks, the custodians, and the director.

Keeper of the Faith

There needs to be someone on every staff who evaluates every decision on the basis of the center's mission. The Keeper of the Faith makes sure that before a new activity is launched, these questions are addressed:

- Is this in the best interest of children?
- Is this what parents need?
- Does this contribute to the quality of the program?
- Does this move us forward toward accomplishment of our center's goals?

Bull Dog

While Day Dream Believers and Nervous Nellies are engaged in their flights of fantasy and paranoia, you need someone to keep the team on task. You need a Bull Dog . . .

- to keep discussions from getting sidetracked;
- to keep everyone focused on the problem at hand;
- to keep an eye on the clock; and
- to force the issue when it is time to make a decision.

When staff are bored with an old problem or overwhelmed with a tough new one, it is very tempting to seek escape in discussions about last night's Seinfeld episode or Sarah's mother's new boyfriend. When discussions wander, it is up to the Bull Dog to get everyone back on task.

Like the Nervous Nellie, the Bull Dog can be really irritating, constantly spoiling the fun. But your

team can't function well without a Nervous Nellie or without a Bull Dog.

The Bull Dog is always eager for things to move fast. However, speed is not always the answer. Sometimes discussions need to con-

tinue uninterrupted when feelings run deep. The Bull Dog must be skillful in knowing when to step in. He must exercise good judgment so that debates continue . . .

- long enough for all issues to surface;
- long enough for all participants to have their say;
- not so long that positions get entrenched; and
- not so long that participants' egos get invested in the outcome. Sometimes you need to put a leash on your Bull Dog so your team can take the time it needs to reach a decision that fully takes into account all points of view.

Compromiser



When discord builds over personal or organizational issues, a Compromiser must step in to preserve team unity. The job of the Compromiser is to cool emotions, summarize the issues, and suggest possible compromises.

While many staff members may be bothered by staff conflict, not all can be effective in diffusing it. To be effective, the Compromiser must be . . .

- respected enough so that her opinions will be listened to;
- objective enough so that she will not be identified with one side or the other; and
- experienced enough so that she truly understands the issues and personalities involved.

Mover and Shaker

The first nine role players we've described are all required in order to bring staff together in harmony to create ideas, solve problems, and make decisions. One final role player is required, and that is the Mover and Shaker. This is a staff member who can take ideas and make them happen.

Some Final Thoughts

Have you identified the people on your staff who play each of these ten roles? Can you put a name



to your Bull Dog? Do you know who is your Mother Hen? Can you picture your Jester in action?

Keep in mind that roles may change. Today's Jester may be tomorrow's Bull Dog. Keep in mind also that some people may play more than one role. Maybe your Keeper of the Faith is also your Compromiser. Maybe one staff member is at various times an Instigator, a Nervous Nellie, and a Mover and Shaker.

It's okay for people to play different roles at different times. What is not okay is if some types of team players are missing from your team. Your team will surely suffer if it lacks a Mother Hen or a Compromiser.

Some team players are needed in abundance. Every center needs a big supply of Instigators, Day



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Dream Believers, and Movers and Shakers. You can never have enough of these key team players.

Be aware that it may not be your destiny to play the glamour roles. As much as you would love to be the Compromiser or the Day Dream Believer, maybe your team most needs you to be the Bull Dog or the Nervous Nellie.

Most importantly, it is your responsibility as director to assure that every role is taken by at least one person, and that everyone is supported and nurtured for playing these vital roles. Make sure that the Nervous Nellies and Bull Dogs are not ostracized for playing their irritating, yet vital, roles. Help support a climate where the crazy ideas of the Day Dream Believers are given fair play. And make sure that your team is adequately supplied with Movers and Shakers so that your great ideas come to fruition.

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