



Shared Decisionmaking: The Centerpiece of Participatory Management

Paula Jorde Bloom

Building trust and a spirit of collaboration in early childhood programs is central to achieving high-performing work teams. Meaningful involvement in decisionmaking is one way to achieve trust and commitment to organizational goals. Shared decisionmaking goes by many names, such as Total Quality Management, quality circles, and site-based management. When done right, such endeavors can yield positive benefits with respect to improved employee morale, job satisfaction, and commitment to the organization.

Unfortunately, when asked about their participation in many of these experiments, employees often report frustration rather than fulfillment. Attempts at shared decisionmaking are viewed by many individuals as a formality or an attempt to create the illusion of employee influence. Such a perception need not be the case. This article presents a framework for analyzing different types of decisions in the management of early childhood programs and ways that administrators can move to a more participatory process in achieving program goals. Although the examples relate to center-based programs, the specific strategies suggested are generic and apply to all early childhood and human service organizations.

The importance of participatory management in early childhood programs

Participatory management is based on two operating assumptions—that individuals have the right to be involved in making choices that affect their lives, and that people who are involved in making decisions will have a greater stake in those decisions than those who are not. Young-Holt (1983) refers to this deeper level of commitment as “shared ownership.” While there appears to be strong consensus regarding the importance of participation, less agreement exists concerning its meaning. In most early childhood work environments, meaningful participation remains an elusive construct.

The construct is elusive because “meaningful participation” is based on one’s subjective perceptions of a given situation. Any director who has worked her way up the ranks from classroom assistant to teacher to director will not be surprised to learn that individuals who hold different positions in the organizational hierarchy view decisionmaking processes differently. Directors, for example, tend to view their programs more positively than do their teachers (Bloom 1988).

In a recent study I conducted of the current and desired decision-

making influence of 2,709 early childhood workers in 315 centers, 70% of directors agreed with the statement, “The director values everyone’s input in major decisions”; only one-half of the teachers in these centers concurred. Two-thirds of the directors believed that “people are encouraged to be self-sufficient in making decisions,” whereas only one-half of the teachers agreed with that statement. Finally, one-third of the teachers thought that “people provide input, but decisions have already been made”; only 19% of directors concurred with that statement. Overall, fully 78% of the teachers involved in the study indicated that they have less influence in centerwide decisions than they would like to have. These results support previous research on teachers’ perceptions of the decisionmaking practices at their centers (Neugebauer 1975; Whitebook et al. 1982; Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips 1989).

While it may be true that teachers are not always aware of the extent to which their views are taken seriously, or they may not be fully informed of all the competing factors the director must consider when making decisions that have centerwide implications, perceptions are powerful regulators of behavior and certainly influence workers’ level of commitment to a particular center (Kreuger 1986). Directors need to be alert to the possibility that the teachers in their centers perceive decisionmaking processes differently than they do.

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A framework for understanding shared decisionmaking

The following framework is intended to serve as a guide for sensitive and reflective administrative thought and action by helping directors determine when decisionmaking can be expanded to include other stakeholders in key decisions affecting the center. This framework rests on the premise that the effectiveness of decisions is determined by both the quality of the decision and the acceptance and commitment of others in implementing the decision (Hoy & Miskel 1991). The goal is to reduce the incidence of making decisions by default, making decisions that are not implemented, and experiencing the frustrations in human relations that arise when the methods for making decisions are not understood. The following four questions provide the basis for implementing the framework.

Who are the stakeholders?

In the management of early childhood programs, there are several potential stakeholders, including the board of directors or owner of the center, director or key administrator, teachers and assistant teachers, support staff, parents, and children. In some instances, various community representatives may also be stakeholders. In general, it can be said that the degree of participation by these stakeholders relates to the degree of centralization in the center. As greater participation occurs, there tends to be a flattening in the hierarchical structure of the organization.

What are the different types of decisions to be made?

Every day, center directors are confronted with a bewildering array of decisions—some minor and perfunctory (when to schedule the school pictures), and some major, with important consequences (how to handle a suspected case of child neglect). Each decision may be handled in a somewhat different man-

ner, and the same decision may be handled differently at different times. Nevertheless, certain decisionmaking patterns tend to emerge in a center, based on the formal structure of the organization and the leadership

style and belief system of the director (Neugebauer 1982).

Decisions can be broadly classified as two types: those that are operational and relate to how staff carry out their respective jobs (e.g.,

Table 1. Types of Decisions in the Early Childhood Setting

1. Staff supervision and professional development

- Determine methods and frequency of supervision for teachers, aides, and support staff.
- Assess staff development needs.
- Set priorities for individual professional development.
- Assign mentors.

2. Instructional practices, grouping, and scheduling

- Determine daily classroom schedule of activities.
- Select teaching materials.
- Determine what to teach.
- Assign children to groups.
- Determine adult-child ratios.
- Set annual calendar.

3. Fiscal policies and practices

- Determine annual budget.
- Order materials and supplies.
- Set priorities for centerwide expenditures.
- Set priorities for classroom expenditures.
- Determine professional development allocations.
- Determine salaries and benefits.

4. Human resource allocation

- Determine how new teachers and aides will be recruited.
- Hire new teachers and aides.
- Determine staffing patterns (e.g., team-teaching assignments).
- Set staff work schedules.

5. Centerwide goals and educational objectives

- Develop center philosophy.
- Develop educational objectives for different age groups.

- Determine frequency and scheduling of staff meetings.

- Determine staff meeting agenda.
- Set centerwide policies (e.g., how teachers are addressed, dress code, amount of clutter allowed in classrooms and common areas).

6. School-home and school-community relations

- Determine who serves as the primary contact with parents.
- Set expectations for parent involvement at the classroom level.
- Determine frequency and scheduling of parent conferences.
- Determine type and frequency of contacts with the community.

7. Facilities management

- Determine how space is allocated.
- Decide how equipment is allocated.
- Determine facility improvement priorities.
- Arrange classroom space.
- Arrange administrative space.
- Arrange common areas and support space.

8. Evaluation practices (child, staff, and center)

- Determine criteria for teacher promotion.
- Determine how staff performance is appraised.
- Evaluate teacher performance.
- Determine frequency of and how to conduct a centerwide evaluation.
- Determine whether or not to pursue accreditation.

classroom activities), and those that are strategic and relate to the center as a whole (e.g., program philosophy and policies). But those global categories are inadequate for capturing the multidimensional nature of decisionmaking in centers and identifying areas where the involvement of teacher, parents, and children may be increased. Table 1 provides a more comprehensive list of decisions in eight areas: staff supervision and professional development; instructional practices, grouping, and scheduling; fiscal policies and practices; human resource allocation; centerwide goals and educational objectives; school-home and school-community relations; facilities management; and evaluation practices (child, staff, and center).

What are the possible levels of participation?

The reason why participatory management is such a complex concept to put into practice is that we cannot always assume that greater participation is necessarily desirable—in other words, more is not always better. Determining the appropriate level of participation depends on the nature of the issue and the people involved. Table 2 delineates the subtle distinctions in four levels of participation from the director's perspective: unilateral, consultative, collaborative, and delegated.

Consultative, collaborative, and delegated approaches have strong appeal because they can result in feelings of empowerment and involvement by individuals (stakeholders) who might otherwise be excluded from the process. A consultative approach, for example, is one in which the board, teachers, parents, or children have been asked to provide information, but the director reserves the right to make the final decision. This approach is attractive because it allows the director to sharpen and elaborate his or her position through discussion with others. It is critical, however, that the director communicate up front how input from others will be used. Failure to do so may leave group members uncertain of the

value of their contribution and contribute to the possibility that a later announcement of the decision will be misunderstood.

An example of a consultative approach is the method used by a director who needed to make a decision about what kind of new playground surface material to put outdoors in the swing area. This director invited input from staff, parents, and children regarding their recommendations (a few of the teachers and children even visited selected preschools and playgrounds in the community to "try out" different ground coverings). Recommendations about preferences were then considered in light of budgetary constraints, with the director making the final decision.

Collaborative decisionmaking generally takes more time but, if done properly, can result in greater feelings of empowerment and commitment to the center. Table 2 elaborates three ways that collaborative decisions can be achieved. A unanimous vote means that everyone voting supports the decision 100%. When nonsupport or sabotage by one or more members could seriously damage an undertaking that requires total group support, a unanimous vote may be necessary.

To avoid conflicts that arise from differences of opinion, the majority vote holds great attraction for many. But majority vote ascertains only those alternatives that people find more or less preferable (unless there is extended discussion). It does not uncover the alternatives that certain people find insupportable (Schmuck & Runkel 1985). One cannot assume that the loudest voices represent the feelings and opinions of quiet members (Roy 1995). Some organizational theorists believe that a majority vote is not a rational group decisionmaking process because the discussion preceding it usually takes the form of persuasion, negotiation, and intimidation and may cut off discussion of viable alternatives.

Wood (1984) uses the phrase "strain toward convergence" to describe the tendency of many groups to coalesce rapidly and to avoid conflict-producing discussions. Particu-

Table 2. Levels of Participation

1. Unilateral decisionmaking: The director makes the decision.

1.1 The director makes the decision and announces it to the staff.

1.2 The director makes the decision and "sells" it to the staff, providing a rationale for taking a particular course of action.

2. Consultative decisionmaking: Prior to making a decision, the director seeks information or ideas and suggestions from the staff.

2.1 The director makes a tentative decision and solicits reactions from staff (either individually or as a group) before making a final decision.

2.2 The director presents the problem or issue to the staff and solicits suggestions and advice on alternative solutions. The director then makes the decision, which may or may not reflect the staff's advice.

3. Collaborative decisionmaking: The director and staff define and analyze problems together, generating and evaluating alternatives and deciding on a course of action.

3.1 The final decision is made by unanimous agreement.

3.2 The final decision is made by majority vote.

3.3 The final decision is made by consensus.

4. Delegated decisionmaking: After providing relevant information, the director allows the staff to make the decision.

4.1 The decision is made by a subgroup of the staff with or without input from others.

4.2 The decision is made by individual staff members unilaterally.

larly in hierarchical differentiated groups, lower-level participants tend to remain silent about their ideas or acquiesce to what they perceive to be the majority opinion. Often individuals think, "I do not actually agree with that idea, but no one else seems to be saying anything, so I will not rock the boat." Being aware of the desire to avoid conflict and the need to compromise is particularly important for groups run by females, because women, in general, have traditionally been rewarded for playing the roles of harmonizer and compromiser.

Consensus decisionmaking seeks to generate general agreement on a particular issue. For consensus to exist, it is not necessary for every participant to agree in full, but it is necessary for every person to be heard and, in the end, for none to believe that the decision violates his or her convictions. The decision may not represent everyone's first choice, but those who remain doubtful nevertheless understand the decision and agree not to obstruct its implementation (Schmuck & Runkel 1985).

Some directors have used a finger voting method to elicit the strength of commitment to different decisions being considered (Table 3). This is one quick way to determine the strength of support for different options being decided. Because consensus decisionmaking takes more

time and often requires advanced skill in communication and conflict resolution, it is more difficult to achieve than a majority vote. The emotional benefits of this strategy make it a viable option worth implementing when possible, though, particularly when considering complex issues or making decisions that have centerwide implications.

What are the external constraints?

Despite good intentions to expand the decisionmaking influence of different stakeholders in early childhood programs, the realities of directors' jobs with respect to time, resources, and mandates often prevent them from carrying through on their intentions. Speed is clearly not one of the basic advantages of shared decisionmaking. When faced with an impending epidemic of head lice, for example, directors do not have the luxury of involving others in considering options for action. The circumstances of certain kinds of decisions to be made dictate swift, unilateral action. Financial resources to pay staff to attend staff meetings and to provide incentives for greater involvement often limit a director's ability to involve others broadly in centerwide decisionmaking. Finally, certain mandates from sponsoring agencies, boards, and other regulating bodies may limit a director's options.

Putting the pieces together

Under what conditions, then, should involvement in centerwide decisionmaking be expanded? The answer to that question will vary from situation to situation, given the needs of the individuals involved, the time frame in which to make the decision and involve people, and the level of expertise they have.

In determining how to involve different stakeholders in the decisionmaking process, the director needs to determine which decisions fall inside or outside their zone of indifference—in other words, which decisions do different individuals have a high interest in and the expertise to contribute helpfully to? One rule

of thumb is that the people who are closest to the problem or the solution should be involved in making the decision (Roy 1995). Two tests proposed by Bridges (1967) will help guide these deliberations:

Test of relevance (personal interest or stake in the issue)—Do individuals have a high personal stake in the decision? If they have a personal stake, their interest in participation will be higher. If they have no personal stake, employees will be more receptive to their supervisor's directive.

Test of expertise (degree of competence regarding the issue)—To what extent are individuals qualified to make a useful contribution to the identification or solution of the problem?

The decisionmaking model derived from these two tests is straightforward. It describes different situations in which the degree of involvement decreases depending on the combination of interest and expertise of different stakeholders (Hoy & Miskel 1991).

Situation I—high interest, high expertise: If different individuals have a personal stake (high relevance) in the decision and have the knowledge to make a useful contribution (high expertise), the decision clearly falls outside their zone of indifference. They should be involved in the decisionmaking process as early as possible and given as much freedom as possible in defining the problem and specifying objectives.

Situation II—high interest, low expertise: This situation needs careful consideration and skillful leadership. Involvement of various stakeholders should be limited. The rationale for involvement here is to lower resistance to the decision. A consultative model of participation may be useful in this situation so that the interested parties have input, but the director makes the final decision.

Situation III—low interest, high expertise: In this situation, it is usually best not to involve other stakeholders unless necessary, and even then, involvement should be limited. To involve others may increase the likelihood of alienating other stakeholders. Although involving others under these circumstances increases

Table 3. Consensus Voting

| | |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| • Five fingers: | Total agreement Best solution 100% support |
| • Four fingers: | Agreement Good solution Support |
| • Three fingers: | Willing to support |
| • Two fingers: | Do not agree Will not sabotage |
| • One finger: | Will sabotage |

the director's chances of reaching a higher quality decision, the disinterested parties are likely to wonder "what the director gets paid for."

Situation IV—low interest, low expertise: If the topic or issue is irrelevant and falls outside the stakeholder's sphere of competence, then involvement should be avoided. Indeed, involvement in this case is likely to produce resentment because subordinates typically will not want to be involved and will probably not follow through if they are delegated tasks.

When applying this framework to the variety of decisions detailed in Table 1, it is possible that the separate work of teachers and administrators may soften, blur, and even disappear, because many decisions span the border between center and classroom (Conley 1991). Many other decisions deserve the serious input of parents (and, sometimes, even children).

In a more lighthearted vein, Townsend (1970) says that there are two types of decisions: those that are expensive to change and those that are not. A decision to expand the program to include infant care should not be made hastily, and not without plenty of input from staff, parents, and other specialists. But common decisions, such as what kind of easel paint to purchase, should be made quickly. These decisions can be corrected inexpensively later if they are wrong.

Strategies for implementing a model of shared decisionmaking

Whether the director reports to a board or has the authority to act independently, she or he is usually the key actor in initiating and facilitating collaboration and shared decisionmaking. The director is the one who must provide the support—time, resources, and encouragement—necessary to sustain teachers' collegial interaction (Smith & Scott 1990). It is not enough to embrace the beliefs and values surrounding participation; organizational structures and processes must be adopted

so that staff and other stakeholders have the power and capacity to participate actively in decisionmaking ventures (Wood 1984).

Initiating the process

The first step in implementing a model of shared decisionmaking is to work with staff, board, and parents to define types of decisions, current levels of participation for different types of decisions, and desired levels of involvement in each area. Directors cannot assume, for example, that all teachers have a uniform desire to participate in centerwide decisions. Indeed, teachers resent being involved in trivial matters, serving on committees of dubious value, and sitting through long meetings on topics that are of little interest to them (Smylie 1992).

Directors can assess staff's perceptions using formal assessment tools (Bloom, Sheerer, & Britz 1991) or designing their own. Whichever method is used, it is important to assess teachers' decisionmaking participation in relative terms (how much influence they currently have compared to how much they desire) rather than in absolute terms (how much they have). Teachers are far from homogeneous in attitudes, sentiments, and expectations concerning decisionmaking. Different people want different things, depending on a number of factors, including their long-range career goals and what else is going on in their personal lives.

Creating an open, trusting environment

In child care centers, like all organizations, things tend to get done because of relationships, not because of job descriptions or formal roles. As a result, interpersonal trust is essential if shared decisionmaking is to take hold. Conversely, problems between directors and staff or among colleagues are often the result of distrust. Distrust begins when each party assumes that the other will operate from self-interest, with little regard for the interests of the others. Trust begins with one-on-one connections—getting to know staff on an individual basis.

Directors who have successfully broadened participation emphasize that it is important to avoid pressuring individuals to participate; coercion causes resentment. It is also important to avoid a bandwagon mentality, because everyone may jump on, but some will jump off once the spotlights are dimmed. Schmuck and Runkel (1985) emphasize that if incentives are offered, they should not be made so attractive that everyone will volunteer, whether or not they intend to follow through on their commitments. For the same reason, directors should not impose sanctions on those who refuse to participate.

An open, trusting environment is nurtured when divergent points of view are encouraged. People must be allowed to express their feelings without fear of censure. When groups are too cohesive or too like-minded, they can promote blind uniformity. The problem with uniformity is that it can produce an uncritical acceptance of an idea. This can result in "groupthink" (Kostelnik 1984). To prevent groupthink, Hoy and Miskel (1991) suggest that the group facilitator should remain neutral when presenting options to a group, withholding her preferences and/or expectations until all participants have fully expressed their opinions. They also suggest assigning someone the role of devil's advocate in group discussions, to underscore the importance of considering all sides of an issue.

Encouraging divergent points of view rests on the director's ability to appreciate diversity in value structures. Value orientations are determined by cultural traditions, experience, and deeply held beliefs. Covey (1991) believes that the only way leaders can truly communicate that they value differing perspectives on issues is to employ empathetic listening skills. In Covey's words, effective leaders "seek first to understand, then to be understood."

An open, trusting environment is also cultivated when directors avoid "one right answer" thinking. Most problems can be solved in a number of good ways. Keeping options open and exploring new, creative ways to

define and solve problems communicates to staff that different perceptions of the issue are both valued and valuable in generating ideas for collective action.

Providing training in group dynamics

For shared decisionmaking to be successful, it may be necessary to provide training for the board, staff, and parents in a variety of group process skills—effective questioning strategies, eliciting and receiving feedback, conflict resolution, brainstorming, problem solving, and peer coaching. It is also important that essential roles are played in group meetings (facilitating, clarifying, summarizing, etc.) and that tasks are performed (agendas distributed, minutes accurately recorded) so that the group can function cohesively and effectively (Saphier, Bigda-Peyton, & Pierson 1989).

Conclusion

Some people believe that participation in decisionmaking is an either-or proposition—that employees are involved or not involved. The framework presented in this article helps us understand that the concept of shared decisionmaking cannot be reduced to such simplistic terms. Where participatory management is successful, there are differentiated levels of participation depending on the issues, the people, and the external constraints affecting the program.

Involvement should be viewed as a means to an end, not an end in itself. The goal of participatory management is to improve program practices for children and families and the quality of work life for staff. Collaboration and shared decisionmaking does not mean discussion for its own sake. A collaborative school should not be confused with a congenial school (Roy 1995). Greater collegiality may be a positive outcome of shared decisionmaking, but it should not be the driving force of our efforts.

In the end, shared decisionmaking is a delicate balance of meeting both organizational needs and individual

needs. If endeavors in participatory management are to be successful, cooperation and teamwork frequently will require that individuals subordinate their personal preferences to group goals—a difficult shift that does not happen overnight. Implementing a model of shared decisionmaking in an early childhood program is analogous to conducting an orchestra. Individually, instruments can produce interesting and even melodic sounds; together, though, they have the potential to achieve a full, symphonic sound, illustrating that the whole is truly greater than the sum of its parts.

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A Great Place To Work: Improving Conditions for Staff in Young Children's Programs

by Paula Jorde Bloom

Are you concerned about your staff turnover?
What kind of environments are conducive to
professional and personal fulfillment for adults
who work with young children?

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