Refocusing Leadership Basics: Strengthening Staff Relationships

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The start of a fresh calendar year is a great time to get back to basics. As you reflect on the challenges of the past year and look forward to new opportunities, a central goal for program success is the care and nurturing of your staff. You may hold various titles and take charge of multiple responsibilities, but above all, you are in the people business. Your most important priority is overseeing the well-being of staff and families.

Program leaders are "the heart and soul of an organization, taking the lead in creating, nurturing, and supporting the multiple and varied relationships that make for a healthy, quality environment" (43). When leaders model positive relationships with staff, there are many advantages for the whole program. Benefits of strong interpersonal staff relationships include a shared sense of belonging and support among staff; greater participation in collaborative learning, feedback, and growth; lower teacher turnover and burnout; and a more positive organizational climate characterized by a sense of belonging, commitment, and respect.

Staff take their cues from leaders as they evaluate the attitudes, approaches, and interpersonal priorities and norms of a program. Studies about the impact of leadership reveal that leaders with high emotional intelligence create climates in which information sharing, trust, healthy risk-taking, and learning thrive. The good news is that relationship skills are not fixed and may be developed and strengthened through intentional self-awareness and planning for positive change. Leaders may build on their current strengths and add new strategies and skills to strengthen relationships with and among staff.

Leadership essentials include foundational attributes of leadership that ensure cultural safety and trusting communication. The Whole Leadership Framework can help leaders evaluate the positive impacts of self-awareness, communication and team-building skills, cultural competence, and staff motivation. The framework highlights the personal characteristics that strengthen program collaboration and effectiveness. By using the framework, leaders and staff are able to see the ways their work serves the priorities and mission of the program and understand the importance of their unique strengths and efforts.

Leaders can begin by making small adjustments to stabilize, strengthen, and sustain staff communication and promote cohesive teamwork. The following interpersonal priorities can be adapted to fit your specific program and its needs. Each strategy, by itself and in combination with others, can establish and encourage a spirit of camaraderie and facilitate mutual staff commitment to positive growth.

- **Focus on [intentional listening](.)** Leaders who build strong professional relationships know how to listen. When they engage in a conversation, they give the other person their full focus. They convey personal interest and seek to know more about staff perspectives and experiences. Leaders ask questions to help staff express their needs and ideas. They seek to know staff well and to learn about them and from them. However, one [national survey](link) reported that only eight percent of leaders are good listeners. Listening is a foundational skill that may be developed to improve communication and interpersonal connection. Staff look to leaders to be understood, supported, and encouraged in their work. Staff thrive when [leaders really listen](link) and help them be successful in their work.

- **Encourage a [positive culture of learning](.)** Begin meetings by asking staff to share a positive success or strategy that worked well or talk about a current challenge and what they are learning. Staff often gain deep insight by hearing about the experiences and decisions of others. Personal conversations held during a safe and caring exchange establish respect and trust as staff learn about and from each other. Personal stories encourage respect and promote compassion, empathy, and identity with others.

  Invite staff to share practical resources for teaching, family interactions, behavior guidance, and professional development. Organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Association for Family Child Care, and McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership offer a range of resources that focus on continuous quality improvement, leadership, and teaching. Ask staff to recommend books that can become the foundation for a discussion. Check out resources for your state [quality improvement system](link) to identify opportunities for online professional development and participation in program development.

- **Explore [staff motivation](.)** While work is professional, it is also personal. Staff spend most of their waking hours and a substantial portion of their lives investing in their work and professional relationships. Their well-being, sense of belonging, and purpose often depend on the extent to which they feel connected to the purpose of their work. Do you know what motivates your staff? What aspects of their work are important to them? Take time to ask. Find out what your staff value, what they want to experience, and the kind of support they need to energize and motivate their work. Often, what they really need are words of kindness, encouragement for a job well done, and appreciation for going the extra mile.

- **Use [strengths-based](link) language and thinking.** Aim for a strengths-based culture where the focus is on identifying and developing staff potential. Listen carefully to the words you use about yourself and others and the messages these convey. A leader's positive language is contagious and has the ability to elevate and inspire the thoughts of others. Affirming messages strengthen staff pride in the work and increase investment in the purpose and impact of your program. Reorienting to a strengths-based approach requires a shift from focusing on fixing problems to seeing challenges

as opportunities for positive learning, growth, and change and affirming staff capability to grow and contribute to that change.

- **Seek staff perspectives.** When you need to make decisions related to the program, seek input. "I need your feedback. What do you think will work best?" "What have I missed? Is there anything else we need to consider?" "Are there any impacts of this decision I may not have considered?" Brainstorming with staff builds trust. It conveys respect for diverse opinions. Asking for feedback sends a strong message that staff experiences, perspectives, and ideas are valued at the table.

  Staff (and family) feedback is especially important when decisions relate to them. Important questions include, "How would this plan work? Is this change doable?" "Can you identify any barriers to engagement or success?" "Do we have the capability to make this happen?" The answers to these questions will reveal essential information to help you refine decisions.

  Sometimes leaders hesitate to ask for input, thinking that rules, protocols, and procedures should be made and obeyed. But staff are more likely to commit to and support decisions when they are asked to give feedback. When you feel a firm decision needs to be made about a protocol, share your decision-making reasons and seek feedback before the decision is finalized. Then when the change is written into a handbook, included in staff expectations, or announced to others, staff will feel they have been on your team and are a respected part of the process.

- **Create an inclusive culture.** Leaders must guide staff in identifying and seeking to remove barriers to an inclusive culture. The goals include opening dialog, establishing active respect for diversity, and ensuring that anti-prejudice norms are set for the organization. Staff should work together to create inclusive classrooms and practice reflective communication, with opportunities to share personal stories and set collaborative goals for anti-bias work and teaching.

  Even with priority placed on inclusive anti-bias practices related to culture, language, gender, and other diversities, some dynamics remain hidden and inhibit open communication. The first barrier includes an often unacknowledged power imbalance. Power dynamics can shape decision-making and agenda-setting and guide the direction of interaction outcomes. For example, a supervisor has the ability to undermine or support staff job security. While the supervisor may not perceive this imbalance as an obstacle, it influences the extent to which staff feel safe sharing information. In the same way, power imbalances may be present through hidden expectations or knowledge and because of cultural and language differences among leadership and staff. In these circumstances, one party has access to understanding and information (is an insider); whereas, the other person lacks complete information and therefore participates as an outsider.

  In addition, leaders may assume staff share similar understandings about organizational expectations, teaching styles, and interactions with families and children. But the accepted norms of one early child care program may be significantly different than another. Staff bring with them

a range of understandings about their roles and approaches to work. Diverse ways of communicating may result in inaccurate assumptions, misperceptions, and bias when interpreting what someone says or does. Without regular, reflective conversations, these issues may remain hidden or unresolved.

- **Identify effective processes for problem solving.** Foundational to staff development is the use of restorative practices. "Restorative conversations may be formal or informal discussions that use restorative questions, 'I' statements, and empathetic listening to guide someone through reflection, problem solving, and repairing harm (5)". Rather than shaming or bringing punitive actions, restorative practices help staff grow, feel supported, and take responsibility for their own growth and positive change. Having someone come alongside to brainstorm solutions to problems and experiencing compassion and support when mistakes are made can lead to real growth and insight. Leaders must be intentional about creating safe psychological spaces where staff may ask honest questions without fear of retaliation and where mistakes may be made and used as learning opportunities, rather than an occasion for shame or threat.

- **Practice reflective supervision.** Reflective conversations support positive professional growth and foster dispositions of flexibility, responsibility, and self-reflection. To facilitate reflective supervision, the leader must reserve regular time to meet with individual staff. Questions for reflection include: "How are things going? What successes have you experienced? What factors contributed to these outcome?" "Are there any issues that have challenged you? What happened, and how did things turn out? What insights have you gained? What could you have done differently?" "What support or resources do you need as you move forward in your work this week?" This kind of action-focused reflection fosters a culture of safety, collaboration, constructive action, and trust. Staff feel they are a priority and use this time to seek advice, share accomplishments, and talk about their needs.

During a time when courage and determination are needed to maintain the stability of early childhood programs, take time to reimagine your influence in the lives of staff. Learn more about the ways they are managing current stresses and check in on their well-being. Revisit your schedule and time allocation, and reserve time to meet with staff to learn about their perspectives and needs. As you review the strategies for interpersonal communication, consider new ways to strengthen and support staff relationships. Make it a priority to develop greater sensitivity and insight about staff experiences as they manage the many challenges and triumphs of teaching and family engagement. When life is stressful and programs are stretched, leaders can create powerful change by helping staff grow and building safe spaces for communication and professional growth.

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