

Helping Adults Succeed

Overcoming Barriers to Better Performance

by Gigi Schweikert

As a supervisor, you're probably full of ideas and energy, a strong work ethic, and lots of enthusiasm. So are you wondering why everyone you supervise isn't as excited as you? Do you get frustrated because some adults don't complete the work you ask them to do? One of the greatest challenges for supervisors is realizing that our employees don't always share our expertise and commitment. Sometimes adults do their job and sometimes they don't. And even if our employees do follow through, they often don't do the work like we want it done.

So how do we help adults succeed? Let's think about working with children. If a child isn't functioning well in our program, perhaps having separation problems or misbehaving, we don't immediately say, "What's wrong with that kid?" No, we look at ourselves, we look at our role as a teacher: Did I set up the room appropriately? Are my expectations realistic? Have I given the child enough atten-

tion and support? It's the same with adults.

Now let's think about the child who exhibits challenging behavior. As early childhood professionals, we would never say, "I don't think that kid's ever going to crawl, so don't worry about taking that one out of the bouncy seat." We would never work with a preschooler and say, "I don't think that kid will ever learn to read. He doesn't need books." Never! As teachers, we would never give up on children. We love children and we'd do anything to help them succeed. If we have a child who doesn't want to participate in an art project, but he likes cars, we do crazy, creative things such as, "Let's roll cars through paint." But how often do we give up on adults?

For children, we spend a great deal of energy and creativity to develop an individual care and education plan, create an environment and experience that fits the child, and investigate and use other resources so every child can succeed. Our efforts are endless. But when it comes to the adults, do we think the same way? Usually not. Usually, we expect adults to know what to do when we hire them; and with limited hours of orientation, those adults are on their own. And then, when those same adults

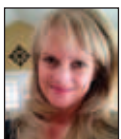
fail, that's when we give them plenty of our time, energy, and judgment. Let's help adults, just as we help children, before they fail. That's our job as supervisors.

Help Adults to Succeed, Don't Wait Until They Fail

There aren't many people who wake up in the morning and say, "Today I am going to really mess up at work. First, I'll be late, then not watch the kids, and after that forget to turn in my paperwork." Absolutely not! Adults, like children, don't want to fail. Most of our employees work hard to seek the approval and affirmation of others, the acceptance of and belonging of a group, and the feeling of a job done well. Unfortunately, there are adults who may feel like failures or even losers. Your greatest role as a supervisor is to help adults be successful, to coach them, to teach them, to role-model for them, just like you would do for any child. If you're a master teacher, you have many of the skills to be a master supervisor.

Have Realistic Expectations of Adults

We have to realize, even as supervisors, that we cannot control those around us.



Gigi Schweikert is the working mother of four and author of more than 15 books on early childhood education, including the best-selling *Winning Ways* series with Redleaf Press. Gigi's practical ideas and realistic perspective on child care will have

you laughing and learning. Gigi's an international keynote speaker, recently in Malaysia and headed to New Zealand. Follow Gigi on Twitter @gigischweikert and checkout her website: www.gigischweikert.com for speaking engagements.

We can try to motivate others to perform and control our responses when they don't. Here's the situation. You are good at your job. You get things done. But no matter how good you are, you must depend on the performance of others for your program to function well. There is no way, no matter how good you are, that you could run your center alone. Every single person on your team is important. That's why you have to build on the success of every adult. And here's the deal with most supervisors: You may be an overachiever. Do you have unrealistic expectations of others?

Practice DAP for Adults

As supervisors, we need to remember that some of the people whom we supervise may not perform or aspire to perform as we do, and that's okay. Our expectations as supervisors should be that each employee does her job at an acceptable level of competence, according to what we have asked. Are you expecting your staff to be exactly like you? If you are, then your expectations are unrealistic. So part of helping adults to succeed is setting clear and appropriate expectations. Think about this. You know what DAP is, right? Developmentally Appropriate Practice. Do you use DAP for adults or do you just expect people to be just like you, on your skill level, with the same experience? Can you see the strengths and successes of everyone you supervise and help them perform even better? Do you accept your employees where they are and guide them to learn and grow? You should.

Help Adults Succeed

- Appreciate the skills, talents, experience, and ambition of those you supervise.
- Build on the skills and talents of each employee.
- Never assume your employees know what you want them to do.
- Make your expectations simple and specific.

- Communicate your expectations in a variety of ways — verbal meeting, written statement.
- Clarify expectations. Ask the employee to tell you what he believes you expect.
- Address safety issues first when communicating expectations.
- Focus on one job goal that is not being met or where performance is marginal.

Communicate Clear Expectations

- During the interview
- At the point of hire
- During orientation
- In job descriptions
- On center charts
- During one-on-one meetings
- During staff meetings
- At performance appraisals
- As an issue arises, but not around the children

Overcome Barriers to Success

Supervisors get frustrated when employees don't perform what to us seems like a simple task. We think, "Shouldn't they just know that?" "Shouldn't they just do that?" Not unless we have told them. But what if we have given the employee simple, clear expectations and the job is still not getting done? What if we ask the employee about a job expectation that is not being accomplished and we are met with reasons or perhaps excuses? I call these 'barriers.' These barriers are real or perceived reasons the employee feels are keeping her from being successful.

Even though an employee may know and understand what she is supposed to do, the employee may feel she can't perform her role because of these barriers. It may sound like this:

Supervisor: "Please make sure you take out the trash after lunch."

Employee: "We don't have enough staff for me to leave the room" (or I don't

have enough time before my break). Some of the barriers that employees state are legitimate, others may be inaccurate perceptions. Although perceptions are certainly their reality, others may be excuses. Don't assume that your employee is making an excuse before you explore the situation.

Let's take a closer look at some of these barriers. Barriers can include time; coverage; limited materials; lack of experience, skills, or confidence; and fear of failure or lack of motivation. Your job as a supervisor is to actively listen to the barriers the employee identifies and then help her eliminate or overcome those barriers. Some people are barrier-spotter; but you, as a supervisor, have to be a barrier-jumper. How am I going to help this person get over this barrier?

Eliminate Barriers

- Give employees choices
- Solve the barrier issue as a team
- Provide advice based on experience
- Have the person attend a workshop
- Role-model how to overcome the barrier
- Provide encouragement
- Give praise
- Offer your time as a supervisor
- Create a culture that allows employees to question authority

Build Relationships

- Offer employees choices regarding how they carry out or perform their jobs:
 - "We need a bulletin board for Week of the Young Child. What would you like to do?"
 - "Teachers are bunching up in a group and chatting on the playground when they should be watching the children. How can we make sure all the children are being supervised outside?"
- Give one-on-one attention to each employee through weekly meetings, working alongside the person in the classroom, taking the employee out to

lunch, or talking on the phone about how the day went.

- Listen carefully and respond to the employee's real and perceived barriers:
 - “So what I understand from you is that you can't use the water table more often because the children get wet and don't have a change of clothes. Let's send out a note to parents to bring in extra clothes.”
- Recognize the importance of being patient and helpful while adults are learning.
- Encourage staff to seek help from each other:
 - “Dana, in Toddler Room 2, has a lot of good ideas for helping with transition. I can arrange for you to spend some time in her room.”
- Understand the intensity of feelings regarding change:
 - “Having family-style meals with children is messy and much harder than on the adults serving it. Why don't you just start with snack?”
- Intervene and help the employee before she is too frustrated or overwhelmed:
 - “Let me help you get the children dressed to go outside.”
- Provide a culture that allows for venting. Listen to the employee, repeat to see if you understand her feelings and then help her deal with the issue.
 - “It sounds like that parent could have spoken to you more politely. I'm sorry. I'll speak with the parent, but in the meantime we need to think of a way to make sure all of her child's things are ready to go at the end of the day. How can we do that?”

Here's the Deal

How do we help adults succeed? Just as we would with children: Accept everyone where they are. Then we can determine how to help that adult become a better early childhood professional. That's it? That's it. And it doesn't happen overnight. And some employees may never reach your level of expertise nor do they want to. That's okay, too. Most importantly, never give up on an adult. You'd never do that to a child.