

Looking Out for Number Two: Working with an Assistant

by Karen Maggio

The number two position in your early childhood program may be a program director, an assistant director, or anyone serving as the second in command. An awareness of how to prevent being “squeezed” in that middle role helps each person be successful and effective. Consider how to implement these ideas in your center.

How did being in the middle ever get such a bad rap? The dilemmas of middle children have been widely publicized. Being in the middle of a conflict is portrayed as an uncomfortable place. The middle, though, can be wonderful. In the middle, you gain a perspective that helps you relate to each side. Think about that favorite chocolate sandwich cookie. Most everyone agrees the middle is the best part! It serves a critical function that only happens from the middle — it keeps both sides together. The number two position can do just that, given the opportunity and support. Here are some proven guidelines.

Who Does What?

Teamwork will be stronger if the roles are clearly defined. Your roles may resemble a “boss and book-keeper” relationship. Sometimes the number two person may have opposite skills from number one so that will define their role. Occasionally the manager may hire someone

who has similar interests or skills to his or her own. In this case, the two would work together to decide responsibilities. In well established relationships, there may be a genuine partnership. The alternatives all have value. To determine the most effective arrangement for your program, evaluate these factors: requirements of the center, job requirements, and each person’s needs.

• **Requirements of the center.** Center requirements may indicate the most effective role definition for number one and two. For instance, if your center needs program or curriculum improvements, someone in the top two positions should be knowledgeable and credible with staff if they are to contribute to improving the program. If, on the other hand, your curriculum runs like clockwork, your center may have other needs, such as marketing. In this case, the number one and two should decide which person is most suited to marketing and then assign that responsibility.

• **Job requirements.** Job requirements may dictate the manager and assistant’s relationship. If the center director position seems to be the most appropriate one for staff development, the assistant’s role should include many of the other time consuming responsibilities that limit the center director’s availability to work with staff.

Another aspect of job requirements is to evaluate the time allocated for number two to complete their job. In some centers, the second in command also has classroom responsibilities. They may have a limited window of time in which they can complete their tasks. For example, if your assistant has two hours during naptime set aside daily, his or her tasks must be those which can be started and stopped easily, such as working on children’s files or creating resources for staff. Imagine being responsible for taking prospective parents on a tour when naptime is the only time available. Frustration and ineffectiveness are inherent in this set up. Looking out for number two requires avoiding these pitfalls.

Another consideration in job requirements is to stay away from assignments which overlap responsibility.

(Each of you should have clearly defined jobs. When the number one person has partial responsibility for a task and number two does also, there is sure to be trouble.) This happens frequently because we tend to be very flexible people. The only time it appears to work is when the manager and assistant jobs are interchangeable because the duo has worked together a long time.

The more “fragile” (or new) the relationship, the more limits should be defined. For instance, if the center director and the assistant are both working on social service billing independently, it can be predicted there will be problems. One of you may have a conversation with a caseworker and inadvertently forget to mention the call to the other. A better recommendation would be that one person be assigned total accountability for the complete job. Then when situations involve that topic, the appointed person would be notified. (Number ones should keep out of the middle of number twos’ areas of responsibility.)

- **Each person’s needs.** It is human nature to enjoy work that uses our skills, holds our interest, and contributes to our self-development. An assistant may have his or her heart set on being in the number one position someday. (An enlightened manager would structure the assistant’s job to enable them to have a broad scope of responsibilities with corresponding authority and to have opportunities to make independent decisions.) This being the case, the relationship and roles would need to reflect your commitment to their aspirations.

In addition to addressing needs, it is good advice to each to work from their strengths. A person with great people skills can use those whatever the job assignment. Even when

working on files, the ability to build relationships enhances cooperation from parents in bringing the missing paperwork. When we take on a job with the intent of improving a weakness, our comfort levels are low and our chance for success is lessened. We are usually hired for our strengths — we should use them! Number one can be careful to delegate work to number two which plays on his or her strengths, rather than broadcast weak areas.

It Takes Two

A relationship requires the support of each person if it is to work. There are three simple recommendations: keep the other person informed, present a unified front, and keep confidences.

- **Keep each other informed.** Regardless of the roles assumed by number one and number two, there must be a commitment to keep one another informed. This helps each person make educated decisions which in turn helps you both look good. If the assistant knows that one of the parents is upset about a policy and informs the director, it is likely he or she would then approach the parent to work through any differences. Parents and staff expect that information discussed with one of you will be shared.

- **Present a unified front.** Because first and second positions are authority positions, some staff may test the boundaries. We know how it works: “If mom says ‘no,’ ask dad.” When dad and mom have different answers, children learn to go to the most lenient person. (The director and his or her assistant must live the principle of “united we stand, divided we fall.”) Each of you, because you are a team, must set aside personal opinions and take the position that is right for the center.

A center dress code is an example. One may believe that staff should dress professionally and the other may feel blue jeans are more conducive to crawling around on the floor. While you have very separate ideas, once a policy is defined, each of you must support it without fail. Even a side comment by either of you — such as, “here’s what I wanted to do” — is destructive. This creates an impression with your staff that by building an alliance with one of you, the other can be overturned. You should share a public voice.

- **Keep confidences.** Everything that gets discussed is not up for grabs. There are times when certain topics are off limits for others. A conversation about a staff disciplinary action is a topic that would require confidentiality. (Both one and two must trust that they can think out loud and work together to problem solve sensitive issues.) These three areas clearly lead one to the importance of trust in the relationship of a number one and two position. The ability to foster this trust will benefit you both in all aspects of staff relations.

Learn to Empower

Some people like being the center director because of the control and authority the job offers. When a manager grows, he or she realizes that sharing control works best. It relieves the pressure of a large job and develops staff at the same time. Here are some pointers for empowering the next in command.

- **Teach them to see both sides.** Many assistants are new to management. Their view is often from the staff perspective. That is valuable, but it only presents half a picture. When the manager observes their assistant falling into this pattern, both should agree to have a discussion which challenges them to change perspectives.

- **Allow them to make mistakes.**

Sure, maybe the job could be done faster with fewer mistakes. It is easy to forget how long we have had to perfect our talents. Assistants will make mistakes. It probably will take an assistant longer to complete a new task. As long as the person is improving, the manager should allow them the space to fail and experiment. (Directors are often surprised to find that their assistants may also find a better way to do the job!)

- **Support them to staff and parents.**

The center director should let staff know that the assistant's word is as good as their own. Number one can inform staff and parents when they will be out of the building and confidently report, "Jenny (number two) will be taking care of everything — just see her if you have any questions!" If Jenny does make a wrong decision, that should be saved

for a private discussion. No one else needs to know. (Number twos can also present a confident front to parents and staff by saying, "Let me think about that," instead of saying, "Let me check with the director.")

- **Be a power deflector.** Some assistants are reluctant to make decisions and may be in the habit of bringing the manager all problems that need solving. What a compliment — they can handle it all! Yep, they probably can. They can also return the power to the assistant by saying, "How do you want to handle it?" or "I trust you'll make a good decision. I will support whatever you decide." It is the only way an assistant will learn to fly on their own.

There are many easy steps to take toward building the relationship between a number one and assistant. Each person can have a positive impact and each will benefit.

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