

Who Made Me Boss?

Eight Tips for Supervisors

by Gigi Taylor Schweikert

You know those early childhood teachers who are absolutely amazing? The ones who can manage 20 children inside on a rainy day all by themselves, make dough out of air, construct an entire addition to their center using only toilet paper rolls and duct tape, create a complete curriculum of science, math, social studies, and more based on one pumpkin seed? And of course, those amazing teachers can figure out “coverage” even if six teachers are sick, two can’t lift anything over ten pounds, and one teacher is leaving early. Those amazing teachers are the ones I call “the master teachers.”

Becoming a Supervisor

You know what happens to most master teachers? They are asked to be supervisors so they can teach other staff members how to do all the great things they do. Unfortunately, most master teachers do what they do naturally, and working well with children doesn’t always translate into working well with adults.

Whether you’re a director, program coordinator, or lead teacher, supervising other adults is probably the hardest part of your job. You’re good! That’s how you got where you are, but doing every-

thing by yourself and complaining about it won’t make you a good supervisor.

So what does makes a good leader? Everyone’s style is different, but in my experience a boss “tells you what to do,” a manager “motivates you to do stuff,” and a leader “inspires you to be the best you can be.” Being a good supervisor requires you to be all three at times, but most importantly, and all the time, you need to be a leader.

Eight Supervision Tips

Here are some ideas to help you become a better supervisor and inspire those around you:

1. Admit You’re the Supervisor

Admitting to yourself that you’re the supervisor is not a bad thing. In the corporate world success is measured by title, salary, and the number of people under you. Somehow, in the child care field, we’re not always proud of being *in charge*. Working directly with children seems the most worthy responsibility in our industry. But good supervisors are not only necessary, they’re helpful.

There must have been a person, a supervisor, who inspired you to continue in the early childhood field. Think of the positive skills of that supervisor. What can you use in your own leadership? Concentrate on being respected rather than being liked. Try to make the right decisions, not popular decisions.

2. Make Your Expectations Clear

The majority of employees want to do a good job. They want to please you and others. Suppose you hired me as a substitute? Think I’d do a good job? I’d try to apply my skills, but in spite of my experience I couldn’t do my best for you unless you told me what you need. I don’t know that Mark and Tasha’s mats don’t go side-by-side, where to get the glue, or how lunch is set up. Super-

Gigi Taylor Schweikert is the cable television host of Today’s Family, an entertaining and educational half-hour show that focuses on information for families. Reaching over 300,000 households, Today’s Family airs on Comcast, Cablevision, and RCN. Gigi has developed and managed the Johnson & Johnson System of Family Centers serving six employee work sites and over 3,000 families. Prior to her work with Johnson & Johnson and Bright Horizons Family Solutions, Gigi was the director of the United Nations Early Childhood Program in New York City. She has written two books, *Teacher Tips* and *Back to Work with a Baby* and a *Briefcase*. Gigi lives in Hunterdon County, New Jersey with her husband, four children, and two dogs.



visors have to tell their employees what they want them to do, and supervisors need to be specific. Employees feel awkward if they don't know or understand their responsibilities. When a job isn't done well, first question whether you clearly communicated your expectations clearly.

3. Create a Culture that Encourages New Ideas and Allows for Mistakes

Developing clear expectations for your employees doesn't mean there aren't lots of opportunities for employees to be creative and involved. Develop a supportive work environment that encourages new ideas and allows for mistakes. Never compromise the safety of children. Leaving children unattended or falling asleep at naptime are not mistakes; they're irresponsible. But encouraging another staff member to coordinate Grandparent's Day, plan the daily curriculum, or even organize and carry out circle time are opportunities to let teachers use and improve their skills. There's more than one way to make Jell-O®. So what if it doesn't gel. There's a science lesson in there somewhere. Encourage individual thinking. Make it easy for employees to give ideas through meetings, one-on-one conversations, and written suggestions. Once new ideas are in-hand, follow through on their ideas so employees know that you value their contributions.

4. Don't Get in the Way of Success

Can you let the process and results of a job be different from the way you would do it? Try to avoid the "Do it my Way" approach to supervision. Employees whose work is constantly criticized or redone because there is only one way to get things done eventually stop trying. And guess what? You're on your own to *do it your way*.

Everyone has skills and talents. Emphasize the skill or goal rather than the process or method. Allow freedom of expression. Don't stand in the way of teachers doing their job. Delegate a job and stand back. You'll be surprised and your employees will feel empowered, trusted, and proud! Build on success. There's more than one way to get things done.

5. Communicate Honestly

I'm the kind of person who definitely wants to be told if I come out of the bathroom with toilet paper stuck on my shoe. Ever check out your teeth in the mirror only to see a big hunk of broccoli or something, and wonder how long it was there and why no one told you? It's the same with supervision. Keeping employees adequately informed and telling employees about *hunks of broccoli* in their performance are only fair. Be honest. Let people know where they stand.

You're not a *meanie* if you accurately provide your employees with feedback on their work. On the contrary, good supervisors describe to employees how they are doing and how they can improve. Surprise! We can all improve. As Jim Greenman says, "Good enough, never is." Tell employees right away about any changes that will affect them and about things that won't affect them, so they won't worry. In the absence of information, people speculate and gossip. I call that "playground chatter."

6. Follow Through

I think supervisors with the greatest credibility are not only honest, but follow through on what they promise. Child care is a busy world and no matter how well your "To Do List" is scripted, the events of the day will rewrite your list and priorities. State licensing always shows up on the day

the oven breaks and you're stuck making 200 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, a gerbil is on the loose somewhere in the building, and your entire afternoon staff is going to be "a little late." So how do you follow through? Develop clear, realistic expectations of yourself. Stick to policy, but be open to policy change. Don't waiver on consequences when an employee neglects responsibility. If you request curriculum plans to be turned in every Thursday, then stick to it. And if you promised to make comments and return the plans, then do it.

Sometimes following through after a very busy day is just a call to say, "I promised to get back to you this afternoon about your concern. I will have to meet with you tomorrow." If you find you're failing to follow through often, reexamine your expectations and those put upon you by staff. It's okay to say to an employee, "I know this project is important to you and I can discuss it next week." You don't have to make every decision when someone grabs you in the hall.

7. Stay Connected

Develop ways to stay in touch with your employees, especially if you work side by side in the classroom. Good supervisors need adult time away from the children to reflect and talk. Weekly head teacher or classroom meetings, quarterly goals, annual performance appraisals, and frequent one-on-ones may seem like too much time to invest. Actually, defined opportunities for supervisor and employees to meet cut down on, "May I talk to you for a minute?" and lines at your door. Supervisors and employees learn to hold their issues and ideas for meeting time instead of chatting in front of the children.

As a supervisor, you want to maintain an, "*I'm approachable, I'm available, open*

door policy," but important issues and policy decisions require scheduled time on the calendar. Supervisors are kind of like banks; your ATM is always open for a quick withdrawal or balance update, but refinancing requires employees to come in and sit down. Stay connected.

8. Set the Tone

As a leader, your attitude sets the tone of the center or classroom. Are you hurried and frantic? Are you determined to get things accomplished, but relaxed? Which style would better motivate you? When something goes wrong, help employees feel a problem is their problem, too. Don't look for someone to blame. Build your team by asking employees for their advice and help. Leaders don't know all the answers, but they do surround themselves with people who can help them figure it out.

Give authority with responsibility. It inspires staff. When the job gets heated, be the thermostat not the thermometer. Establish a calm, supportive environment where adults and children feel comfortable and at home. No one likes to work at 110%. But as a leader you can inspire those around you to be at 110%.