Stop Refereeing and Start Building Communication Skills

by Patty Whitelaw Drogue

Your lead preschool teacher, Tomar, tells you that the new assistant teacher in his class - room, Tania, isn't doing a very good job of cleaning up after snack and lunch.

Chris is grumbling in the staff room. Mia left exploded food in the microwave again; and Chris, who has lunch after her every day, has to clean it up again.

The storage closet is a disaster, again. You spent an entire day separating and organiz - ing the different blocks and manipulatives into their correct containers, wiping up paint and glue spills, and cleaning up the piles of paper. Now, a few days later, it looks like a tornado hit it. Everybody is blaming everyone else for the mess.

Helping staff get along with each other can sometimes be more challenging than helping young children get along! A director can feel like a referee instead of a leader of professionals when staff bicker with each other. Many directors find that efforts made to strengthen everyone's skills in giving and responding to feedback help a great deal.

Early childhood training calendars are filled with opportunities to learn how to teach children to use their words with each other and manage their conflicts. As early childhood educators, we understand that children need repeated opportunities, with lots of support and guidance, to apply new skills in daily life.

We assume that since staff are adults, they already know how to provide constructive feedback to each other. Unfortunately, all too often, people haven't learned how to do this. Many supervisors also assume that if we give staff the basic information, they will know how to apply it, and will start doing it regularly in their daily interactions with each other. Just like children need good role models, guidance, support, and lots of practice when developing new skills, so do adults!

Director as role model

This is where supervisors play a pivotal role. They are behavioral role models for the staff, and are frequently teachers' primary source for guidance and support in learning how to work more effectively with each other, as well as with children and families. Supervisors who strengthen their own skills in giving and responding to feedback can become powerful role models for their staff, and can then coach others in these skills.

Giving constructive feedback — rather than blaming or criticizing — can be hard to do. But when it is done consistently, it makes a tremendous difference in the way staff work together. It requires us to think carefully about what we say, how we say it, and when we say it.

Constructive feedback

Some key characteristics of constructive feedback include:

- Talking about the specific behaviors and incidents, not feelings, judgments, or attitudes
- Approaching the issue with the intent of creating a mutually agreeable solution, rather than blaming or criticizing someone
- Focusing on developing a dialogue about the issue, a two-way conversa-

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tion, instead of venting frustrations

- Providing feedback in a timely manner, not days after an incident
- Giving feedback confidentially, when others can't eavesdrop on your conversation

Let's look at the storage closet example presented at the start of this article. Here is a great "teachable moment" for the entire staff. The most important message to give staff is that this is a specific problem to be solved, not to be complained about or blamed on anyone.

At a staff meeting a director could say: "The storage closet is a real problem lately. The manipulatives are getting mixed up with each other, the paper is falling on the floor, and paint and glue are dripping on other materials and getting tracked on the floor. Let's take some time to brainstorm how we can keep the closet organized, so it is easier for everyone to get the things that they need quickly."

This clearly identifies the issue, sets the stage for many ideas to be offered and discussed, and states the goal of making things work better for the staff. It also sends the message that you believe that your staff can arrive at a workable solution.

At this point, teachers may play the "blame game":

"It's been rainy all week with the kids bouncing off the walls, so we don't have time to clean up."

"The closet is too small and half the puzzles are missing pieces and the toys in the back are all broken anyway. Why bother?"

"I haven't even gone into the closet for the past week, so it's not my fault!" Staff may need help focusing their attention on solving the problem, rather than getting stuck on who is to blame or why it is a problem. As Holly Elissa Bruno, an early education consultant in Massachusetts says, "Keep your eyes on the prize." The prize here is a solution to the messy storage closet that can work for everyone. You may need to acknowledge some of the challenges, like the never-ending rain and the fact that the closet is not as big as you'd like. But then bring staff back to the question of what can be done to make it work better.

This process develops problem-solving skills. Directors get better at helping people to stay focused on developing solutions. Staff learn how to shift their focus from the blame game to a problem-solving focus. Of course, these skills don't develop in one session; both directors and staff need support and practice in developing these skills over time.

Brainstorming

Once staff are focused on the issue at hand — the storage closet — the next challenge is brainstorm possible solutions. Nancy Alexander defines brainstorming in her book *Early Childhood Workshops that Work!* as "an activity in which many ideas or suggestions are generated without regard to feasibility." Finding great solutions to challenging problems requires us to be creative in our thinking.

This kind of creativity in problem-solving requires specific skills. First, it requires everyone to suspend judgment and to let ideas flow, no matter how absurd or perfect they may seem. Alexander suggests that staff be presented with humorous *warm-up* brainstorming activities to loosen them up and get them ready to brainstorm: How many different ways can you use a paperclip? How many different ways can you eat bread? Alexander offers the following brainstorming guidelines:

- Quantity rather than quality is the goal. Think of as many ideas as you can. The ideas can be as bizarre as you wish.
- Piggyback on others' ideas. Look for variations on the ideas suggested by other participants. Evaluation is not allowed at this time. All ideas are accepted without comment, and no discussion of feasibility should occur at this stage.

After you've generated a lot of ideas, staff review the ideas together and identify the suggestions, or parts of suggestions, that they think could work. And lastly, staff must discuss and agree on a plan they will try.

Once staff have developed a plan that they are all willing to try, implementation begins. An important part of implementation is monitoring progress. Don't forget to check in with the staff to see how the plan is working. If it's working then congratulate yourself first for helping them through the process, and then congratulate them for their input and work on the issue! If it isn't working, then rethink the solution with them and work together to change or fine-tune the solution. This follow-through sends the message that issues may require a few tries at problem-solving before an adequate solution is reached. The focus is on solving the problem, not on whether the idea is *good* or not.

The process for helping Tomar, Chris, or any staff member to problem-solve involves one additional factor: confidentiality. In the storage closet example, confidentiality wasn't addressed, because the issue affected everyone. In the other examples, the problem is between two staff members and is not the business of every person in the program. Tomar and Chris may need coaching in how to start a confidential discussion with their coworkers: Setting up a time either before the children come in, during naptime, or at the end

of the day. Other staff can also be asked to step into the classroom for a while to allow uninterrupted discussion time for problem-solving.

Learning to give and receive feedback constructively takes time, energy, and patience; but the payoff is great. Supervisors find that using these skills ultimately makes their job less complicated and frustrating. And staff who learn these skills have fewer conflicts, greater trust in each other, and more energy to devote to the children and families in the program.

References

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