

Thriving on feedback

by Julie Bartkus

Would you like your staff to feel valued? Would you like to know what changes you need to implement to be more effective in your leadership role? If you've answered yes, consider setting up systems so that you can get consistent feedback from your staff. When you open yourself up to receiving feedback from your staff, you're sending a clear message to them that their thoughts and input matter, allowing you to cultivate positive relationships with them. This is a powerful technique for staff motivation as people have a deep desire to feel valued, respected, and appreciated at work.

Requesting feedback from your staff

The purpose of the feedback that you receive from your staff is to give you the opportunity to make constructive change happen and break down the 'us' versus

'them' mindset that can divide your team and break down trust. Really knowing how your staff feels — and then providing them with methods for communicating their thoughts and feelings directly with you on an ongoing basis — can be a valuable tool in your toolbox. Internally your organization will thrive, especially when there are major challenges to overcome.

Feedback that will help you and your center thrive can come in many forms, including verbal and written. The best feedback is offered firsthand as opposed to a second-hand tale of who's unhappy about what or as the familiar "who did what to whom." I'll share with you some techniques for getting feedback later on in this article. First, let's take a look at two major challenges leaders face when it comes to getting feedback.

Challenges to getting feedback

The first challenge for many leaders is getting consistent feedback. Have you ever had the experience where you announce a change through a memo or make an announcement at your staff meeting and then allow time for feedback? What happens? If you're thinking, "No one says anything," you're not alone. Many leaders share this challenge. They ask for feedback and the room is silent. So, they wrap up the meeting and notice something odd. Staff members walk away and huddle

in small groups talking softly or two people are off in a corner whispering to one another. You can only assume they're sharing what YOU wanted — feedback.

Another challenge comes when staff are unable to offer constructive feedback and instead get caught up in endless venting and complaining about the situation. Can you think of a time when you wanted to know how people were feeling about a situation and instead of getting good constructive feedback and formulating solutions, gossip and complaints were what circulated around the room? This is a form of feedback that often leads to more workplace gossip and can carry over into staff's communication with parents. This results in negative word-of-mouth spreading far and fast about the situation and your program. Some leaders have shared with me how surprised they were when they made a stop at the grocery store only to find out that the cashier knew what was going on in their programs.

In order to get consistent feedback that you can thrive on, it's important to have systems in place to help you collect, digest, and respond to feedback. Systems are important, especially if you're like many leaders in this industry who struggle to get a moment of free time. Common tools that you can consider incorporating into your 'feedback system' include suggestion boxes, feedback forms,



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regular one-on-one meetings, and, of course, regular direct and honest feedback when there are issues that need to be resolved.

Handling the feedback you receive

Before we get into setting up systems and understanding what can work for you going forward, there is another important element to address. That is your being able to digest the feedback that you get without your emotions overwhelming you. This can be tough when you pour your heart and soul into your work. Here are a few success strategies that will help you get feedback and thrive on it:

■ Refrain from defensive reactions.

These feelings are understandable. However, they must be handled appropriately in order to get open and honest feedback consistently.

I remember working with a child care team where the directors were trying to implement constructive methods of communication. A situation came up where it was shared that staff don't give feedback because they are afraid to speak up. I found out through confidential surveys that this was because one of the directors had asked for feedback and reacted defensively when it was given. She had asked, "What do you think of that bulletin board I put together?" One teacher said it was nice, but it could be more professional. The director became upset and defended herself by saying how long it took to put together. She said that the teacher's feedback was unfair. Well, her reaction became the subject of gossip and staff stopped sharing their thoughts and feedback. If your staff thinks that the feedback they share with you — even when asked to do so — will upset you, they will not want to share it. They don't want to upset you because they fear that their words will be held against them in performance

reviews or negatively impact your relationship with them.

■ **Remember that the way people communicate often has more to do with them than it does with you.** This doesn't mean you should dismiss their feedback. But it does mean that you should look for the trends in the feedback that's offered.

One time I worked with a leader who read a comment on a staff survey about someone wanting to be greeted in the morning with a doughnut and a cup of coffee. This was not a trend in the feedback she received, but someone's expression of feeling under-appreciated.

■ **Respect confidentiality.** If you say feedback is anonymous, respect that and don't try to figure out who said what.

I once worked with an organization where the staff's trust was broken. When I surveyed team members, I found out that there was at least one instance where the leaders did not do what they told their staff they would do — in fact, they did the opposite. They initiated a feedback process and asked staff to complete surveys. They assured staff that their responses would be confidential and that the feedback would only be used to help the leadership team make constructive changes to the program. However, as the surveys were returned, the leaders glanced at the surveys before placing them in an envelope. Staff members caught a glimpse of what was going on and became understandably upset. In that moment trust was broken. As a result, destructive attitudes and communication patterns followed. In the following weeks, staff members claimed that the atmosphere was rabid with mistrust, gossip, and fear.

The concept that is important here is that the way you communicate with your staff has a tremendous impact on their level of motivation. And, if trust is

broken between leaders and their staff, the impact can be very detrimental. On the flip side, if you cultivate a climate of trust and respect, it's better than giving employees a 35% raise according to Michelle Reina, author of *Rebuilding Trust* (2010). Many child care teams I've worked with are afraid to give feedback because their leaders might recognize their handwriting and it might impact their performance evaluation. Part of this fear is natural, but part of it may be because trust has been broken in the communication process at some point in the past.

■ Model the process from top down.

Start modeling the process from top down and encourage your entire team to participate in giving and receiving feedback. Make giving and receiving feedback an art that is visible every day, not just a once-a-year event. If you only open yourself up to feedback from your staff once a year, it will be like pulling teeth to get it. When you model how to be open to feedback and make changes based on the feedback that you receive, your staff will follow suit.

Establishing a feedback system

The systems that you have in place are critically important in helping you get open and honest feedback when you request it. So what are systems? You can think of systems as the processes you put in place to accomplish a goal. They typically outline steps to follow to achieve the desired outcome. The wonderful thing about setting up systems from a leadership perspective is that many of the steps can be delegated to others — freeing up your time and yet still accomplishing the goal. The problem that comes up most often related to feedback is that all of the steps in the feedback system are not outlined or followed. This causes staff and parents to lose trust in the process and become unresponsive.

Here are the important steps to include as part of your feedback system regardless of what tools you use to get feedback.

■ **Educate your staff about the feedback tools you use.** Whether it's a suggestion box, monthly forum, or annual survey let them know what your goal is in using the tools and that their use benefits the program.

■ **Inform staff of what happens next.** Many times leaders will put out a beautiful suggestion box and let everyone know that it's there. At first, people are excited. They submit their suggestions until they realize that they have no idea what will happen next. You'll want to consider the following questions to more fully implement your feedback system:

- When will you read the feedback?
- How will you acknowledge the feedback you receive?
- How will you decide the action you will take as a result of the feedback?
- How will you communicate with those who provided you feedback?

■ **Take action on the feedback you receive.** Failing to take action and follow through is one of the worst mistakes that leaders make when it comes to feedback. Skip this step and you'll be skipping the most important and gratifying aspect of receiving feedback — the chance to improve your performance.

Summary

The process of getting feedback from your staff is one that can be made simple by thinking about feedback positively and putting systems into place. Always remember that the feedback you receive — positive and negative — is a priceless gift that will help you understand things from your staff's perspective and take

positive action to make constructive change happen.

Reference

Reina, M. (2010). *Rebuilding trust: Seven steps to renew confidence, commitment, and energy*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.