Supervisory Techniques for Positive Performance

by Diane M. Kohl

Directors of early childhood programs wear many hats in the performance of their job responsibilities. One of the most important is that of providing leadership through effective supervision of staff. Promoting positive and helping relationships among the staff yields confident, motivated caregivers who want to provide quality care and education for young children.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 1986 there were 762,000 child care workers in educational and social service and 359,000 preschool and kindergarten teachers. Of these two groups, 35.9% of child care workers and 14.9% of preschool and kindergarten teachers became dissatisfied with their occupations due to low wages and poor benefits and left their jobs. This situation adversely affects the quality of services available.
to young children and their families. Program quality is directly related to the provision of trained, dedicated and caring child care personnel.

Many early childhood programs face a lack of adequate financial support and increasing operating expenses. The prognosis of this situation seems to be continuing low salaries paid to child care personnel. As a result, the child care profession will continue to be faced with staff turnover and shortages (Whitebook, 1986).

Recognizing that people need to do work they like and that the character of the work itself is a motivating force, supervisors can counter the problem of low salaries somewhat by enticing their competent personnel to remain by providing a positive environment and benefits which require limited financial outlay. A less attractive solution to filling staff vacancies is the hiring of inexperienced and untrained staff. When it becomes necessary to hire staff, it is prudent for the supervisor to carefully plan the advertising and interviewing processes so that only the most promising candidates are hired.

Counselman (1987) suggests the implementation of people-centered environments in which the needs and desires of adults as well as children are recognized and met. In this type of environment staff feel that they are important assets to the program and valued for their contributions. The director, as a supervisor, is the key to promoting and facilitating activities that will encourage positive relationships among staff members.

Orientation

Orientation serves as an excellent learning opportunity for new employees as they are eager and motivated to do well on their new jobs. Handbooks containing employee and center policies should be reviewed along with the center's philosophy and goals. New employees should be given opportunities to observe the program and then be paired with experienced personnel to serve as aides or assistants and gain on-the-job training. As new employees become familiar with the program they learn to develop positive working relationships with peers and supervisors.

Goal Setting/Evaluation

Conveying the program's philosophy and goals are major responsibilities of the supervisor. As each new employee is hired, these are discussed along with responsibilities of the job. Written job descriptions should also be provided for all staff members. Satisfactory job performance is difficult when staff are not sure or do not understand their specific responsibilities. During the evaluation process, a review of each job may also prove helpful for clarification and revision of responsibilities. At this time the supervisor also guides each employee to develop or revise individual goals necessary to overcome weaknesses identified during the evaluation process.

Communication

Whether the activity is orientation, goal setting, evaluation, day-to-day interaction, or anything else, good communication is the foundation upon which it must be built.

Listening to and showing sincere interest in staff members establishes a model for positive relationships. Developing the technique of active listening (Gordon, 1977), in which the listener verbalizes his/her understanding of the speaker's message without blaming or telling the person what to do, encourages more expression and clarification of feelings and problems. Through continued feedback and questioning the speaker can be helped to develop a means for handling feelings and possible solutions for problems.

The supervisor is also a sender of verbal and nonverbal messages. Clarity and timing are important as the supervisor conveys information, requests, directions and critiques. Specificity is crucial in all supervisory communication whether it be spoken or written. Busy supervisors often assume that an employee knows what they mean when this may not be the case. A check on communication can be done by having the receiver restate the information or directions given. The supervisor is then able to assess the level of understanding and continue explaining if necessary.

Morale

Morale is a major factor in the growth of staff (Caruso & Fawcett, 1986). When morale is high, people are happy, creative and work hard to accomplish individual and program goals. The reverse is true when morale is low, resulting in job dissatisfaction and high turnover. Caruso and Fawcett list some factors contributing to low morale as exhaustion, tedium, isolation (little contact with adults), poor working conditions, low pay and low status.

Raising morale should be the goal of every supervisor. A variety of suggestions for morale building follow:

- Provide social gatherings such as parties, staff lunches, family get-togethers among staff and an attractive break area
- Allow staff to attend conferences, workshops and seminars by building registration and substitute costs into the budget
- Encourage staff to take advantage of educational opportunities and help to pay for tuition
- Honor staff members' birthdays with cards, banners, cakes, special lunches, flowers, and/or a day off
- Provide reliable substitutes so that staff members feel they can take off when sick
- Set up a library of magazines, journals, curriculum books and the like for staff to use
- Allow for teachers to be creative in curriculum development within the center's philosophy
- Provide time for the staff to think, plan and work together without having to be responsible for children
- Set up regular staff meetings for sharing ideas and concerns, add refreshments to encourage informal/social interactions
- Allow staff members to purchase materials that they see displayed at conferences
- Videotape teachers in ideal teaching situations and show at staff meetings (be sure to include all staff members at some point)
- Be available to talk and listen to staff