Positive Approaches to Supervision: A Handbook for Mentors and Supervisors

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## Contents

The Mentor Coach Supervisor ................................................................. 3

Supervision: The Limits of Power ............................................................ 7

Personal Styles: Control vs. Empowerment ............................................... 10

Seeing Our Own Reflection .................................................................. 10
Rules and Regulations ......................................................................... 12
The Child and Parent Advocate ............................................................ 16
Doing the Best That We Can ................................................................. 19
Happy Staff - Happy Children ............................................................... 21

Positive Approaches to Supervision ....................................................... 23

Hiring and Training ............................................................................. 23
Ask Instead of Tell, Listen Instead of Talk ............................................ 24
Provide Positive Feedback.................................................................... 26
Approval vs. Appreciation ................................................................... 27
Focusing on Outcomes ........................................................................ 29
Broadening Our Definitions ................................................................. 29
Acknowledging Our Biases .................................................................. 30
Multiple Truths ................................................................................... 32
Lighten Up .......................................................................................... 34
Supporting “Mistakes” Three Typical Responses .................................. 36
Response #1. “I Always Do:” Agree and Congratulate .......................... 36
Response #2. “I Can’t:” Empathize and Problem Solve ........................ 38
Response #3. “I Won’t:” Withdraw from Power Struggles ..................... 41

The Marginal Employee ........................................................................ 44

I’ve Tried Everything ........................................................................... 44
Big Mistakes ....................................................................................... 46
Attitudes ............................................................................................. 49
Access to Decision Making and Information ........................................ 50
Organizational Climate ........................................................................ 54
Racism ................................................................................................ 55
The Marginal Employee - When Nothing Works, Revisited .................... 57

Steps for Presenting Effective Feedback ................................................ 60
The Feedback Conference in a Nutshell: Key Elements ........................................ 65

The Hiring Process: What to Look For, How to Find It ........................................ 67

- What to Look For .................................................................................................. 67
- How to Find It .................................................................................................. 68
- The Interview .................................................................................................. 68
- The Observation .............................................................................................. 70
- Simulations ....................................................................................................... 70
- Probation .......................................................................................................... 71

About the Author...

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About T/TAS...

Training & Technical Assistance Services has been a leading provider of technical assistance and training for Head Start and early childhood programs since 1973. T/TAS delivers comprehensive educational, programmatic, and professional development training, backed by the resources and support of Western Kentucky University. An authority on Head Start and early childhood issues, program management, family and community partnerships, and fiscal management, T/TAS offers a variety of options for local programs to access technical assistance or training. To learn more, contact T/TAS at 800-TTAS-4-TA (800-882-7482) or visit www.ttas.org.
The Mentor Coach Supervisor

Almost everyone, somewhere along the way has had a mentor. Our mentor was someone who saw something special in us that made us worth their time and trouble. Likewise, our mentor was someone in whom we saw something special - someone whom we wished to emulate, someone whose advice was worth taking.

Our mentor may have been a teacher, a supervisor, a friend, or a parent. We may have had more than one. Although each experience is unique, there are some characteristics that are similar in almost all mentor relationships. For example, in nearly every such relationship:

• The mentor and mentee are mutually self-selected. In other words, we chose each other.

• The mentor is not in equal relationship to all. When a teacher or supervisor (or even a friend or parent) becomes our mentor, we are by definition in a more special relationship to that person than any of the other students, employees, friends or children.

• Mentor relationships are frequently based in mutually held values, a common world view and mutual goals.

• Our relationship is long-term, open-ended, and process-oriented. It would be difficult, except perhaps in hindsight, to say the exact moment or the day that someone became our mentor. Like a friendship, it was a relationship that evolved naturally.

• Likewise, there is not a cutoff date for the relationship to end, nor is there a specific result or outcome that would indicate that the relationship was successful and complete. These relationships, in fact, often last a lifetime. And although both parties might identify areas of growth and deepened understanding, there are no specific targets or benchmarks that define the relationship.

When we contrast these characteristics of the mentor to those of the supervisor, the differences are obvious. In a supervisory relationship:

○ Both parties are assigned to each other. There is no element of mutual selection. In other words, we are stuck with each other.

○ The supervisor, by definition, must be in equal relationship to all. Fairness, particularly the perception of fairness, is critical if the supervisor is to successfully manage a group of employees.
Supervisors and staff may have very different values, goals and world views.

The relationship is for a specified term and is result-oriented. Supervisory relationships in Head Start and in schools are arranged on a contractual basis and may be terminated for any number of reasons, including transfers, resignations, promotions, or revamping of organizational charts.

In supervisory relationships, success is measured by results. The staff member has very specific tasks to perform and benchmarks to achieve, and it is the responsibility of the supervisor to make sure those things happen.

If we were to sum up these differences, we might say that the mentor relationship is essentially a personal one, even though it frequently occurs in a work setting. The supervisory relationship, on the other hand, is essentially a professional one that is defined by the parameters of the work setting.

Supervisors, of course also become mentors to some of their staff with whom a relationship develops that transcends the supervisory role and takes on all of those qualities we mentioned earlier.

But is this the same as a mentor coach? Where does that particular job title fit into this picture? Is it just another word for mentor? If we were to apply the same criteria that we used to compare supervisors and mentors, we would discover that in the mentor coaches’ relationship:

★ Both parties, mentor coach and teacher, are assigned to each other by the agency. There is no element of mutual selection. In other words, we are stuck with each other.

★ The mentor coach, by definition, must be in equal relationship to all. This is not to say that the mentor coach would not individualize. It simply means that the task at hand is to produce results from everyone, not to enter into relationships with a select few with whom we have a personal affinity.

★ Mentor coaches and staff may have very different values, goals and world views.

★ The relationship is for a specified term and is result-oriented. Mentor coach relationships are arranged on a contractual basis and may be terminated for any number of reasons, including transfers, resignations, promotions, or revamping of organizational charts.
In a mentor coach relationship, success is measured by results. The staff member has very specific tasks to perform and benchmarks to achieve, and it is the responsibility of the mentor coach to make sure those things happen. The emphasis on child outcomes, particularly around literacy, as well as the implementation of the National Reporting System, make it clear that the primary role of the mentor coach, like the supervisor, is to produce very specific results in Head Start classrooms.

As we make this comparison, we need to reaffirm that the above list refers not to a mentor that we might have at work or that we might be to someone at work. The mentor coach is a job, in the same way that education coordinator or center manager is a job. Like anyone who holds these positions, it is also quite possible for the mentor coach to develop mentoring relationships. But as we compare the mentor, the mentor coach, and the supervisor, we might decide that the job title “mentor coach” is something of a misnomer. By all criteria, the role of mentor coach is much more similar to a supervisor than that of an actual mentor. Therefore, we ask the wrong question when we ask if a supervisor can also be a mentor coach. Except for the fact that a supervisor might at some point be obliged to write a letter of reprimand or conduct a performance evaluation, the roles are almost indistinguishable, and there is no reason at all that the same person could not wear both hats.

This handbook will instead ask the questions:

1. How can mentor coaches and supervisors become more like true mentors not just to that staff with whom the relationship develops naturally but with staff members to whom we are assigned - staff who might have very different values from us and who therefore may not see us as role models or as someone with something important to share?

2. How do we prevent things from reaching a point that reprimands are necessary?

3. How do we turn a performance evaluation into a dialogue that inspires growth so that mentor coach, supervisor and staff member alike can each participate in a positive manner?

4. How do we take a relationship (whether supervisor or mentor coach) that was imposed on both parties and build it into something more trusting, more mutual, more satisfying, and ultimately more productive?

This last item - “more productive” - strikes at the heart of the matter. If the supervisor could simply get staff to perform because “I say so,” or if the mentor coach could simply change staff performance because “I know what’s best,” then we could just ignore the whole issue of mentoring and let relationships, both positive and negative develop as they may.