

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

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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.

*What we have discovered, and what the Head Start Bureau had in mind when it created the mentor coach, is that we can most effectively bring about change and enhance performance in all staff members when we **focus on the relationship.***

However, what we have discovered, and what the Head Start Bureau had in mind when it created the mentor coach, is that we can most effectively bring about change and enhance performance in all staff members when we *focus on the relationship*. When relationships are positive and trusting, staff are more willing to listen. They will work harder and at higher levels when the mentor coach/supervisor (we will use these terms interchangeably throughout the Handbook) lets them know they are valued. They will be more motivated when they are encouraged to make decisions that honor their practices, values, and goals, and which are based on what is best for children, families and the agency rather than what is expected from someone in authority. (Mentor coaches almost always have more authority than they are willing to admit. Supervisors almost always have less than they think.)

This handbook, then, is about relationships. It will explore broad strategies and describe specific techniques designed to build trust and inspire confidence not just in those few staff members who are like us and who might naturally enter into mentor relationships with us, but also those who are very different from us, who might even view us with suspicion and resentment. When *those* staff members begin to look at us as someone who is worth listening to, despite all the roadblocks inherent in organizational charts and job descriptions, we might discover that we have become true mentors after all.