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# How Did You Manage That? A Closer Look at Staff Guidance

by Pauline Davey Zeece

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At a time when society demands quick fixes and simple solutions to complex problems, a search for the ideal model of staff management is inviting. A stroll through the business section of your local library or bookstore will afford the opportunity to polish your passion for excellence or mull over megatrends for the next millennium. The truly brave can learn to dance with giants or ponder the leadership secrets of Attila the Hun! While such resources may offer insight into management, none presents *the answer to effective staff guidance.*

In reality, there is no single right answer. Perhaps this is because staff guidance by its nature is a dynamic process. It is action and growth oriented. As such, it is based on the assumption that everyone in an organization is constantly changing and that all can benefit from growth opportunities.

Although there may not be one right answer, Caruso and Fawcett (1986) suggest that the quality of early childhood programming can only be maintained and improved when administrators have a realistic understanding of how workers grow

and develop in their roles as caregivers and teachers.

## **New Thoughts about Old Ideas**

With little time (and usually less money), where can directors turn for direction in staff guidance? Where can administrators obtain information about staff growth and development? Surprisingly, the answer may be closer than you think. Staff guidance can be optimized when it functions within the guidelines of developmentally appropriate practice. As with children, the concept of developmental appropriateness has two dimensions: age and stage appropriateness and individual appropriateness (Bredenkamp, 1986).

### ***And How Did You Grow: Age and Caregiving***

Each of us brings to our respective jobs the collective experiences of a lifetime. And part of these experiences include the attitudes we have developed toward work roles. Because attitudes about work roles are often formed during a child's early years, younger and older

workers may vary in their initial expectations about a variety of things related to child care work.

For example, some older workers may at first feel uneasy when a three year old calls them by their first name, as such behavior may appear impudent. A young beginning director may experience discomfort when taking disciplinary action with a worker who is the same age as a parent or grandparent.

Developmentally appropriate practice, then, does not dictate change based on the birth cohort of staff. Rather, it requires that directors develop a sensitivity about the relative effects of age and incorporate this awareness into a staff management style. Allowing and encouraging staff to share their perspectives based on when they were born and how they were treated as children builds rapport and strengthens programming.

### ***Developmental Stages of Child Care Workers***

Understanding stages of child care work can also be a part of age appropriate practice. Nearly 20

years ago, Katz (1972) delineated changes that teachers of young children experience.

She labeled these changes as developmental stages which include:

- Stage I — Survival
- Stage II — Consolidation
- Stage III — Renewal
- Stage IV — Maturity

**The survival stage.** Survival is a very real part of child care work. Not only is the job physically demanding, but it is also psychologically intense. Bonda, a beginning infant/toddler teacher, recalls:

*"The first months were terrible. I would go home at night and collapse. The first few days I couldn't even find the bathroom. By the second week, several toddlers had attached to me — so even though I knew where it was, I couldn't get away to use it. I remember telling my roommate that I was so tired, even my hair hurt!"*

Additionally, when a teaching or caregiving assignment is changed, an experienced and successful teacher may be thrown back into survival mode. For example, although an infant teacher may know many of the mechanics and policies of a program, she or he may discover that five year olds bring their own special kind of pandemonium to a child care job. Length of time in the survival mode may be less the second or third time around, but the feelings of panic are oftentimes the same. It may be that beginning directors go through this very difficult survival stage, too!

Survival mode teachers need:

- Assurance that what they are feeling and experiencing is not unusual or wrong.

- Specific, detailed, ongoing information about the mechanics of the job they are expected to do.

- Feedback from colleagues and administrators. They need assurance that they can and will survive.

**The consolidation stage.** "I not only survived, but I am making a difference" could be the slogan of consolidation mode teachers and caregivers. Ronnie, a teacher of four year olds, talks about his second six months at a child care center:

*"At first I thought it was because I was male. I couldn't tell anyone how I felt. How could I say that four year olds were making me crazy? But it got better, especially when I figured out that the world wouldn't end when things didn't get done exactly. . . . I think the turning point for me was when they (other teachers) started asking me about my science table instead of just asking me to help move stuff."*

During the consolidation period, workers feel more organized and secure with everyone — children, parents, and colleagues. The focus of energy turns from managing panic to planning programs. Working as a team member is more physically and psychologically rewarding. This is the time when teachers begin to build a repertoire of skills. It is also a time when their sense of themselves as competent teachers and caregivers is established.

Consolidation mode teachers need:

- Continued feedback and reassurance from administrators.
- Encouragement or empowerment to solve their own problems — they are best directed to exchange solutions and ideas with others.

- Additional information about individual differences and specific behavior management techniques.

**The renewal stage.** Introspection is the hallmark of the renewal stage. At this time, workers possess the security and self-confidence necessary to realistically examine their professional strengths and weaknesses. Molly, a veteran nursery school teacher, comments:

*"I have come to the point in my life when I want more . . . but I'm not quite sure what more is yet. I know I'm good with children — I hear that from parents all the time. But there are days when I just go through the motions. It may sound egotistic but I'm good enough at this that other people can't tell. . . . But I can tell and that's what bothers me."*

Renewal mode teachers oftentimes need exposure to innovation. If they have not had the opportunity to engage in advocacy efforts, this may also be a time when this is important. More than new equipment, they seek new ideas and new ways to think about old (or enduring) problems. This is often the stage wherein the teacher-specialist emerges. Teacher preference, talent, and experience mesh to create a unique teacher identity. Stevens and King (1976) suggest that workers in this stage should be encouraged to build on and extend emerging specializations.

Renewal mode teachers need:

- Feedback and recognition from administrators.
- Opportunities which encourage their growth as professionals and specialists.
- Opportunities to function as team leaders and mentors for beginning teachers.

**The maturity stage.** If renewal mode teachers are mentors for new workers, maturity mode teachers are mentors for the profession. Mature teachers and caregivers are committed to quality early life experiences for every child. Maturity is not necessarily a function of age or even of longevity involvement in the field. This is the time when interest and involvement in advocacy emerges or matures.

The fifth and final stage of professionalism is **the influential stage**. According to Vander Ven (1988), few reach this final plateau which is characterized by many years of experience in multiple roles in child care work. Workers in the influential stage are often recognized as state and national leaders. They may be directors of well known, model service programs. Influential stage workers are self-directed and feel comfortable with leadership and authority. These are the people who set the pace, first in their own thinking and then in their professional endeavors.

### Individual Differences

Staff guidance techniques can also be enhanced when directors are sensitive to individual differences, most obviously differences in temperament and cognitive style.

#### *A Closer Look at Temperament*

Even as very young children, people display distinct differences. As people mature, they learn to act in socially appropriate ways. They also show very basic differences in their approach to life and in their individual temperaments. Keirse and Bates (1978) have proposed temperament categories which may be applied or extended to those who work in child care. Workers in these categories may be conceptualized as

adventurous, responsible, intuitive thinking, and intuitive feeling.

**The adventurous worker.** Adventurous workers are spontaneous, fun-loving, and impulsive by nature. They oftentimes are interested in a wide variety of things and may have difficulty when organization or preparation is left solely to them. Completing tasks or unplanned delays may also be difficult for workers with this temperament. What they do well is help children and colleagues see the world as an ongoing adventure. Boldness, cleverness, and performance are what many adventurous workers pride themselves on: they feel appreciated when these qualities are noted.

**The responsible worker.** Even as very young children, responsible workers thrive on a predictable, scheduled world. They respond most favorably when the surroundings are ordered so that the same thing happens at the same time each day. Of all the temperament styles, this is the most susceptible to conflict at work. This makes sense considering the disruption that such conflict often brings. Carefulness, thoroughness, and accuracy are valued by this group. The predictable, dependable nature of responsible temperament workers can be deceptive, for insecurity may be buried beneath an outwardly competent surface. Administrator approval is highly valued, and it is important not to place unrealistic expectations or pressures on people with this temperament style.

**The intuitive thinking worker.** Intuitive thinking workers may seem solemn. They may prefer standing back and watching things happen instead of becoming actively involved in activities. This should not be mistaken for a lack of interest or lack of intellectual ability. Actually,

as a group, intuitive workers are high achievers who enjoy and seek out challenges in a variety of ways. Conflict may appear if these workers lose respect for administrators who are not logical or fair in their demands or who issue rules that are not warranted by the circumstances. The ideal child care environment for these workers is one in which the right to question is valued and appreciated.

#### **The intuitive feeling worker.**

Intuitive feeling workers are sometimes called empathic. They are usually happy, but they need reassurance that they are valued because they are sensitive people. There are wide differences in the behavior of workers within this temperament style. For example, introverted and extroverted empathic workers are very different. For the extrovert, life among people is filled with pleasant interaction as these workers seem to have a charm that draws people to them. For the introvert, there may be some difficulty communicating, especially in new circumstances. Intuitive feeling workers are quite responsive to administrators who are accepting, who allow for expression of feelings, and who genuinely respond to their ideas and opinions.

#### *What Do You Think about That?*

Another important way in which people differ is called **cognitive style**. Cognitive styles are consistent individual differences in the ways workers organize and process information as they perform their jobs. However, cognitive style does not imply a level of intelligence or even the content of cognition. Rather, it represents the strategies and preferences a worker uses in thinking through problems.

Messick (1976) proposed that all people utilize cognitive styles or conceptual tempos. Accordingly, these tempos are either **reflective** or **impulsive** in nature. The worker who uses a reflective style takes a longer time to solve a problem, but is more accurate. In a child care setting, reflective workers might respond more positively when given time to think about upcoming changes before they occur. They may be silent during a heated staff meeting, only to come up with a brilliant solution after everyone has left the room. Reflective workers function best in a planned, ordered, and predictable environment.

Impulsive workers respond swiftly to situations. They are quick to answer and to analyze. Although they solve problems more quickly, they may make more errors. This does not necessarily mean that impulsive workers are irresponsible or ineffective. It only implies that they are cognitive risk takers and are able to brainstorm about immediate solutions. They are more likely to spontaneously contribute during a staff meeting. Impulsive workers may be more influenced by authority figures. In general, they have more highly developed social skills and function best in an environment which provides opportunities for discussion and fosters the notion that there are many right or acceptable ways to do things.

So . . .

Regardless of the ages, stages, or individual differences among workers, it is clear that competent and caring interaction enhances the administrator-worker relationship. Also, like all general descriptions, these categories, stages, and models are meant to be used only as a guide to a better understanding of people.

All workers are unique; they will not fit any of these profiles perfectly.

The fact that people do have predictable similarities, as well as challenging differences, has important implications for child care administrators. First, this makes the best case for utilizing developmentally appropriate practice with adults, as well as children, within a child care setting.

Second, it should be reassuring to directors that behavior once thought to be the result of poor management may actually be traits or development characteristics of workers.

Third, although administrators may not be responsible for workers' age, stage, temperament, or cognitive style, their reactions to such things may have important consequences for staff guidance and professional development. Staff guidance is an important and integral part of successful program administration. When it is steeped within developmentally appropriate practice, it affords all involved the opportunity to grow, develop, and prosper.

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