

Effective Evaluations

Bringing out the best in your staff!

By Marcy Hemminger

Evaluations – the mere word can cause panic in our hearts! I think that staff evaluations are one of the most challenging aspects of being a director. When things are going well and our staff are performing as expected, evaluations are easier to do. But when things aren't going well and staff aren't performing up to par, evaluations can cause gut-wrenching stress! I personally have never enjoyed having to do someone's evaluation, even when everything written seemed to be positive in nature. I do not like being in the position of evaluating peers – I am too much of a people pleaser. What I have realized though, is that evaluations can be great tools and, since they are generally a necessary part of licensing, have learned to make them work for me instead of against me.

Here are some questions often asked from both directors and teachers about performing evaluations. The answers written have come from my experience and research. I calculated that I have performed over 100 evaluations from my position as director of either the preschool program or the child care center. This does not make me an expert, but lets me share some of the lessons I have learned.

When do we do evaluations?

Each staff person should have a minimum of one evaluation per year. Though licensing dictates this for most centers, I have found the annual review time period to be extremely effective. Now that I teach in the public schools, we receive evaluations every 3 years and I believe that that is not frequent enough, especially if a staff person is getting off track. Performing evaluations once a year is enough to stay on top of things, but not so often as to be cumbersome or interfering.

Another appropriate time to engage in the evaluation process is to check on proposed goals and behavior changes. If it has been discovered that a staff person needs to make changes in her teaching methods, styles or behaviors, one can not wait a full year to analyze whether she has made the proposed changes. Just like when changing the behavior of our children who need frequent monitoring, guidance and reinforcement to learn new and appropriate behaviors, so it is with adults. Say punctuality is an issue. Without monitoring and support, they may come in promptly for a few days or even weeks, but if left to their own motivation, may slip back into the old habit of arriving late. Having an opportunity to evaluate 4 to 6 weeks after the annual review will open the door to a more diligent focus, both by the director and the staff person. That focus, along with intermittent evaluations, provides just the prompts necessary to develop new learning patterns and bring about consistent changes.

If a staff person has decided to leave the program, performing an evaluation as an exit interview may be an excellent way to get truthful and constructive information about what is working and what is not. Granted, at times this information needs to be tempered with the reasons that the person is leaving, but even then, it provides insight and perspectives that might not have been revealed otherwise. As a result, I highly recommend performing an evaluation at the end of someone's employment.

What are the benefits of evaluations?

The benefits for performing staff evaluations far outweigh any negatives and that realization helped me to keep plodding through them rather than procrastinating or avoiding them when possible. Here is a list of some of the many benefits:

- **They provide feedback on work performance.** I don't care who one works for or what type of job they hold, just about everyone one wants to know how they are doing on that job. Evaluations provide that opportunity to reflect, discuss and share both data and analysis of that data that paints the job performance picture.
- **Evaluations help staff stay on course.** Knowing that evaluations occur each year helps employees keep goals and objectives on their minds. Certainly for the first 6 to 8 weeks after an evaluation and the same time period before the next evaluation is due, staff are thinking about what they are doing and should be doing on their job.
- **They help to define job descriptions and training needs.** It sometimes becomes evident that jobs evolve and change over time. A teacher assistant's job used to be "X", but now because either the make-up of the children attending has changed or the demands of the assistant have changed, so has the job description. Evaluations are perfect opportunities to make these discoveries. In regards to training, if evaluations are revealing that several staff are struggling with discipline or teaching methods, a director can deduce that they need new or updated information that can be received through training.
- **Evaluations provide a "reality check" for performance.** I always say that when perceptions match, everything is good. When a staff person believes that they do an excellent job and their peers agree, well that's easy. Perceptions and reality match. The same is true if a staff person thinks that they need to make changes and improvements and the director and peers agree. Everyone is satisfied when perceptions and reality match. BUT, when perceptions do not match reality and a staff person thinks they are doing an excellent job, but their peers believe that they are not, well, that's when evaluations are the most challenging. Sometimes, the only way to discover this perception/reality check is through evaluations.
- **Evaluations can be an excellent tool for motivating staff and increasing morale.** When accurate information is provided, along with reasonable goals and objectives, employees are motivated to achieve those goals and often strive to make positive changes.
- **Evaluations can bring everyone on board with center philosophies.** I hear directors comment that many of their employees do not follow center policies and procedures. Research shows that many times it is due to a lack of understanding as to why the policies and procedures are in place; how they connect with the center's philosophy. Evaluations can be the opportune time to have this discussion one-on-one with the staff person. When the "buy-in" to the reasons, they are more likely to follow through and support your policies and procedures.
- **They provide the staff person the format to openly discuss their concerns and goals.** It can be difficult for employees to talk about view points and teaching styles especially if they differ from those of either the director or their peer professionals. When the evaluations are used as a tool for 2-way communication, this allows everyone the opportunity to voice opinions, both positive and negative.

What are the key elements to an effective evaluation?

Research and experience suggest that each evaluation contain as many of the following segments for information as possible:

- Employee's name and position
- Supervisor's name

- Date of the evaluation
- Employee's goals and objectives:
 - For the review period
 - For the coming year
- General work quality
- Dependability
- Job knowledge
- Personality
- Communication skills
- Service to patrons (parents and children)
- Personal development
- Team work
- Initiative and creativity
- Performance overview
- Areas of improvement
- Action plan
- Employee response
- Date of next review
- Signature of both the supervisor and the employee

What are the steps necessary to have an effective evaluation?

Before the evaluation:

- Take time to review the staff person's job description. It will make the comments much more credible if they match what they should be doing.
- Review the personnel file and past evaluations to check to see the comments, goals and objectives agreed upon the last time.
- Provide a blank copy to the employee being evaluated and ask them to complete it. This allows for the opportunity for reflection and assessment of their job performance.
- Schedule an appointment with the staff member before the "due date" and confirm.
- Complete the evaluation promptly a week in advance if possible so that there is time for corrections and additions.
- Provide a completed copy to the employee. Actually there are two thoughts on this. Some people find that this is a fair way for the staff member to be able to respond accurately and intelligently to the comments made and not be caught like a "deer in the headlights" during the conference. Others feel that this provides an opportunity to create a counter argument and can make the conference one of discourse and defensive language. Do what works best in your situation.

During the evaluation conference:

- Open with a smile and at least one positive comment. This goes a long way in setting the tone for the meeting and helps keep things on track.
- Discuss both evaluation forms – yours and theirs – and review the consistencies and inconsistencies. For areas of improvement, use the sandwich method:
- Say something positive and productive about the job performance
- Insert constructive criticism. Keep the focus on something the staff person could change. Make your comments pass the "MOO" test. (explanation later)
- Wrap it up with another positive and productive comment.

- Provide the employee with the opportunity to respond to:
 - Duties they enjoyed the most
 - Duties they enjoyed the least
 - Areas of personal excellence
 - Areas of challenge or that require training
 - Perceptions of their “fit” within your program
- Review the goals and objectives from the past year and, together, determine goals for this coming year.
- Create an action plan for any areas of improvement.
- Determine the number of days or weeks for follow-up on those areas and set a date for reviewing that progress.
- Thank the employee for their participation in the evaluation and finish with a positive comment about their job performance.

After the evaluation conference:

- File the evaluation in their personnel file.
- Make a note of the action plan checkpoint dates.
- Write a “Thank You” to the staff member.
- Follow up the action plan with feedback, training and review to ensure the success.

Evaluation “Do’s”:

- All of your comments should pass the “MOO” test. In other words, the comments are measurable, objective and observable. Too often words such as “difficult to work with” are used. What does that mean? It may mean one thing to me and another thing to someone else. Writing comments that pass the “MOO” test makes them visible and understandable to anyone and everyone. Here is a different way to explain what “difficult to work with” means.

“___ responds to directions from others at least once and up to 5 times per week by walking away during the directions, commenting that she does not agree with the directions. She then indicates her disagreement by lack of follow through with the designated tasks. This sequence is generally followed by the “silent treatment” where she does not answer questions or comments by peer staff.”

Now can you “see” how she behaves? When using the “MOO” test, the comments are about the behavior and not your perception of the behavior.

- Provide an accurate and comprehensive picture of the staff member. Nothing can undermine the entire evaluation process than having inaccurate evaluations. Overly positive ones do not help them set realistic goals and objectives nor do they help to motivate staff. This is especially true if everyone receives an overly positive evaluation. Overly negative evaluations can destroy morale and self-esteem. Employees tend to walk away from situations where they perceive they have a negative impact. Uniformly neutral evaluations do not provide benefit for either motivation or correction.
- Evaluations should be viewed as a positive learning experience. Your attitude can set the tone for the process and conference so “act as if” you love them!
- Evaluations need to be completely confidential. If the staff member wants to share them with others, let that be their prerogative. You must NEVER discuss, refer to or comment on an

evaluation except to that specific person – EVER!

- Observe and document performance all year long. It is difficult to remember positive or negative behaviors and situations from an entire year, so to prevent the evaluation really being a “last month or 3 months” job performance review, data needs to be collected throughout the year. Collect things such as class newsletters, e-mail messages to and from you, anecdotal records, daily schedules, lesson plans, calendars, etc.
- Get a second opinion if you are not sure how to evaluate a particular individual or behavior effectively and without bias. That opinion needs to come from a source outside your school or center to make it objective.
- No matter who is being evaluated and what their current job performance is, stress the need to improve! Studies show that having clear goals keeps moral high. If an employee feels that they are “perfect” they will not strive to do anything differently and may lose initiative and creativity.

In summary, evaluations are a necessary, but productive tool that can enhance your program! Your attitude plays an important role and so use these evaluations as a time to really get to know your staff and have the opportunity for an intelligent and productive conversation about the job and workplace.

Good luck with your evaluations!

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Resources:

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