



MARGIE CARTER lives in Seattle where she teaches at Pacific Oaks College NW. She travels widely to speak and consult with early childhood programs. Her newest video is *Building Bridges Between Teachers and Parents* and her new book with Deb Curtis, *Designs for Living and Learning: Transforming Early Childhood Environments*, will be published in June 2003.

Supervising or Coaching – What’s the Difference?

Managers in the corporate business world are now making big investments in training seminars and consultants to help them learn about coaching employees. There is also a whole new field of personal and professional coaches, taking their place alongside the long established professions of vocal coaches, sports coaches, and labor coaches (doulas and midwives). Coaching and mentoring are buzzwords in the early childhood field as well. Does this signal new professional roles for us or just a renaming of supervision strategies for our workforce?

My colleague, Constant Hine, suggests that there are distinct differences between training and coaching staff, with the former focused on skills and know-how, while the latter aims at nurturing self-defined goals and passions. Deb Curtis and I make a similar distinction in our book, *The Visionary Director*, proposing that supervising and training has a focus of upholding standards and managing resources, while coaching and mentoring keeps the focus on the staff person as a learner, working from his or her strengths, learning style, and desired goals. These distinctions are more than a matter of semantics. They represent different attitudes and approaches to helping staff get better at their jobs.

Supervising versus Coaching

Beyond a seminar or two, most program directors have no formal education in

staff development, constructivism, or reflective teaching. Indeed, these last two terms are not typically part of the working vocabulary of the average early childhood supervisor. Program directors are, however, familiar with the rating scale approach of assessment and evaluation tools, and these typically shape their system of evaluating staff. This makes sense when the focus is on upholding standards, a central aspect of a supervisor’s job.

But what if your staff is unfamiliar with the *whys* of the standards and agreed upon best practices? Many early caregivers and teachers have little experience with the kind of self-reflection and collaboration characteristic of ongoing professional development. They surely want to do a good job and be seen as competent, but most haven’t had an education based on constructivism or reflective practice. What kind of supervisory feedback will be useful to them?

STRATEGY:

Clarify when you are supervising versus coaching

Every director needs to regularly supervise and evaluate staff. This means holding them accountable to acceptable work habits and the responsibilities of their job description. Performance reviews should be based on specific observations and lead to identifying goals and desired outcomes; but for these to be reached, some coaching

might be in order. Whatever observation assessment form or approach you use, be sure to conclude your staff evaluations with a plan for specific next steps. This may include, but should go beyond, any corrective action plan you as a supervisor offer.

Develop a set of questions you can use to help staff identify strengths and interests they can further develop in the coming period. For instance, explore what excites them most about their job. Ask what kind of learning would help them feel more confident or further their leadership in your program. Collaboratively develop some action steps to be taken and, as a director, allocate some resources toward that end. This might include release time to visit a program known for particular strengths. Or it could involve paying for a workshop, class, video, or book the staff person might see as useful. Perhaps you could rearrange staffing for some side-by-side coaching of the person.

STRATEGY:

Identify issues before developing strategies

When you observe staff behaviors that need improving, take the time to ask yourself some questions before jumping in with strategies that might help. Without clearly uncovering the possible issues involved, you might pursue improvement strategies that take you down a side road.

Remembering that coaching is focused on the teacher or caregiver as a learner, ask yourself some questions before developing your coaching strategies. What do I know about this person's learning style and disposition? Who on our staff is this person most positively connected to? How might I further develop support for this person? Consider any aspects of your supervision that might have contributed to the problem. For instance, is there an adequate orientation for new staff members? Has anything in your policies, communication systems, or distribution of resources created confusion or contributed to the problem? Once you have carefully explored the issues, you are in a better position to choose useful training or coaching strategies.

Coaching as a process of inquiry

There is a significant difference between a performance evaluation and a coaching process and it is important to be clear about which you are using when. Constant Hine suggests that when you are trying to be a coach, you approach your work as a process of inquiry. Coaching as inquiry suggests using a thoughtful set of questions that promote self-reflection, as opposed to an interrogation, which has an undercurrent of criticism or investigation to assign blame. In the early childhood field we have long distinguished between closed and open-ended questions in conversations with children. A parallel line of thinking can be applied to inquiry that encourages staff to think about their thinking as well as actions.

- What values were influencing your planning or how you responded?
- How do you think this reflected your learning goals for yourself?
- What did you find satisfying, surprising, confusing, or frustrating?
- Is there a question you could have asked yourself, your teammate, or the children to discover more about what

was going on?

- How might this have gone better for you?
- How could you begin a dialog with others about what you are learning?

STRATEGY:

Ask questions that spring from genuine curiosity

There's nothing more off-putting than a series of rapid-fire questions that barely allows one to gather her thoughts. The intent of coaching as inquiry is to help teachers think about what they know and care about and what their questions, desires, and concerns are. A good starting place for the coach is to get curious about who this caregiver or teacher is, how she thinks, her disposition toward different aspects of her work, and the values and experiences that might be influencing her thoughts and actions.

Uncovering your own questions will lead to useful questions for self-reflection on the part of the teacher.

Documentation as a tool for coaching and inquiry

A typical tool for evaluating staff is a checklist with some kind of rating scale from poor to excellent. However, when you are playing the role of coach, rather than supervisor, you need other tools: a process for teachers to clarify learning goals or desired outcomes; thoughtful questions developed by the coach, and hopefully, the teacher as well; observation notes with descriptive details; and a mutually respectful dialog.

Observation notes with descriptive details look and sound significantly different than a checklist or rating scale, perhaps parallel to the difference between a report card and a portfolio

with work samples and observations to analyze. Descriptive observations serve to not only give a focus for inquiry and dialog, but also model the process you hope teachers will be using with children. In fact, the focus of your observations for coaching can as easily be on children as on the teacher.

STRATEGY:

Offer detailed descriptions of teacher actions

With an agreed upon focus or learning goal in mind, teachers and caregivers benefit from having a mirror offered to them in the form of observation details, perhaps accompanied by photographs, audio, or video tapes. However, it's an extremely self-assured teacher who doesn't find this observation process anxiety producing, even when they are eager for feedback.

When using this observation process for supervision or evaluation, you typically have some standards or best practices in mind. The discussion that follows will have suggestions for improvement, along with comments about what's going well. Observing as a coach, however, I prefer to document only details of how the teacher is reaching her goals, or things that genuinely leave me curious rather than critical, so that we can have a dialog to uncover how she or he is thinking and feeling and how this relates to a self-defined interest, goal, or outcome.

When your documentation makes visible something a caregiver has identified as a desired outcome, or something you are eager to learn more about, he will, in turn, become more self-aware, confident, and eager to learn more. Constant Hine reminds coaches to stay focused on what teachers say they really care about. Doing so, helps them flourish in new ways.

STRATEGY:
Spark dialog with detailed descriptions of children

Most of the coaching I do these days focuses on observations of children, rather than caregivers and teachers. I find this an effective coaching tool, not only because it provides ongoing examples and experiences with documenting children's conversations and activities; focusing on children allows us to have a genuine dialog about our curiosities, values, uncertainties, and hunches. This feels so clearly different than being evaluated, that teachers are often propelled into ongoing observations and dialog with their teammates.

STRATEGY:
Agree upon further observations and dialog

Most coaching relationships are time limited. For the most promising long-

term results, caregivers and teachers need to actively practice and internalize what they are trying to learn. As you bring each coaching session to a close, collaboratively design some options for the learning to continue. An effective strategy will involve further opportunities for the teacher to engage in both self-reflection and dialog with others. Perhaps you can devise a way for the teacher to share with co-workers what she has been discovering and learning, through dialog, presentations, or documentation displays. You might develop some questions for him to explore through further observations and dialog with teammates and the children's families.

Specifically identified follow-up actions will keep the teacher focused on her learning intentions. The process may encourage others to seek out coaching opportunities for themselves and create an overall organizational climate of

excitement about the possibilities for learning. Payoffs for directors who make an investment in coaching are extensive, not the least of which is more job satisfaction and less staff turnover.

Margie Carter works as a coach, college instructor, author, and video producer. To learn more about her work, visit www.ecetrainers.com.



***Related articles on
Training Staff online:
www.ChildCareExchange.com***

***Article Archives are searchable
by keyword or topic.***