

# Putting Together a Blue Sky: Laying the Foundation for Staff Evaluation

by Jeny Searcy

Susan sat in her supervisor's office, waiting for her annual evaluation. She was nervous because she had no idea what to expect. She didn't see her supervisor much. How, she wondered, could someone who had never seen her work or spent time with her say whether or not she did a good job?

Lacy's evaluation was scheduled for later that day. She hadn't thought much about it. Evaluations were, in her opinion, just going through the motions. They didn't mean anything. She didn't learn from them. Her supervisor would hand her a form with boxes checked off and she would sign it and go about her business. What difference did it all make, anyway?



With a degree in secondary speech education, Jeny Searcy rather unexpectedly entered the field of childhood education when she became Director/teacher of the Head Start Center

in Tipton, Oklahoma. Since then, she worked as a Disability Specialist, Mental Health Specialist, and Literacy Specialist with a Head Start program in rural Oklahoma. After a lifetime in southwest Oklahoma, Jeny moved to Oklahoma City. She has worked in various programs in Oklahoma City, including Oklahoma City Head Start, Sunbeam CDC, and INTEGRIS Baptist Children's Place. She is currently director of the OSU/OKC Child Development Lab School and will (finally!) finish her master's degree in August of 2012. Jeny is married with two grown, married children and has three grandchildren — Geoffrey, Elisabeth, and Lane.

Finally, Tim, the last appointment, came into his supervisor's office. He hated this! Not the evaluation process, exactly, but the going to the office. It seemed so formal and foreboding. He liked his supervisor and was able to discuss issues with her — but the process of 'going to the office' left him tongue-tied.

Evaluation time can be like putting together a 5,000-piece jigsaw puzzle that is all sky — what, exactly, is the point? When all is said and done, one ends up with a big blue blob — nothing to show for all the effort. However, it doesn't have to be that way. Performance reviews can and should be an effective means of communication for both parties involved — the supervisor and the staff member. The process simply needs to be reworked. Samuel Culbert was quoted in the *The Wall Street Journal* (as cited in *ExchangeEveryDay*, 2008) as advocating for performance *previews*, stating we need to make sure that our employees know what is expected of them every step of the way. This involves talking to them frequently, not just once every six months or annually. This is good advice, but how do we accomplish this in the child development arena? How can performance evaluations be effective for the employee, the supervisor — and, more importantly, for the children and families we serve? I

believe that implementing the three R's — relationships, reflection, and respect — will lead to a final 'R' — results.

## Relationships

Shortly after I began one position as a supervisor, one of the teachers said to me, "I really don't know why they hired you . . . I don't know what you can do." Hurtful? Yes. Honest? Yes. Motivating? Definitely! It forced me to focus immediately on developing relationships with all the teachers I supervised. I have to be, in the words of John Maxwell, ". . . close enough to relate to others, but far enough ahead to motivate them."

Developing a good relationship with those you supervise is the most essential ingredient. The employee from our opening vignette, Susan, was nervous about meeting with her supervisor. Her supervisor didn't observe Susan's performance very often, and only seemed to come into the classroom when one of the children was crying. Did she ever see the good things that went on: the gains the children in the class had made in their language development and small motor skills? Susan didn't know if her supervisor had seen these things, and she felt uncomfortable sharing this information herself. Would her supervisor listen?

Would she understand how much this meant to Susan? How could her supervisor accurately assess her performance?

Supervisors — whether center directors, program directors, or education managers — often get so bogged down in the details of the performance review instrument that they neglect to spend time in relationship-building. This involves spending time in the classrooms, both in observation and in assisting staff. Being there for the staff without taking over for them is tricky. However, a good balance between watching and helping will go a long way toward building a relationship foundation. If the teacher sees a supervisor who is actually willing to change a diaper, clean up the spilled milk, or play in the sandbox, he is more willing to trust that supervisor. If the supervisor is sitting in the classroom, the teacher may also share concerns more easily; issues that may be forgotten during a ‘formal’ evaluation can be brought up as they occur. The supervisor, too, may see things in the course of a regular program day that need her attention. These incidents provide supervisors with the opportunity to mentor or coach their staff, providing suggestions and comments, without the detached, evaluative stance of a formal performance review.

By spending time in the classroom with the staff, supervisors can also see the good things that happen; for example, the finger plays and songs that Susan is using every day to foster the children’s language development. A timely and sincere, “You chose a great song for circle time. The children really responded!” means much more than a vague compliment six months later.

To build and foster relationships, a supervisor must:

- **Spend time with his staff.** A combination of observation and assistance is essential.

- **Compliment or correct on the spot.** Mentioning something that happened three months ago during an annual performance review is not effective in improving performance.
- **Do what the staff does.** Whether the supervisor is changing diapers, cleaning up after lunch, or dancing to the music, supervisors must do the task themselves in order to evaluate it.

## Reflection

Two months into one job, I started ‘reflection times’ with the staff I supervised. I spent individual time, off site with each person for about an hour every other month (and wished it could have been more). I had times when I visited the coffee shop four times in four hours and days when I visited the local ice cream shop five times. The purpose was for my staff and me to reflect on their work and our relationship and talk about how I could support them. I laughed with staff members, cried with them, and listened to rants, gossip, and new ideas. The time away was good for all of us . . .

‘Reflective supervision’ is the new standard for early childhood programs. It is touted by organizations including the Head Start Bureau and Zero to Three. But what does this mean exactly?

Let’s consider the case of Lacy, the employee in the second example. In order for the evaluation process to be meaningful, Lacy must believe in it. She must do some thinking about her performance before the evaluation meeting and come prepared to share her thoughts about her performance, as well as ways her supervisor can support her. Her supervisor must also be committed to the process and see it as more than checking off boxes on a form to please the human resources department or other policy. She must devote time to observing and mentoring Lacy and be prepared to spend time in discussion.

Both Lacy and her supervisor must reflect on what happens in the classroom on a daily basis. Through this reflection comes an accurate and meaningful evaluation and better teaching practices. For example, a toddler in Lacy’s classroom cries every day when her mom drops her off at the center. The supervisor, without proper reflection on the situation, may assume that Lacy isn’t handling parent drop-offs effectively. Lacy, on the other hand, immediately decides that the problem is the fault of the child’s mother. To make the reflective process work, both Lacy and the supervisor think through the problem and use that reflection as a springboard for discussion. They must be willing to share their thoughts and actively listen to the other person. Then they can work together to find a solution.

How can we make reflection work? Both supervisor and teacher must:

- Commit to a mutually beneficial process; they must have faith that the system will work.
- Spend time before the reflection meeting considering the teacher’s performance.
- Be willing to share the result of that reflection. Merely thinking through a problem isn’t workable. They must share those thoughts and actively listen while the other speaks.

## Respect

I worked with 14 teachers, in seven classrooms, dealing with three different age groups. One teacher had a master’s degree, one had just started work on her Child Development Associate credential (CDA). While I had to treat them all *fairly*, I could not treat them *all the same*. I have to be, as former Senator Everett Dirksen once said, “. . . of fixed and unbending principles, the first of which is to be flexible at all times.”

A good supervisor understands and respects her supervisees’ needs and feel-

ings; this is a piece of the relationship-building discussed earlier. The employee, too, must respect her supervisor enough to share those feelings. Perhaps Tina, in our third example, who hates going to the office, would respond better to a meeting at the local coffee shop. Even the best supervisor, however, needs her staff members to share their needs and feelings with her. A director I know holds sessions with her staff that she calls 'going to the van.' When she discusses things with her staff, they take a ride in her van. This ensures her undivided attention; no one can interrupt because they aren't there. Sometimes, too, more effective communication can occur when the participants aren't looking into each other's faces. Of course this approach might not be for everyone:

- Some employees might appreciate sitting on the playground in the sun or taking a short walk in the neighborhood.
- Some might react best to discussions first thing in the morning; others want to wait until the end of the day.
- Some employees want to have discussions and conferences with the supervisor frequently — weekly or monthly.
- Others respond more effectively with less frequent contact.

It is the mark of an effective supervisor to understand (relationship-building again!) the individual staff member's needs and meet them. Just as we are taught that all children are individuals and must be cared for and educated accordingly, the needs of our staff members must be respected and individually met. There cannot be a 'one size fits all' approach. This will take more time and patience on the supervisor's part, but the results are worth the effort.

Respect for staff works when:

- The supervisor understands the needs and wishes of her staff and is willing to work with those needs.
- The staff member respects her needs enough to share them with her supervisor.
- It is remembered that flexibility is essential. What works for one staff member might not work for another and what works for an employee at one time might not work at another time.

### The Implied 'R'

There is another, implied, 'R' in these three areas — **response**, which should come from both the supervisor and the staff member. As mentioned in the story of Susan, the supervisor must respond to what is happening in the classroom when she visits. She should give immediate feedback and Susan should reply freely. When the proper **relationship** has been built, dialogue should be natural. For Lacy, too, response and communication are a basic part of reflection. As both parties **reflect** on what is happening in the classroom, they must be able to communicate their feelings. Finally, Tina and her supervisor, through developing mutual **respect**, should be able to listen to and respond to each other's ideas and thoughts.

### Results

There is no point to putting together a 5,000-piece puzzle when all the pieces are the same shade of blue. If the supervisor is willing to include a little variety — by developing relationships, taking time for reflection, and showing respect for each staff member's needs — she will still have a blue sky, only this one will be more beautiful through the introduction of a few white clouds and a yellow sun. Everyone — staff, supervisors, children, and parents — can appreciate the beauty of that sky!

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