



## BUILDING EXEMPLARY AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS: CREATING A SYSTEM THAT SUPPORTS STAFF DEVELOPMENT

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There's no point in having a compelling vision, great leadership skills, a worthwhile strategy, a solid management system or an enlightened purpose without developing a high performing team. People excel when they have ownership over what happens *and* guidance and support in carrying out their work. When they know what's possible, are motivated to continually improve, and have high expectations of success, their performance soars. When they feel supported in their efforts and recognized for their accomplishments, they're excited about their work. When they really enjoy what they do and like the people they work with, they stay committed. Staff development is critical to bringing this into being.

Staff development is a process through which individual interests move toward alignment with your program's vision and goals. As a practice, it includes a mix of information, guidance, direction, modeling, coaching, mentoring and empowerment. Its purpose is to strengthen skills, increase knowledge, build self-confidence and transform individuals into a team that resonates with purpose, commitment and excellence. Its about personal as well as professional growth. Done well, it:

- Increases knowledge, awareness and buy-in;
- Creates shared norms and ground rules that allow people to work together effectively and synergistically;
- Strengthens decision-making, problem-solving and critical thinking skills;
- Creates excitement about the value of everyone's work;
- Builds the capacity of staff to engage and support children and young people intellectually, emotionally and socially; and
- Results in a high performing team capable of and committed to achieving your program's goals and bringing your vision into reality.

### TRAINING IS CRITICAL – AND NOT ENOUGH

Training is an essential part of staff development – as a starting place, not an ending point. Research tells us that at best 20 percent of what is learned in workshops is retained and less than 10 percent actually becomes embedded in everyday work. A workshop on conflict resolution won't make your staff better problem-solvers unless they integrate what they have learned into their own personal styles and belief systems and practice it enough times that it becomes a way of life. A training on aligning enrichment activities with state content standards won't make much sense until people learn to make real connections in real settings. A workshop on



youth participation can spark new ideas and offer a variety of approaches, but getting to authentic youth involvement and leadership takes much more.

No matter how well-received a workshop is, it's very rare for real changes in behavior to occur without follow-up support. Unless staff members can actually see a personal benefit in their own day-to-day experiences, training is likely to have little impact. Learning how to *apply* knowledge requires understanding *why* and *how* it should happen. It takes guidance, modeling and coaching – the essence of staff development.

#### ✓ *A Reality Check*

- Does your staff really know why they are asked to attend trainings and what is expected of them as a result of their participation?
- Do you evaluate the performance of the trainer in conveying information but not the staff in applying it in everyday situations?
- Do you have a system in place to ensure that staff receive appropriate support in translating ideas into practice?

- Do you make a practice of doing reality checks six weeks after a training to find out how much of what was learned has actually taken hold?

## DEVELOP A SYSTEM OF SUPPORT

The most frequent explanation staff members give for not being as successful as they could be is that they don't know what they're supposed to do, why they are supposed to do it, or how to do it. While it's easy enough to understand why employees who have just been hired might feel this way, it's all too common for staff members who have been in programs for quite some time to say the same thing. Nine times out of ten this can be changed by shifting from an emphasis on training to establishing a *system* of staff development.

In working directly with literally hundreds of afterschool programs, we've found that without exception the heart of effective staff development is a system that goes beyond technical assistance and training to guiding and shaping attitudes and behavior, developing and strengthening skills and confidence, and creating a high performing team. Staff development is fundamentally about personal and professional capacity building and empowerment. It's invaluable for programs at all stages of development because people cannot apply knowledge they haven't yet truly embraced or learn from experiences they haven't already had. Practices that include a combination of learning communities and coaching strategies have exceptionally positive results.

### ✓ *A Reality Check*

- Have you determined what percentages of time you give to training as compared with staff development?
- Have you assessed the results of these efforts?
- Have you calculated the costs and benefits of each in terms of outcomes for children and young people in your program?

## CREATE A LEARNING COMMUNITY AND PROVIDE ONGOING COACHING

People working together can and do accomplish much more than any one individual could do alone – but only when they have a shared vision and common purpose that transcends their own personal interests and priorities. This won't happen without guidance, hard work and opportunities for people to spend time together. One of the most effective ways to do this is to see yourself and your staff as a *community of learners*.

Use staff training as a format for introducing exemplary practices in afterschool programming and *follow up* with three or four hours a month devoted to bringing staff members together to discuss these practices in greater depth. Engage in dialogues about what's working in each area and what's not. Use collective wisdom, shared experiences and new ideas to foster continual quality improvement. Encourage Site Directors and their staff members to learn from each other and to draw on expert counsel to make changes and adjustments as they are warranted. View this as an opportunity for invention and discovery, a way of increasing understanding, commitment and excitement and an opportunity for building solid relationships.

The essence of coaching is getting people to work together to become the high performing, synergistic team you know they can become. Coaching is an ongoing, people-centered, forward-looking approach that supports people until they become empowered to work successfully on their own. Begin with meeting individual staff members where they are, provide direction and support and gradually release responsibility as they become increasingly knowledgeable, capable and confident.

Keep in mind that coaching begins with the end, not the moment, in mind. Communicate and demonstrate not only what needs to be done, but why it is important and how to do it most effectively. Convey information in ways that people really understand and embrace the answers. If you're a Program Director, make a serious investment in training, modeling and mentoring Site Directors and they'll become world-class coaches for their staffs. Use all the resources you have to help your team:

1. Truly understand and embrace your program's vision, purpose and values;
2. Stay focused on the achievement of concrete goals;
3. Buy into shared expectations;
4. Adopt effective communication strategies, decision-making processes and problem-solving approaches;
5. Build on their strengths, diagnose difficult situations and find solutions to problems on their own; and
6. Become increasingly knowledgeable, effective and self-assured.

## BUILD ON PROVEN APPROACHES

Coaching is a learned behavior. Some of us have innate talents and past experiences that make the process easier for us. Others of us don't. Fortunately, so much has been written about effective coaching in the last few years that

we already know what is involved and what is important. Sixteen tried and true practices are worth keeping at the forefront of your efforts. Each of these is equally appropriate for Program Directors and Site Directors.

1. Be clear about your expectations and never assume your staff knows what you want;
2. Commit to being supportive and positive – no matter what;
3. Focus on the behavior you want to change, not the person;
4. Offer suggestions and encouragement in ways that are easily understood and relevant to the person you are working with;
5. Give feedback that is descriptive, not judgmental;
6. Criticize in private and compliment in public;
7. Build confidence as well as competence;
8. Create an attitude and environment of trust;
9. Hold people in high regard;
10. Encourage staff to be innovative and take constructive risks;
11. Stay focused on aligning their personal interests with program interests;
12. Learn to be flexible and focused at the same time;
13. Spend time assessing the emotional climate of your program;
14. Recognize that either everyone wins or no one wins;
15. Never forget that your success depends on everyone's success; and
16. Make coaching a way of life, not an activity.



In the beginning, you're likely to be most effective when you concentrate on specific actions that have a high probability of a significant return on an investment of time and financial resources. Focus on telling and showing staff members what to do and how to do it. As their skills increase, the need for directive behavior decreases. Be alert, however, that while skills may significantly improve, this isn't always accompanied by a similar increase in confidence or commitment. It's important to learn when to be directive and when to be supportive, when to take control and when to release it.

## USE A MIX OF INVOLVEMENT AND PERSUASION

There are two ways to develop effective learning communities and provide high-impact coaching. The first is by involving people in the process of finding solutions to their own challenges by telling them what to do and letting them decide how to do it for themselves. The second is by using

your power of persuasion to explain how and why particular actions can lead to the achievement of their own goals.

Involvement is the most powerful motivator because it operates at both an intellectual and an emotional level. People work harder for what they believe in, and they believe in what they have helped create. Involvement helps people feel challenged in positive ways. It heightens the value they place on taking on important and meaningful responsibilities and

increases their feelings of achievement. By giving people ownership over ideas, goals and objectives, the likelihood that these will be adopted increases dramatically. Introducing new ideas rarely results in their whole-hearted acceptance and implementation, however. People need sufficient time to understand, appreciate and see the value of accepting advice before full agreement and consistent action can be expected.

Persuasion operates at an intellectual level. It's about giving someone good reasons why he or she should do something, based on the worthiness of the effort and the results that are likely to occur. It involves making clear connections between actions and probable outcomes, based on real experiences and concrete examples. Both involvement and persuasion are important. So also is knowing when to use one and when to use the other. Although everyone will encounter their own unique situations and dynamics as the process of capacity building unfolds, personal interaction provides the direction and support needed to develop staff talents, expertise and commitment.

### ✓ *A Reality Check*

- Are you comfortable in establishing clear, achievable goals for individual staff members?
- Are you able to frame issues in ways that gain people's interest, agreement and action?
- Do you know when to be directive and when to be supportive?
- Do you use both involvement and persuasion as techniques for capacity building?
- Do you focus on high leverage points, or those actions most likely to produce positive results and lead to concrete successes?
- Are you attentive enough to recognizing and celebrating individual and team accomplishments?

## INCLUDE AN ACADEMIC COACH ON YOUR TEAM

There are many ways to strengthen student academic achievement in afterschool programs. Including a credentialed teacher as a site-level *academic coach* seems to be the *one* action that consistently produces early, concrete results. The strategy is practical, easily implemented and relatively inexpensive. As program consultants and team members, academic coaches typically spend four to six hours a week:

- Aligning afterschool activities with the school day curriculum and state content standards,
- Mentoring and coaching staff in real situations, and
- Advocating for the program among their faculty colleagues.



The inclusion of an academic coach is emotionally as well as intellectually appealing. Principals like it because it underscores the importance of student academic achievement and demonstrates the value of

credentialed teachers as experts. Teachers are much more likely to be supportive of afterschool staff when they begin to see results for students. Tensions between afterschool and school day personnel are markedly reduced. In literally hundreds of programs, we have found that this is one of the best investments in staff development you can make. Within six months, student academic achievement almost always measurably improves, staff members are significantly more competent and confident, and certificated teachers are more supportive and engaged.

## CREATE AND SUSTAIN A CULTURE OF HIGH EXPECTATIONS

As a leader, it's your responsibility to ensure that your staff is successful. Your primary goals should be to build a high performing, synergistic team that accomplishes much more than what any one individual could do alone. When you treat team members as capable individuals who can perform at the highest levels, they'll do their best to prove you're right. They'll become increasingly:

1. Self-managed, self-disciplined and self-motivated,
2. Focused on achieving shared goals,
3. Intentional in the way they bring about positive results, and
4. Excited and enthusiastic about their work.

When you have high expectations you're also likely to be much more interested in and anxious to make the investments needed to achieve these expectations. When you really care about them as people and not just employees, you'll be willing and anxious to provide them with frequent and valuable feedback, more challenging goals and more in-depth coaching – all of which are critical to developing a high performing team.

### ✓ *A Reality Check*

- Do you really believe that the people you work with have unlimited potential – or that just some of them do?
- Do you believe that your staff really wants to grow, learn and excel, or that some do and some don't?
- Do you believe that people working together can accomplish more than anyone working alone – or do you just give lip service to this?
- Are you willing to work shoulder to shoulder with your team, or do you believe you are head and shoulders above them?
- Are your expectations for them accompanied with the support they need to succeed?

## INCREASE THE AMOUNT OF TIME YOU SPEND WITH YOUR STAFF

Surprisingly few Program and Site Directors spend enough quality time with their staff members. Take care to avoid making this mistake. No matter how many reports you write, memos you send or meetings you attend, you'll never develop the kind of relationships and trust it takes to build a high performing team without spending a lot of time with the people who work for and with you. There's no way you can understand people's aptitudes, attitudes or performance without observing them in their actual job settings. Being there enables you to assess situations, uncover problems and offer solutions that would be impossible at a distance. It allows you to identify what's working, what's not and what can be done to genuinely build on strengths and shore up areas in need of improvement.

This can't be done if you stay in your office. It's very unlikely that you'll be able to keep people excited about their work without being available to champion and acknowledge their efforts. There's no way to develop and maintain trust, reduce anxiety or minimize frustration without knowing staff as people and not just employees. The best coaches understand that no matter how valuable the information they may be able to provide, nothing is ultimately as important as the relationships that they build.

If you have any doubts about this, listen to the grapevine. Take notice of how willingly and enthusiastically staff members ask for help when they need it. Reflect on whether they seem to really care about what you think and want to do their best for you. Ask yourself whether you get more good news or complaints about your staff from their colleagues, principals, teachers, parents, students or community partners. Ask your staff whether you are supporting them as effectively and meaningfully as you could. Distribute a confidential survey. Hire an outside consultant to conduct focus groups. Whatever approach you take, make a commitment to yourself to find out what's really happening and pay attention to what you learn.

### ✓ *A Reality Check*

- Are you spending enough time getting to know your staff as people as well as employees?
- Have you really let them know you are there for them by your words and your actions?
- Does your staff willingly and enthusiastically respond to your requests and ask for support when they need it?
- Are you more concerned with long-term changes than quick fixes?
- Do you truly understand that your success depends on their success?

## USE A VARIETY OF APPROACHES

Not everyone will hear what you say in the same way or interpret it with the same meaning. Some of your employees are great listeners, others are not. Some are naturally able to translate words into actions. Many will have a hard time. Some will figure out how to do something, but not understand *why* it is important or *how* it fits into the bigger picture. Everyone is different. Everyone brings something of value to your team and everyone has areas that can be improved.



The better you know your staff as individuals, the more effectively you can target your support to what's important for each person and what will make the greatest difference to your program. Learn to recognize and appreciate what makes individuals unique – what motivates

them, what holds them back, what makes them happy and what discourages them. Learn to draw on their

personal strengths and help them overcome their weaknesses.

Build their self-confidence by telling and showing them you believe in them. If staff members are having trouble, listen intently to discover real concerns and respond with patience and empathy. If they're doing well, take the time to tell them so and be specific with your praise. Discover what approach works best with each person. Learn when to be a teacher, a coach, a mentor or a counselor.

Take fifteen or twenty minutes a week to talk with your team about what they've accomplished in that week. Ask them what their high points were, what really went well, what surprised them in a positive way. Recognize each person for the contributions they have made and the successes they have achieved. Be sure everyone is included and tell each one how much you appreciate what they have done. Don't wait for major accomplishments to offer praise – do it in real time.

### ✓ *A Reality Check*

- Do you know and appreciate the differences in your staff members?
- Do you tailor your approaches to meet specific individual needs and interests?
- Do you realize how important their self-confidence is to their success?
- Do you let your staff, individually and together, know how much you appreciate them?

## EXPAND THE OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE TO YOUR STAFF

Successful staff development systems provide intrinsic rewards and extrinsic incentives that attract and retain the best and brightest team members. They provide time and opportunity for people to network, learn from and support one another. They reflect an investment of resources that develops the talents and skills of all staff members, not just a few proven stars or those encountering the greatest challenges. And, they create pathways for people to take on new responsibilities.

As staff members become more competent and confident, reward them for their efforts by seeking out new areas where their skills can be used. Recognize that they are uniquely well-positioned to become coaches for new employees, to open and develop new sites, to expand and strengthen the staff development process throughout your organization and to institutionalize a culture of excellence in your program. Give them additional responsibilities and pay them for their services.

Don't limit the number of people who have the opportunity to become involved in new ways. Stay alert to identifying staff members who are ready to take the next step and become their mentor as they transition into their new roles. Not only will you build the capacity of your program to become increasingly successful, you'll avoid the danger that the culture you have created will disintegrate when people who strongly exemplify it leave or you move on to something else. It takes a lot of time, consistency and intentionality to move employees to a place where they can become a real team and not just a group of individuals. It's an investment well worth maintaining by planning for the future.

## MAKE A SERIOUS FINANCIAL INVESTMENT

Almost without exception, the most successful afterschool programs commit as much as 20 percent of their annual budgets to staff development. If this seems high to you, consider the alternatives. The hidden costs of under-investing can be staggering. The actual dollars lost because of staff turnover can be as much as \$3,000 per person. If this seems high to you, calculate the actual amount by taking into account all of the time/wages that go into advertising, interviewing, doing background checks, putting people on the payroll and getting them up to speed to do their work. Multiply this by the number of people you have to replace in a year. It's likely to be much higher than you thought. Staff development minimizes staff turnover and saves thousands of dollars in unnecessary program expenditures.

The social costs of staff turnover are extremely high. Not only is it almost impossible to develop a high performing team when there are constant changes in personnel, it prevents us from providing children and young people with the consistent, supportive relationships with adults that are critical to positive youth development. The stakes are simply too high on all fronts not to make a significant financial investment in staff development.

### ✓ *A Reality Check*

- What percentage of your budget do you invest in staff development?
- What was your staff retention rate last year? What accounted for this?
- What impact did staff turnover have at the site level? At the program-wide level? How do you know?

## CONTINUALLY ASSESS YOUR PROGRESS

Don't leave yourself out of the loop. Create a 360 degree feedback system that ensures an open dialogue with all members of your team. Model the responses you want from your team and insist that they keep you informed about how you're doing and what you could do better. Use the rubrics in this guide to assess your own progress as well as the impact staff development is having on your team and your program. Integrate training with a learning community and a system of coaching, measure and manage results, and you'll be well on your way to developing a high performing team and a high quality program!

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Dr. Andria (Andi) J. Fletcher is regarded as one of the leading experts in the United States in afterschool program development. Her experience includes working with hundreds of communities and afterschool programs throughout California. She is the former director of Sacramento START and Chief Consultant for the Center for Collaborative Solutions. She initiated and wrote much of the legislation that has led to California's investment in afterschool programs and currently leads a team that provides training, technical assistance and mentorship to more than 2,700 afterschool programs in the state. She is the author of *What Works? After School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnerships Programs Implementation Approaches*, *After School Programs and Systems Change*, *Building Exemplary Programs: Eight Keys to Success* and numerous other articles. She holds a doctorate in Political Science from UCLA.