

# WORKING WITH PARAPROFESSIONALS IN YOUR SCHOOL

## Communication, Observation, and Feedback

As in any collaborative relationship, on-going communication between the educator and the paraprofessional is essential to effective team functioning. Open communication, providing fair leadership, and sensitive feedback within the guidelines of a coaching model builds trust in teams. Successful communication results in mutual understanding of what was sent and what was heard. As a supervisor, the educator needs to use active listening skills to facilitate open communication among team members. Active listening involves eye contact, paraphrasing, clarifying, and summarizing.

### Active Listening

Active listening involves the listener attending to the speaker in a way that will allow direct and clear communication. The result of active listening is an accurate understanding of what is being said. The supervisor needs to model active listening by:

- Making direct eye contact with the speaker. To be comfortable, one may have some moments where eye contact is broken by blinking or looking at an object and then returning attention to the speaker.
- Attending to the message without drifting to personal thoughts. This includes not interrupting when the paraprofessional is speaking.
- Asking clarifying questions to be sure that the message is understood. Examples of clarifying questions are, “What did you mean when you said...?”, “Is this an example of what you observed?”, and “Is this what you mean to do...?”
- Paraphrasing or summarizing the message to be sure everyone is in agreement. When paraphrasing, it is important to remember that both the emotion and the words need to be matched to the speaker’s message. If the emotional content is not conveyed correctly, the speaker will feel that he or she has not been heard well enough to understand the full impact of what was being said.

### Developing Communication Channels

Teams should set aside at least a few minutes at the beginning and end of each day to clarify plans, ask and answer questions, and address any immediate concerns that arise. However, the fast pace of schedules within any program often means that there is limited time to meet and

communicate on a daily basis. That is why a variety of communication methods need to be developed that allow the teacher or related service professional to keep up with the instructional tasks, and the progress the paraprofessional is making toward reaching the program goals. Written lesson plans should be provided to the paraprofessional as part of the educator's responsibilities. Information on the implementation of the plans may be written or whenever possible communicated face-to face, however, when this is not possible other techniques will be useful. Sample communication channels include:

- Communication logs in which the paraprofessional and the teacher write notes about the day's activities and progress can be kept in a three-ring binder in a convenient place.
- Progress and data sheets that are routinely used will provide information for the teacher and the paraprofessional on the effectiveness of the instruction or management plan.
- Communication notes that are jotted down and dated on post-it paper can be organized in a spiral notebook and reviewed for a more thorough analysis.

## **Delegating Tasks**

As part of the on-going communication process, teachers need to be skilled at delegating appropriate tasks to other members of the team. Delegating tasks require the teacher to be willing to surrender a certain degree of control over how a task may be completed. The paraprofessional needs to know exactly how much authority she or he has in carrying out assigned tasks and what to do when unexpected circumstances arise. Again, the importance of keeping the lines of communication open among team members cannot be overemphasized.

The longer a problem is allowed to go unresolved, the more complicated it becomes and the more difficult it is to solve. Daily communication, as well as regular team meetings, can help to maintain a healthy level of communication and collaboration.

Delegating tasks to a paraprofessional is often hard for teachers to manage. Whether it is because they feel a loss of control, believe that the paraprofessional is not skilled enough, or feel that they are totally responsible for the child's program, teachers are not always prepared to subdivide their responsibilities. Trust in the other team member's ability to do the task is absolutely necessary. Task analysis of the program needs and of the steps for carrying out planned instruction will allow the teacher to feel more comfortable about delegating responsibilities.

To successfully delegate tasks, a teacher must accept the differentiation between the teacher's roles and paraprofessional's roles. Next, the teacher should analyze what needs to be done to accomplish the goals that have been established. Consider whether the task can be achieved reasonably well by a student peer, an adult volunteer, or the general educator. If the answer is yes, those individuals should be asked to complete the tasks. If the answer is no, analyze the level of professional skill that is needed to perform the task and determine if the paraprofessional can accomplish the job, or if the teacher needs to perform the task.

## **Team Meetings**

Working teams of teachers and paraprofessionals should conduct regularly scheduled team meetings at which complex problems may be discussed and more thorough explanations and instructions given. Team meetings should be conducted in a manner that shows respect for an

individual's ideas and concerns. Meetings should be focused on common goals, seeking solutions to problems, or providing additional clarification of instructional procedures.

All team members should have the opportunity for input and participation in problem solving. Team meetings should be occasions for positive and public feedback to the paraprofessional. Many paraprofessionals are not paid for time to attend team meetings after school hours, yet open communication cannot exist without them. Teachers may need to be creative and flexible in scheduling team meetings so that the paraprofessional may participate without putting in extra hours off-contract. One option may be to allow the paraprofessional to arrive late or leave early one day of the week to compensate for staying late on another day to attend a team meeting (adjustments to work schedules should be discussed with school administrators).

Whatever arrangements are made, it is important for teachers to consider the fact that paraprofessionals are paid an hourly wage and should not be expected to put in extra hours without pay. Depending on the needs of the team, regular team meetings can be held weekly, bimonthly, or even monthly for a set amount of time. The team meeting schedule should be established from the beginning of the year to establish a routine and obtain an on-going commitment from every team member to participate on a regular basis.

## **The Goal of Supervision**

If asked, most adults would say that they do not like to be supervised. Understanding that supervision is a required part of the position may not change feelings, but explaining up front that the intent is for skill development may help the paraprofessional to accept the supervisory relationship. Supervision should be an on-going interpersonal process, such as coaching, that focuses on the paraprofessional's actual performance of the job requirements. This focus involves detailing and improving the paraprofessional's skills through formative and summative measures. The outcome of supervision is improved job performance, which is defined in terms of increasing student achievement.

## **The Importance of Providing Feedback**

Educators learn a great deal from one another and value the opportunity to talk about what is happening in the classrooms. One way to share information and reflection on issues is through creating a feedback loop. Feedback is part of the cycle of on-going coaching and support. Feedback is a means of giving both supportive and corrective information to the paraprofessional. A feedback loop consists of:

- (1) establishing effective ways of providing instruction to students and managing the classroom environments
- (2) helping paraprofessional learn vocabulary of educational terms for teaching techniques they can use and discuss with others
- (3) helping paraprofessionals become aware of increasing skills
- (4) assisting paraprofessional in building confidence in their ability to work effectively and make further improvements (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001).

Feedback supports the continued use of appropriate behaviors, as well as, informing a person about inappropriate behaviors that need to be changed in order to improve performance. Downing, Ryndak and Clark (2000) concluded that most paraprofessionals “considered both receiving feedback related to their interactions with students and brainstorming future interventions with other team members to be forms of support” (p. 176).

The primary function of feedback is to enable educators to improve their job performance. It is less likely to be threatening when it is a regular component of the feedback conference, and when it focuses on how she or he can improve their performance. The most useful feedback meets four criteria:

- (1) It is descriptive rather than evaluative. Feedback should be objective with as little personal interpretation as possible.
- (2) It is specific rather than general. Tell paraprofessional what she or he is or is not doing correctly rather than using terms that convey little meaning such as “Nicely done”. Such terms should be accompanied by an explanation, such as “The way you paced the lesson was nicely done”.
- (3) It is directed toward behavior that is voluntary and can be controlled. Involuntary behaviors do not respond to feedback.
- (4) Feedback should always be checked to insure that it is understood.

## **The Purpose of Feedback**

Feedback is carried on throughout the year as the paraprofessional completes the assignments given by the supervisor. Feedback can be formative and summative. Detailed feedback is considered formative and occurs as part of a continuing process. Formative feedback informs people about what they have done and enables them to make changes if necessary. For example, after a meeting to discuss the paraprofessionals’ concerns, the educator/supervisor and paraprofessional can create an action plan based on feedback that identifies strengths and needs. The action plan is a type of formative feedback because it addresses on-going job improvement issues. Formative feedback is specific, non-judgmental, and objective. It is based on observed performance and related to indicators that measure consistency and effectiveness.

Summative feedback is given to the paraprofessional at, or near, the end of the term and is passed on to a program administrator for the purpose of deciding continued employment. “You did a good job” is an example of summative feedback – it sums up what the person has done but does not explain what was good or bad about it (Morgan & Ashbacher, 2001). If the formative process has been appropriately applied, the end-of-the-year feedback, or summative feedback, should reflect the previously gathered information, act as a follow-up review of the past year, and serve as a planning mechanism for professional development for the coming year.

## **Elements of Supervision Model**

Supervision involves providing performance-based assessments of the paraprofessional. This occurs through interaction between the supervisor and the paraprofessional during planning sessions, performance observations, and feedback conferences.

(1) Supervision of the paraprofessional during planning sessions involves identifying the paraprofessional's tasks and strategies that should be in place during the observation and helping the paraprofessional identify areas that need improvement. The paraprofessional may not be able to identify the areas needing attention, however, the supervisor can assist by asking probing questions such as:

- (a) What do you feel you do well most of the time?
- (b) How much progress toward the objective have you made?
- (c) What seems to be holding the progress back?
- (d) When you try \_\_\_\_\_, what happens?
- (e) What do you think are the consequences of using that strategy?

By the end of the planning conference the teacher-supervisor and the paraprofessional should have agreed on skills or strategies that the supervisor will observe.

(2) The supervisor should do formal and informal observations of the paraprofessional. Informal observations are those that occur in the course of the day while the teacher and paraprofessional are executing their duties.

These observations, although generally unfocused, can provide much information on the paraprofessional's ability to carry out the tasks assigned by the teacher and to help children meet instructional and behavioral goals. When a paraprofessional is observed informally, the teacher should try to wait to the end of the lesson to make comments about what was observed. Occasionally, there may be a good opportunity for the teacher to demonstrate a strategy or to assist the paraprofessional during the on-going lesson. Too many interruptions by the teacher, however, can interfere with the lesson and/or undermine the paraprofessional's authority with the children and should be avoided.

Formal observation of the paraprofessional within the supervision model should occur at a scheduled time. The focus of a formal observation should be the agreed upon areas discussed in the planning conference. During these observations the teacher may choose to collect data on the interaction occurring between the paraprofessional and student(s), the methods or strategies used, and the consequences of the paraprofessional's communication and behavior. This nonstructured approach is useful for gaining an overall impression of the paraprofessional's abilities.

A more objective observation approach is a checklist of instructional, interpersonal, or management behaviors. A frequency count of specific behaviors also may be applicable. With a frequency count, the educator/supervisor would use a checklist to record the number of instances the paraprofessional demonstrated a specific behavior such as giving clear directions to the student(s).

(3) The feedback conference provides another opportunity for enhancing the paraprofessional's performance. During the feedback conference, the teacher should solicit the paraprofessional's self-assessment of the lesson and encourage the paraprofessional to highlight strengths and areas for improvement that occurred during the observation period. The conference provides feedback on past performance, a chance to modify strategies and behavior, and an opportunity to develop new professional goals.

## **The Teacher's Role in Performance Evaluation**

Although the educator oversees the paraprofessional's daily activities, she or he may not have the responsibility to complete the paraprofessional's performance evaluation. The local educational agency's management plan, or policies, may place that responsibility with the principal or a central office administrator. As the paraprofessional's supervisor, the teacher should clarify who will complete the evaluation and convey that information to the paraprofessional. If an administrator is the primary evaluator, the teacher should request a role in the process to provide a fair assessment of the paraprofessional's job performance. However, many teachers would prefer to remove themselves from the summative evaluation process so that they can maintain a balanced relationship with the paraprofessional with whom they work so closely. A possible solution to this dilemma is to have different people do different parts of the evaluation.