

WORKING WITH PARAPROFESSIONALS IN YOUR SCHOOL

Solving Performance and Interpersonal Problems

In virtually any working relationship, problems will arise and cause tension among individuals. Sometimes problems develop because one or more team members are not meeting the performance expectations of the rest of the team. At other times, problems arise as a result of different interaction styles or opposing philosophies or ideas. Regardless of the source of the conflict, the team needs to have a strategy for addressing and trying to resolve the issue. The purpose of the "Problem-Solving Strategy" discussed below is to provide such a framework for the classroom team. This is preceded, however, by a discussion of some of the most common issues that frequently contribute to conflicts between teachers (as supervisors) and paraprofessionals (as supervisees).

Issues in Supervision

Control factors

The role of the paraprofessional has evolved out of necessity because the teacher cannot be everywhere or do everything required for the job. The teacher, therefore, has to feel comfortable delegating tasks to the paraprofessional. This involves surrendering some degree of control over how and when things are done. Difficulties may arise when the teacher is not willing to give up control over the tasks she or he delegates. Perhaps the teacher did not delegate an appropriate task that the paraprofessional has the knowledge or skills to complete. Perhaps the teacher did not make the expectations clear or provide adequate instructions to the paraprofessional. Or perhaps, for some reason, the paraprofessional is unable or unwilling to perform well enough to meet the demands of the job. The problem-solving strategy provided in this section can be used to address these situations.

Time Constraints

Obviously a great deal of time is required for the teacher and the paraprofessional to develop a working relationship and to operate efficiently as a team. The teacher needs to find the time to prepare, confer with, and observe the paraprofessional at work. This can present quite a problem because most paraprofessionals are paid on an hourly basis, usually arriving when the students arrive and leaving soon after the students leave. Furthermore, even when the teacher may have a

planning period during the day, the paraprofessional is often working with students and not available. In many situations, the teacher may need to request shared planning time with the paraprofessional. In some schools, coverage can be arranged for the class to allow the teacher and paraprofessional time to meet and plan. In other situations, meetings before or after school can be scheduled as part of the agreement that the paraprofessional may leave early or arrive late to compensate for the extra time. Any change in work adjustments should be discussed with the school administration. However it may be arranged, time for meeting, planning, and problem solving is essential to developing an effective instructional team.

Communication Differences

Everyone has a personal style of communication, and supervisors interpret events and make decisions differently, to a large extent because of individual style. One common distinction between communication styles is "direct" vs. "indirect." A description of each style, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of each, is given below.

Direct: People who are considered to have a direct, forward communication style engage in behaviors such as dispensing knowledge, giving directions, and offering opinions. The advantages of this style of communication are that expectations are usually very explicit and honest feedback is given frequently. Disadvantages may include unwillingness to accept new ideas and suggestions and insensitivity to others' feelings.

Indirect: People who have a more indirect style of communicating tend to be less reticent in expressing their ideas, feelings, and opinions. The advantages of this style of communication are that indirect people may be less confrontational and, on the surface, easier to work with than direct people. The disadvantages, however, include the fact that expectations are usually not made clear, and misunderstandings are often not addressed immediately.

People who are predominantly direct or indirect in their methods of communicating do not make good supervisors. Although there are times when the elements of one style or the other are appropriate, the best approach appears to be a "happy medium" between the two, in other words, an assertive/supportive style of communication. An assertive person stands up for beliefs and opinions, yet does not trample on the beliefs and opinions of others. Being supportive involves giving encouragement and praise as well as making suggestions and setting goals for improvement. Using "I-messages," asking clarifying questions, respecting and using the ideas of others, expressing empathy, providing guidance without taking over are all examples of assertive/supportive behaviors. Supervisors who model these behaviors are more likely to get the responses they desire from their supervisees.

In addition, teachers need to be aware of both correction and praise strategies. Just like students, adults respond better to positive feedback than to criticism. This is not to say that correction will not be necessary, but teachers should keep in mind that statements of praise should far outweigh corrections. Whenever possible, teachers should focus their praise and correction statements on student outcomes to avoid making the paraprofessional feel under personal attack. For example, a correction statement may be stated as "I noticed that Marcus started raising his hand to speak," rather than, "You need to stop responding to students who call out." A praise statement similarly consists of comments such as "Your preparation of the materials for the class assisted in a smooth transition for the students" rather than, "You helped me today." Specific comments assist the paraprofessionals in their job performance and self-esteem.

Furthermore, teachers and paraprofessionals need to pay attention to the nonverbal cues they give to others. Facial expressions and body language contribute a great deal to the content of any interaction. They can also enhance the ability of a team to operate smoothly and efficiently throughout the day, when verbal communication is not possible or may not be desirable. By developing a set of hand signals or nonverbal cues, the teacher and paraprofessional can signal to each other that a student is becoming agitated, trying to manipulate them, or may be in need of extra assistance.

Certainly, other factors exist that may influence team performance and interpersonal relationships. For example, team members may have different points of view about educational practices and strategies, different value systems, different cultural backgrounds, different ages, different ideas about gender roles, varying levels of education and experience, and different tolerance levels for frustration. Importantly, the feelings of both teachers and paraprofessionals must be recognized, understood, and appreciated. When these feelings are not expressed openly, they can build resentment, increase frustration, and allow negative feelings to fester to a point where they become insurmountable barriers to an effective partnership.

Differences in Role Expectations

Sometimes problems arise when individuals are not accustomed to or are not comfortable with the role they are expected to assume. For example, the teacher may not feel comfortable in a supervisory role, especially if the paraprofessional is older, more experienced, or culturally different. Similarly, some paraprofessionals may not be comfortable taking directions from the teacher or, conversely, taking the initiative when specific directions have not been given. Again, open and honest communication is the essential ingredient for creating an effective partnership and clarifying role expectations. Talking about problems early on and employing the problem solving strategies before problems become too difficult are the keys to teamwork.

A Problem-Solving Strategy

Because of the complex and fast-paced nature of classroom life, it is easy for teams to ignore or postpone dealing with minor misunderstandings or disagreements. Unfortunately, this only tends to exacerbate the problem. The team needs to work together to decide on a course of action, but this is not always easy to do. To make matters worse, most classroom teams are left to solve interpersonal problems on their own, without much outside support or assistance.

The following problem-solving strategy has been adapted from Pickett and Gerlach's work (1997) and consists of a series of five steps that the teacher may use to guide the team in resolving conflict and improving their ability to work together. This approach emphasizes the team's effort to reach consensus, but in reality, there are times when the teacher or other school professionals need to make decisions with which everyone on the team may not agree. However, if problems are addressed early and assertive/supportive communication techniques are used, these situations should be kept to a minimum.

Step One: State the problem. A situation must be clearly understood. If concerns and issues cannot be stated clearly, it is impossible to choose a course of action that will lead to a satisfactory conclusion. Everyone involved in a situation or participating in team efforts should describe the problems in their own words and from their own point of view. At this stage, each

person needs to be objective in describing the variables involved. Infusing subjective statements will lead to misinterpretation of the problem.

Each member of the team should attempt to answer the following questions: What is the problem? Who is involved? Who is affected? How are they affected?

Step Two: Identify the causes of the problem. After defining the problem, the team must try to identify the sources of the problem and the reasons it persists. Some of the reasons for the problem may come from outside sources, over which the team may have little or no control. Therefore, it is important to focus the solutions on those factors over which the team does have at least partial control. At first, differences may not be apparent and the problem may be attributed to something else. It is important that the team investigates as deeply as necessary the true source of the problem and clearly identifies areas of agreement and disagreement. Utilizing skills such as active listening can help separate surface events from the underlying issues and clarify similarities and differences.

Step Three: Generate possible solutions. The team must decide what the desired outcome looks like. This can be stated in terms of a goal. From there, the group can generate a list of possible pathways to that goal. At this point, it is important that the team accepts all feasible solutions and allows each member to contribute something. It may also be helpful to list resources that may be necessary to implement each proposed solution.

Step Four: Select a course of action. After a list of possible solutions has been developed, the team should spend some time discussing the positive and negative aspects of each idea. Ultimately, the team wants to choose the alternative that is most likely to achieve the desired results and, at the same time is most agreeable to team members. The chosen solution must be "tested" over a period of time to see if it will work. An intervention should be assessed at least weekly to determine its effectiveness.

Step Five: Evaluate the results. Finally, the team must reconvene to evaluate progress in resolving the issue. Remember, progress toward a desired goal can be meaningful, even if the goal has not been entirely achieved. Sometimes change is occurring but more time is needed to achieve the desired results. Try to determine what parts of the intervention seem to be working and what parts may need to be changed. If positive changes have not occurred after a two-week period, the team should review the original problem statement and try an alternative intervention.

WHAT IF . . .

In this section, several hypothetical problem situations and a series of steps for teachers to follow are presented. The examples represent fairly common challenges for many classroom teams, and although the details of each situation will be different, the basic problem-solving framework remains consistent. The suggestions below may help the teacher determine a starting point for resolving the problem.

1. What if the paraprofessional is not performing well enough to meet the demands of the job? The teacher should:

- Clarify job expectation for the paraprofessional. Review any written information (job description) that has been developed.
- Document the paraprofessional's performance.
- Develop a discrepancy analysis: How does the paraprofessional's performance differ from the established expectations? Do the expectations need to be clarified? Does the paraprofessional possess the knowledge/skills necessary to perform the task? Is additional training needed?
- Set clear expectations for improvement. Establish a timeline for evaluating results.
- Document progress toward goal.

2. What if the students like the paraprofessional better than the teacher? The teacher should:

- Acknowledge her or his own feelings.
- Try to identify reasons why students feel this way: reasons may be positive or negative (for example, students may prefer the paraprofessional's sense of humor, or students may prefer the paraprofessional because she or he does not enforce the rules consistently).
- Make changes in interactions with students, if appropriate.
- Accept the fact that this is not a popularity contest, and students are entitled to their personal preferences.

3. What if the paraprofessional cannot maintain control of the class? The teacher should:

- Determine needed level of classroom control.
- Observe paraprofessional and document interactions and effects of paraprofessional's behavior on students (e. g., students have difficulty settling back into academic routine after activity with paraprofessional).
- Model appropriate control strategies.
- Minimize negative factors effecting control (e. g., reduce amount of time that paraprofessional is expected to manage the entire group).
- Provide frequent feedback to the paraprofessional.

4. What if the paraprofessional and the teacher have different styles and philosophies? The teacher should:

- Identify and communicate stylistic/philosophical differences.
- Highlight positive aspects of each style/philosophy.
- Match positive aspects of paraprofessional's style to certain tasks or activities whenever possible.
- Take the lead in developing classroom environment and structure and explain the need for a common approach within the classroom.

5. What if the paraprofessional undermines the teacher's authority?

The teacher should:

- Document paraprofessional's behaviors that are causing the problem.
- Explain and show documentation such as the job description and local educational agency's policy manuals to the paraprofessional.
- Agree not to settle differences in front of students.
- Establish methods of communicating differences throughout the day (e. g., check with each other before granting a child permission to do something, or develop hand signals to communicate when a child may be trying to play one adult against the other)