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...information for program practitioners on assessing staff relations.

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ASSESSING STAFF RELATIONSHIPS AMONG OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM PRACTITIONERS

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BACKGROUND

In the out-of-school time field, staff is recognized as a key ingredient to maintaining a high quality program and helping participants achieve positive outcomes.^{1,2} Because of the critical role staff plays, attention is gradually turning to assessing how staff members get along and work with each other as an indicator of program quality.³ However, research in this area is limited. This brief underscores the need to put a greater focus on staff relationships, as well as to increase awareness about the importance of measuring these relationships. It provides program managers and administrators with a practical overview of staff relationships, suggestions for how to incorporate staff relationship-building as a component of standard practice, and helpful tools to assess staff relationships.

WHAT ARE STAFF RELATIONSHIPS?

Staff relationships (sometimes called employee relations) refer to the activities in an organization which affect a staff person's interactions and conditions of employment and their personal well-being and satisfaction with their work environment.⁴ The term pertains to the degree to which staff members collaborate, interact, and show respect, as well as expectations about how staff relationships are formed and maintained.⁵ Research finds that positive staff relationships are important to both organizational and individual performance, and are associated with greater job satisfaction and staff retention.⁶

HOW ARE STAFF RELATIONSHIPS FORMED?

In promoting positive staff relationships, it is important for organizations to encourage staff members to collaborate and communicate with each other.⁷ This goal can be achieved by having more experienced staff work with junior staff, or by dividing up project work among staff members. Organizations also need to define staff roles clearly.⁸ Unclear roles can lead to misunderstandings, difficulties, and strained relationships, which create job stress.^{9,10} Finally, organizations need to discourage uncivil behavior.¹¹ Failing to address this problem can lead to diminished work production and, sometimes, to legal action.¹²

WHAT CAN I DO IN MY PROGRAM TO PROMOTE POSITIVE STAFF RELATIONSHIPS?

Strategies and practices used to bolster relationships among staff can vary depending on the size and type of organization or program, and the number and makeup of the staff. For example, organizations that employ few people may not need to launch the same type of team-building efforts as would a larger organization, whose staff may not have as much direct contact. On the other hand, larger organizations may already have instituted staff relationship-building practices, such as leadership training, which may not be the case in smaller organizations.

Common relationship-building practices that seem to work across organizational structure and composition include:^{13,14,15}

- **Keeping staff informed of changes, policies, and new directions.** Posting a bulletin board, circulating a newsletter, setting up an intranet site, or hosting team meetings to keep everyone abreast of events and procedures can help to make all staff members feel part of the team.
- **Forming social groups or clubs.** Encouraging staff members to participate in social clubs can help them get to know each other, and promote positive relationships.
- **Developing feedback mechanisms.** Giving staff members an opportunity to express concerns about the organization or other staff members—and responding to these concerns—can help reduce the likelihood that issues or conflicts will escalate.
- **Implementing activities that foster tolerance, such as diversity trainings and cultural awareness workshops.** Providing staff members with activities that reinforce understanding and respect for people who differ from them is critical to ensuring that everyone gets along. Such efforts can help ward off misunderstandings, miscommunication, and uncivil behavior.
- **Fostering mentor-mentee relationships.** Taking this step can offer staff an opportunity to share and gain new insights.

ASSESSING STAFF RELATIONSHIPS

The following measures can be used to help assess staff relationships in your program or organization.

Teamwork Questionnaire¹⁶

DIRECTIONS: Here are 12 statements about teamwork. On the fill-in line next to each statement, indicate, as honestly as you can, how rarely or often your team displays each tendency. Please use the following marking system.

(1)
Almost never/
very seldom

(2)
Seldom

(3)
Occasionally

(4)
Frequently

(5)
Almost always/
very frequently

- _____ 1. We try to have set procedures or protocols to ensure that things are orderly and run smoothly (e.g., minimize interruption, everyone gets the opportunity to have their say)
- _____ 2. We are quick to get on with the task at hand and do not spend too much time in the planning stage.
- _____ 3. Our team feels that we are all in it together and shares responsibilities for the team's success or failure.
- _____ 4. We have thorough procedures for agreeing on our objectives and planning the way we will perform our tasks.
- _____ 5. Team members are afraid or do not like to ask others for help.
- _____ 6. We take our team's goals and objectives literally, and assume a shared understanding.
- _____ 7. The team leader tries to keep order and contributes to the task at hand.
- _____ 8. We do not have fixed procedures; we make them up as the task or project progresses.
- _____ 9. We generate lots of ideas, but we do not use many because we fail to listen to them and reject them without fully understanding them.
- _____ 10. Team members do not fully trust the other members and closely monitor others who are working on a specific task.
- _____ 11. The team leader ensures that we follow the procedures, do not argue, do not interrupt, and keep to the point.
- _____ 12. We enjoy working together; we have fun and are productive.

Indicate in the boxes below how you rated each item on the questionnaire. For example, if you scored Item 1 with a 5 (*almost always/very frequently*), then put a 5 in box 1. When you have transferred all 12 scores to the appropriate boxes, total each of the three columns.

1		3		2	
6		4		5	
7		9		8	
10		12		11	
Total		Total		Total	

This exercise is designed to help you assess whether your team operates in the chaotic, formal, or skillful stage. The lowest score possible for a stage is 4 (i.e., you decided all four descriptions *almost never/very seldom* happen in your team). The highest score for a stage is 20 (i.e., you decided all four descriptions *almost always/very frequently* happen in your team).

Your scores may be rather similar, such as all around the midpoint of 12 or with only small differences among them. This result would indicate that your team's performance is variable—sometimes chaotic, sometimes formal, sometimes skillful. If you have an inconclusive result, get additional team members to fill out the Teamwork Questionnaire and compare results.

Teamwork Effectiveness Self-Assessment Questionnaire¹⁷

Instructions: Rate each of the following statements by circling the appropriate number on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 means you *strongly disagree*, and 5 means you *strongly agree*. Add up your scores. A total score of less than 40 may indicate problems with teamwork effectiveness.

(1) Strongly Disagree	(2) Somewhat Disagree	(3) Neither Agree Nor Disagree	(4) Somewhat Agree	(5) Strongly Agree
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1. Team members put the interests and priorities of the organization or unit ahead of the interests and priorities of their respective jobs or functions.
2. Team members obtain and use all the needed information and assistance from others when solving problems or making decisions.
3. The team is organized and structured suitably for the tasks it has to perform.
4. Team problem-solving processes and methods are appropriate and effective.
5. Team decision-making processes and methods are appropriate and effective.
6. Team members participate meaningfully in higher-level decisions affecting their jobs or functions.
7. Team members receive the guidance and resources they need from the team manager to do their jobs.
8. Team members express their opinions honestly and openly to each other.
9. Team members make good use of the time they spend together
10. Every team member knows what other team members expect from him or her.
11. Conflict between or among team members is handled promptly and effectively.

USEFUL RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON STAFF RELATIONSHIPS

- American Management Association
For tips on building staff relationships, go to:
<http://www.amanet.org/training/articles/Building-a-Sense-of-Teamwork-Among-Staff-Members.aspx#blank>
- National Childcare Accreditation Council
For a brief discussion on building staff relationships, go to:
http://www.ncac.gov.au/pcf/Building_Supporting_Teamwork_December%2006.pdf

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