



Creating a Culture of Retention: A Coaching Approach to Paraprofessional Supervision

A PHI Technical Series
Publication



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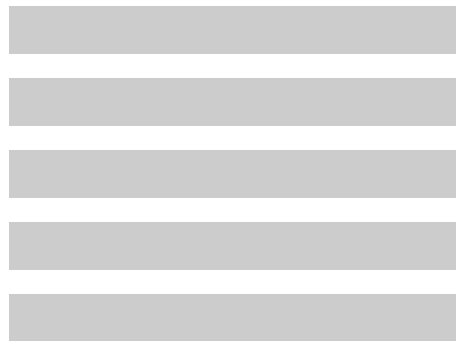
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Acknowledgements

PHI thanks Home Care Associates of Philadelphia and Quality Care Partners of Manchester, New Hampshire, for sharing their experiences and insights with the authors.

PHI also wishes to thank the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Woodcock Foundation for their generous support.

This manual was written by writing consultant Ellen Murphey, with assistance from PHI Training Specialist Sara Joffe.

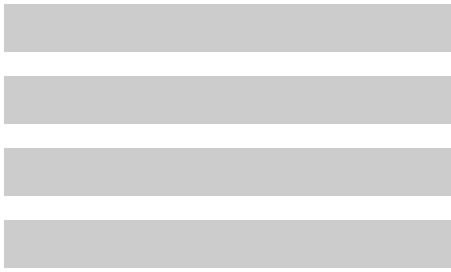


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Addressing Tardiness with a New Worker: Two Scenarios	4
Scenario 1: The Traditional Approach to Supervision	4
Scenario 2: The Coaching Approach	7
How Coaching Works	11
What a Coach-Supervisor Does	11
Skills Required for Effective Coaching	16
Investing the Time	16
Why Use a Coaching Approach to Supervision?	17
Potential for Success	17
Theory and Underlying Assumptions	18
Implementing a Coaching Approach: The Organizational Context	18
Structuring Organizational Policies to Support Coaching	18
Personnel Policies	18
Job Descriptions	19
Training	19
Establishing a Supportive Organizational Culture	20
Conclusion	22

Introduction

Supervisors of paraprofessional workers face challenging situations every day, especially in working with employees who have minimal work experience. Dealing with such problems as repeated lateness, “no call/no shows,” and negative or uncooperative attitudes can consume a significant portion of a supervisor’s time and energy. Although it is tempting to blame the workers for this “poor performance,” it is helpful to remember that low-wage workers often have few resources to fall back on when the complexities of caring for their families conflict with the needs of the workplace. Without financial resources, it is not so easy to find another way to get to work when the buses aren’t running or to find care for a sick child who can’t go to school. As a result, problem-solving skills are often critical to a direct-care worker’s success.

Unfortunately, many workers have not had the chance to develop these skills to the extent required to function well in a demanding workplace. In our experience training home health aides and nursing assistants in the Cooperative Healthcare Network¹, we have found that poor problem-solving skills are an important factor contributing to the disturbingly high turnover rates among newly hired paraprofessional workers.

Developing a high level of problem-solving ability in workers, thus, is crucial to keeping them in the workforce. The term “problem-solving” as used here includes the ability to think critically, prioritize, and communicate effectively. These are life skills that benefit workers in every aspect of their experience, both on and off the job. People with well-developed skills in these areas are more confident and more effective in everything they do. They are much more likely to find ways to remain working at a job they love but which, at times, can be challenging and difficult.

In the context of the home health and long-term care fields, direct-care workers who have more developed problem-solving skills are likely to become more successful employees by “standard performance measures,” such as fewer call outs. But more importantly, problem-solving skills help workers develop better relationships with clients, co-workers, and supervisors. *And relationships are what this work is all about.* As a number of recent studies have shown, it is the quality of the relationships that workers establish with consumers that draws them to this work — and it is the quality of relationships with coworkers and supervisors that keeps them there.²

Quality relationships also underlie quality care. As Carter Williams has said, “Relationships are not only the heart of long-term care, they are the heart of life.”³

Low-wage workers often have few resources to fall back on when the complexities of caring for their families conflict with the needs of the workplace.

When an agency focuses on developing, in its staff and frontline workers, problem-solving skills that support strong relationships, the entire organization benefits in increased efficiency, delivery of better quality care, and a more positive organizational culture.

It is the quality of the relationships that workers establish with consumers that draws them to this work — and it is the quality of relationships with coworkers and supervisors that keeps them there.

“Coaching” — the focus of this document — is an approach to working with frontline employees that centers on developing these problem-solving skills. The coaching approach can be applied to working relationships throughout an organization, but is particularly valuable and immediately effective in supervision.

Supervisors have a powerful impact on the lives of workers. A worker’s relationship with her supervisor is often the most influential factor in whether or not the worker feels valued and respected at work. Not surprisingly, feeling valued and respected is one of the biggest factors affecting a worker’s decision to stay on the job or quit.⁴ As one supervisor in a Massachusetts nursing home recently said, “Workers don’t leave their jobs, they leave their supervisors.”

Supervisors have the opportunity to play a major part in helping workers succeed on the job and to learn and grow both personally and professionally. The traditional model of supervision, however, sharply limits this opportunity. A coaching approach can make the most of it.

This document introduces the coaching approach to supervision through a comparison with the more familiar traditional approach. Simulated conversations between a worker and her supervisor illustrate the difference between the two approaches and highlight the key elements involved in coaching. Subsequent sections outline the rationale, theory, and assumptions behind the coaching approach, as well as the skill set required for successful coaching. The last section deals with the challenge of implementing a coaching approach within the context of an organization, both in terms of structural elements such as personnel policies and in terms of creating an organizational culture that supports coaching.

Addressing Tardiness with a New Worker: Two Scenarios

Scenario 1: The Traditional Approach to Supervision

Most supervisors use a traditional approach to supervision because this is what they were taught or have become accustomed to using. Following is a simulated interaction between a direct-care worker and her supervisor that is likely to feel familiar to supervisors in both home health and long-term care settings.

Supervisor: Okay, Helen, you know I've called you in here because we have a problem with your being late.

Worker: Yeah, well, the charge nurse — Lisa — said something to me about that.

Supervisor: So I have written down here that in the past two weeks since you started working, you came in at 3:20 on Tuesday, you came in at 3:50 on Thursday. And then just this past week, on Tuesday, you came in at 4:08. That's when you clocked in. You know this is a problem, right Helen?

Worker: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I guess.

Supervisor: When you were in orientation we went over with you how important it is to be on time. You know that we have to cover shifts and that the aides who work the shift before you leave at 3:00. If you're not here there is no way the work that needs to be done can get done. You know that, right?

Worker: Mm hmm.

Supervisor: So Helen, what's the problem here?

Worker: (Sighing) The buses — at least three times a week, the buses are not coming on time. I'm there, most of the time — there for the right bus that should get me here on time, by 3:00. But a lot of times I'm waiting there ten or fifteen minutes, waiting for the bus to come. The bus is just killing me.

Supervisor: So the problem is the bus.

Worker: Yeah.

Supervisor: Well, you know that it's your responsibility to get here on time. And if your experience is that the bus is not getting you here on time, then Helen, you are going to have to do something about it. Which means that you are going to have to get a ride with somebody, go on another bus route, or take an earlier bus.

Worker: Well, I —

Supervisor: Are you willing to do that? Because your willingness to do that is an indicator of whether you're willing to do what it takes to stay in this job.

Worker: I'll try. I just... sometimes it might be hard for me to get an earlier bus. But I'll try.

Supervisor: Helen, I need more from you than that you'll try. I need to know that you're willing to do this, because you need to be here at 3:00. You should consider this a verbal warning. If you're late again, you'll be written up for it.

Worker: I'll take care of it. Don't worry.

Coaching is an approach to working with frontline employees that centers on developing problem-solving skills: the ability to think critically, prioritize, and communicate effectively.

What on the surface looks like a successful supervisory interaction has not addressed the fundamental issue, which is that the worker does not feel in control of her time.

Supervisor: Okay.

Worker: You going to fire me or something?

Supervisor: I'm not going to fire you. I'm going to assume that you'll keep to your word and that you'll take care of it and be here regularly at 3:00.

Worker: It won't be a problem anymore.

The traditional approach to supervision used by the supervisor in Scenario 1 is based on explaining and enforcing work rules. Taking a close look at the above interaction, we see that the supervisor:

- Identified the issue to be addressed;
- Explained the rules clearly;
- Explained the consequences of breaking the rules;
- Offered possible solutions to the problem; and
- Maintained a personable but firm demeanor.

The supervisor acted appropriately within the bounds of the traditional approach to supervision. The interaction could be termed a success because the worker agreed to comply with the rules and get to work on time from now on.

But what are the likely consequences of this supervisory interaction? Although the worker wants to comply, she seems hesitant to think through what she can do differently to arrive at work by 3:00. Her focus is on assigning external blame: the problem is the bus. Unless she takes personal responsibility for her lateness, she is unlikely to be able to change her behavior. What on the surface looks like a successful supervisory interaction has not addressed the fundamental issue, which is that the worker does not feel in control of her time. If this core issue is not addressed, the lateness problem — and similar problems — is likely to continue.

While the supervisor in Scenario 1 got the worker to agree to comply, she may still feel doubtful about the worker's ability to perform well in the job. The worker may feel misunderstood and ashamed. She's been reprimanded but never really got to explain what was happening in her life that made it difficult to get to work on time. Although she said she would comply, chances are minimal that she will actually be able to do so.

Unfortunately, this outcome is all too common, even when supervisors do the best job they know how to do. Although well-intentioned and compassionate, supervisors trained in or accustomed to the traditional approach are using tools that often don't work well for them.

Scenario 2: The Coaching Approach

A coaching approach offers supervisors alternative and complementary tools that provide longer-term and more effective results. *Though coaching — as illustrated here — will require a greater initial investment of time, in the long run, it will likely save time by reducing the number of disciplinary problems.*

Following is a simulated conversation between a supervisor and worker in which the situation is identical to the previous one, but the supervisor uses a coaching approach. Because the supervisor is using additional tools, the conversation is longer than the one in Scenario 1 by about five minutes. Specific language illustrating the coaching approach is in **bold**.

Supervisor: Helen, you've been working for two weeks now. **How's it going?**

Worker: Okay.

Supervisor: I asked you to come meet with me because I understand that you've had a problem with being late a few times over the past two weeks.

Worker: Oh, well, just a few times. Yeah.

Supervisor: What I have written here — from a conversation I understand you had with Lisa, the charge nurse — is that there were three times you were late, including Tuesday and Thursday from last week, and then again this past Tuesday. And each of those times you were 15 minutes or 45 minutes or even over an hour late on one occasion. So **I imagine that something must be going on for you that is creating this problem, and I'd like to hear about it.**

Worker: Mm. I'll try to correct it. It's just that...the buses run late sometimes, and I'm standing there for sometimes 15 or 20 minutes. A lot of times it doesn't come on time.

Supervisor: **That must be very frustrating.**

Worker: Yeah! It's very frustrating! I don't know how much those drivers get paid, but they should get docked for that.

Supervisor: Mm hmm. **It has really hard consequences for you. Something you don't have much control over.**

Worker: Right. Can't get to work on time! I get so mad there's smoke coming out my ears.

Supervisor: So, Helen, clearly **you have a problem in terms of being able to rely on the bus. I don't have to ride the buses myself, so I haven't had to deal with that. That must be really difficult for you.**

Worker: Yeah.

Supervisor: And **I appreciate that it takes a lot to get here on the bus on a daily basis.**

Worker: Sometimes. When it's running late, it's just...aggravating.

Supervisor: I assume that you don't have another option, other than the bus.

Is that right? **The bus is your only way to get here?**

Worker: Right. I don't have a car. I don't drive.

Supervisor: Uh-huh. That's hard. So, we have a situation where **the bus is not reliable, so you're not always able to get here on time. But on the other hand, I'm sure you appreciate how important it is that you are here on time.**

Worker: Well, yes. I do. I got to take care of my residents. Somebody's got to be here for the residents.

Supervisor: Right. And as you know, we're often short staffed. So **having you not show up on time really makes a difference. Your presence makes a difference in terms of getting work done, but it also makes a difference to particular residents, as you know.**

Worker: Uh-huh.

Supervisor: **I heard that you've established really sweet relationships, particularly with Mrs. Smith and Miss Alice.**

Worker: Oh yeah. They're great. We have a good time.

Supervisor: **They really love you.**

Worker: Really? Well that's...nice to hear that.

Supervisor: Helen, **I would like for this to work out.** Very much. **Because we really appreciate having you here,** and we can't have this situation continue where you're coming in late. So **I'm wondering if we can brainstorm together what might be possible options for you,** in terms of how to deal with this. **Is it possible for you to take an earlier bus, so that you can be sure to be here on time?**

Worker: Well, uh...it's hard for me to take an earlier bus, actually. Because of what I'm coming from.

Supervisor: **Are you willing to let me know what you're coming from? Because maybe I can work with you on this.**

Worker: Well...I guess. I have a — another part time job I have, doing some private duty for a client.

Supervisor: **A home health client?**

Worker: That's right. I'm supposed to get off by 2:00, but...she has so many needs. I hate to go when there's stuff that hasn't gotten done yet, and she really hates to see me leave. So sometimes it's hard to get away. But...

Supervisor: **That doesn't surprise me, given what I've seen of you here and the attachment that you have to residents. I'm not surprised to hear you have a hard time leaving a client who really needs you.**

Worker: Yeah. I guess I am a pretty caring person.

Supervisor: That's clear. **We would never want to take that away from you. But it seems like the caring you have for your home health client is making it difficult for you to get out on time, and getting out on time is important to you, right?**

Worker: Yes. It's really important. I promise it won't happen again. I'm going to make sure I get out on time. I promise.

Supervisor: Helen, **I trust that you believe that and really want to make a change.**

Worker: I really do.

Supervisor: But I'm not convinced that in a couple weeks you might not get pulled back into the same thing with your home health client, because you're so caring. **So I think it would help us to think through strategies that you could use, to make sure that you get yourself out on time.**

Worker: Right.

Supervisor: **What worked for you on the days that you managed to get here on time?**

Worker: Well, most of those days the 2:30 bus was on time. That's the main thing. And a couple of days I managed to get out on time to catch the earlier bus, the 2:10 bus.

Supervisor: **So if you get out on time, you can manage to get the earlier bus. And even if that bus is a little late, you'll still get here on time. Is that right?**

Worker: Yeah. So I just need to get out on time.

Supervisor: Mm hmm. **Your client loves you and needs you and likes having you there. But leaving on time isn't a health or safety issue, right?**

Worker: Right. She's okay without me.

Supervisor: **So clearly, Helen, you have no control over the bus. But you do have control over when you leave your client's house, even though it might not seem that way.**

Worker: Yeah, I guess that's true.

Supervisor: **What do you think might work for you, to remind you of that? And to remind you that there's serious consequences to your not leaving on time?**

Worker: Well...I could think about all the people here in the facility that need me, too. And that I have to go 'cause I might lose my job, and that would be terrible. If I tell my client about it, that could help. Because she cares about me, too. Maybe if she has a lot of things for me to do and I run out of time, we could make a list and I can make sure to do them next time.

Supervisor: **Great! Seems like you've had some practice prioritizing and setting limits in other parts of your life.**

Worker: Oh... with my kids, every day. They want so much out of me.

Supervisor: If kids don't teach us to set limits, nothing will! **So you have a number of different options. There's reminding yourself about the people who need you here at the facility; there's reminding yourself that your job here is at stake; there's letting your client know about the problem so that she can help support you in getting out on time. And you also had a great idea of making a list at the end of your time with her each day, of the things you'll get to the next time. So you think all this will work?**

Worker: Yeah, I think it will. I'm sure it will make a difference. I just never thought about it that way.

Supervisor: **What strikes me is that you're changing something with your client that's been going on for a while — you've let her keep you longer than you're supposed to stay, because you're a kind and caring person. So she may put up a little battle at first.**

Worker: Oh yeah, she's a fighter!

Supervisor: You'll have to be strong. But **you also may need some support from the outside. And I'm willing to be that support for you.**

Worker: Wonderful.

Supervisor: **I'd like us to set up a kind of contract, where you'll check in with me about how it's going. Not in the sense that I'm checking up on you, but in the sense that I want to support you in doing this. It's hard to change patterns that have been going on for a while.**

Worker: Yeah.

Supervisor: So how about this, **next week — Tuesday and Friday — I'll find you on the floor and we'll check in with each other about how it's going.**

Worker: Tuesday and Friday. I'll look for you.

Supervisor: **I'm writing it down here. Maybe you should write it down, too.**

Worker: All right.

Supervisor: **I'll come and find you on the floor.**

Worker: Come right at 3:00! You'll see that I'm there.

Supervisor: Great. In terms of our policy, **I'm going to see this conversation as a coaching for improvement session. I need to tell you, though, that if you are late again, it will be documented in your personnel file, and we'll have to come up with a remedial plan.**

Worker: That's not going to happen.

Supervisor: **I trust that it won't. It's been a pleasure talking with you, Helen.**

Worker: For me, too.

The coaching approach is based on respect for the worker and belief in her ability to learn and grow. It focuses on helping the worker take responsibility for issues under her control and on helping her develop the ability to solve her own problems.

By the end of the interaction described in Scenario 2, Helen realizes that she has more control over her time than she thought. She understands that she needs to set firmer limits with her home health client so that she always leaves in time to catch the earlier bus. Instead of placing the blame for her lateness on the bus driver, she takes personal responsibility for the problem. Once she sees herself as responsible for the problem, she is able to come up with a practical solution. And because the solution is hers, rather than a dictate from her supervisor, Helen is more likely to implement it effectively.

The supervisor in Scenario 2 views the interaction as successful, not just because the worker has agreed to comply but because Helen has taken responsibility for the problem and has generated her own workable solution. *Also, the supervisor has made a meaningful connection with the worker.* She has a better understanding of Helen and of Helen's life. At the end of the meeting, the supervisor feels more confident in Helen's ability to succeed.

For her part, the worker in Scenario 2 feels heard, supported, and trusted. She is motivated to try to improve the situation for herself and is more likely to remain on the job. When future problems arise, she will more easily confide in her supervisor and get support before the problem gets out of hand. While the coaching approach requires a greater investment of time initially, over the longer run, it saves supervisors vast amounts of time, energy, and aggravation.

The coaching approach is based on respect for the worker and belief in her ability to learn and grow.

How Coaching Works

What a Coach-Supervisor Does

Anyone with the required skill set in an organization can coach, either formally or informally. However, the supervisory relationship is where coaching is most critical and can have the greatest impact. In Scenario 2, the coach-supervisor used some techniques of traditional supervision, such as identifying the issue to be addressed and clearly presenting it as a problem with serious consequences. In addition to these strategies, however, the coach-supervisor used tools that helped produce a much more effective interaction with continuing benefits to both supervisor and worker.

What did she do? Following are the essential elements of the coaching approach.

1) Create a relationship with the worker by:

- Demonstrating interest;
- Maintaining an attitude of curiosity rather than judgment;
 - Paying attention to feelings as well as facts;
 - Carefully listening and reflecting back; and
 - Disclosing personal information appropriately.

Seven Essential Elements of Coaching Approach

- 1) Create a relationship with the worker.
- 2) Provide positive, constructive feedback.
- 3) Elicit the worker's perspective.
- 4) Re-frame the issue.
- 5) Help the worker solve the problem for herself.
- 6) Help plan action steps and make a mutual commitment to follow up.
- 7) Hold the worker accountable.

To create a relationship, the supervisor must show interest in the worker as a whole person, rather than just as an employee. In Scenario 2, the coach-supervisor shows interest initially by acknowledging that Helen has just completed her first two weeks on the job and asking her how it has gone. She continues to demonstrate interest and create a relationship with Helen by maintaining an attitude of curiosity rather than judgment in such statements as, "I imagine that something must be going on for you that is creating this problem, and I'd like to hear about it." Nonjudgmental questions that invite an honest response, such as, "Is it possible for you to take an earlier bus?" and "Are you willing to let me know what you're coming from?" help to make the worker feel respected and supported rather than accused.

The coach-supervisor also creates a relationship with the worker by paying attention not only to the facts of the situation but also to the worker's feelings. At several points in Scenario 2, the coach-supervisor acknowledges Helen's feelings in comments such as, "That must be very frustrating" and "That must be really difficult for you." This helps Helen to feel seen and valued as a whole person. Her feelings — in addition to the facts of her job performance — matter to the supervisor. Acknowledging the worker's feelings is vital to creating a relationship.

Careful, active listening is another important tool for creating a relationship. In Scenario 2, Helen knows the supervisor is listening carefully to her, because of the supervisor's nonjudgmental tone and because the supervisor frequently reflects back Helen's points in such

statements as, "So, we have a situation where the bus is not reliable, so you're not always able to get here on time." Reflecting back helps avoid misunderstanding, but most importantly it helps the worker feel truly heard.

Personal disclosure relevant to the issue at hand can also help create a relationship. The supervisor in Scenario 2 acknowledges that she doesn't have to deal with the frustration of depending on buses for transportation. Later, she responds with humor to Helen's statement about setting limits with her children: "If kids don't teach us to set limits, nothing will!" These more personal comments help to humanize the supervisor and make it easier for Helen to feel a connection with her.

2) Provide positive, constructive feedback.

In a job as challenging as frontline health care, workers need to know they are appreciated. Frequent and specific positive feedback is essential. The coach-supervisor in Scenario 2 provides this in such statements as, “I appreciate that it takes a lot to get here on the bus on a daily basis,” “Your presence makes a difference,” and “I heard that you’ve established really sweet relationships, particularly with Mrs. Smith and Miss Alice.” Specific positive feedback is always more effective than vague or general feedback such as “I heard you’re doing a good job.” The specific positive feedback the supervisor gave in Scenario 2 helps to prevent Helen from becoming defensive and allows her to maintain open communication. Knowing she is valued and appreciated also helps to give Helen the confidence to come up with her own solutions to the problem.

Acknowledging the worker’s feelings is vital to creating a relationship.

3) Elicit the worker’s perspective.

A supervisor can’t effectively help a worker to resolve a problem unless she understands how the worker views the problem. In Scenario 1, the supervisor’s intervention is not likely to be successful because she does not find out all the factors involved in the situation. Rather than responding with open curiosity to Helen’s impulse to place blame on the bus, the supervisor simply demands that Helen take responsibility: “It’s your responsibility to get here on time.”

“Is it possible for you to take an earlier bus?” “Are you willing to let me know what you’re coming from? Because maybe I can work with you on this.” By asking these nonjudgmental questions and by actively listening, the supervisor in Scenario 2 is able to draw out from Helen the various factors influencing her behavior, eventually discovering the underlying reason behind her lateness. Instead of immediately forcing her own agenda, the supervisor expresses interest in *what the worker presents* as the problem. As a result she is able to elicit the “big picture” needed to support Helen effectively.

Knowing she is valued and appreciated helps to give the worker the confidence to come up with her own solutions to the problem.

Nonjudgmental questions and active listening also help the supervisor understand how the worker is framing the issue. What does she see as the core problem? How does she define it? What does she see as her options in the situation? The way the worker frames the issue may be contributing to the problem. For example, the supervisor in Scenario 2 learns that Helen views herself as trapped in a situation that is not working for her. Because her home health client has many chores for her and hates to see her leave, Helen feels she must stay even though it

means being late to her job at the nursing facility. By understanding how Helen sees the problem, the supervisor is able to help her reflect on her own thinking and realize she may have options she hadn't considered before.

Dictating solutions is disempowering and lowers self-confidence; the implicit message is that workers aren't competent enough to solve their own problems.

4) Re-frame the issue.

If the worker's way of framing the problem appears to be contributing to the problem, or is limiting her ability to solve it, the coach-supervisor offers alternative ways to view the situation. In Scenario 2, for example, after reflecting back and affirming Helen's deep caring toward her client, the supervisor leads Helen to rethink her perspective: "What we're talking about here is that your client loves you and needs you and likes having you there. But leaving on time isn't a health or safety issue, right?"

The supervisor encourages Helen to see that caring for her client and getting to work on time are both possible, and helps Helen to brainstorm a few strategies for how to get out on time to catch the earlier bus. By suggesting that Helen may have practiced setting limits in other areas of her life, the supervisor helps her to see that this is a familiar skill that she can use with her home health client.

5) Help the worker solve the problem for herself.

It is always tempting for a caring supervisor to offer solutions to a worker's problem. However, if the main goal of coaching is to develop workers' problem-solving skills, then telling workers how to solve their problems is counterproductive. Dictating solutions is also disempowering and lowers self-confidence; the implicit message is that workers aren't competent enough to solve their own problems.

In Scenario 1, after stating the problem, the supervisor almost immediately jumps to offering solutions: "You are going to have to get a ride with somebody, go on another bus route, or take an earlier bus." Also, she does not check out whether any of these solutions feel workable to Helen. Helen has no part at all in solving her problem. She is simply told what to do.

In Scenario 2, the coach-supervisor is careful not to offer any of her own solutions. To get Helen thinking about possible solutions, she says, "I'm wondering if we can brainstorm together what might be possible options for you," and "I think it would help us to think through strategies that you could use, to make sure that you get yourself out on time."

To help focus Helen's thinking, the coach-supervisor asks, "What worked for you on the days that you managed to get here on time?" The supervisor understands that any effective solution must involve Helen setting limits with her home health client. But

instead of just telling her to set firmer limits, she leads Helen to come up with ways of setting limits on her own: “What do you think might work for you, to remind you... that there’s serious consequences to your not leaving on time?”

By the end of the meeting Helen has thought of several workable ways to help set limits with her client and solve the lateness problem. She is excited and eager to try out her new plan. The brainstorming strengthened her confidence in herself and helped her practice an important problem-solving skill that she can apply to other problems in the future.

6) Help plan action steps and make a mutual commitment to follow up.

In Scenario 1, Helen leaves the meeting with a mandate to change her behavior, but no clear idea of what to do in order to improve the situation. It is unlikely that change will occur, especially since the supervisor in Scenario 1 makes no plans for follow-up support. The next time she speaks with Helen will likely be the next time Helen is late, and her interactions with Helen will inevitably take on an increasingly negative and punitive tone.

In Scenario 2, the coach-supervisor helps plan specific actions, by reflecting back the solutions Helen has generated: “So you have a number of different options. There’s reminding yourself about the people who need you here at the facility; there’s reminding yourself that your job here is at stake; there’s letting your client know about the problem so that she can help support you in getting out on time. And you also had a great idea of making a list at the end of your time with her each day, of the things you’ll get to the next time.”

Helen now has a specific plan to put into action the next time she sees her home health client.

The coach-supervisor ends the meeting with a mutual commitment to follow up in the near future on the worker’s plan for change. This helps the worker feel both accountable and supported: “This next week — Tuesday and Friday — I’ll find you on the floor and we’ll check in with each other about how it’s going.” The coach-supervisor indicates her seriousness about the commitment by writing it down and asking Helen to write it down, too.

Keeping the follow-up commitment is vital as this builds trust and respect. A coaching interaction is not complete until the follow-up commitment has been kept.

7) Hold the worker accountable.

The supervisor must be careful to balance support with accountability. Even a worker dealing with a complicated, challenging situation must be held accountable for complying with workplace policies. But when a supervisor uses consequences as an attempt to

A coaching interaction is not complete until the follow-up commitment has been kept.

motivate a worker to comply — using them as a threat, essentially — the worker is likely to feel attacked and mistrustful. It is important to establish a relationship based on trust and respect and to help the worker solve the problem for herself *before* bringing up consequences for future infractions.

The supervisor must be careful to balance support with accountability.

In Scenario 2, the supervisor waits until the end of the meeting to talk about consequences. At this point, Helen feels understood, supported, and confident in her ability to solve the problem. Hearing about consequences for a future infraction does not cause her to shut down or become defensive. Instead of using the punitive term, “verbal warning,” the supervisor in Scenario 2 refers to their interaction as a “coaching for improvement” session. This language not only carries a more positive tone, but also more accurately reflects the content of their conversation. Because a positive, trusting connection has already been established, the supervisor’s statement that any future lateness will be documented in Helen’s file is likely to feel less like a threat to Helen and more like a logical and necessary consequence.

Skills Required for Effective Coaching

Adopting a coaching approach requires a supervisor to:

- Slow down in order to listen more effectively and empathically, learn more deeply about the worker and the issue at hand, and become less reactive;
- Focus on future behavior rather than on past mistakes;
- Tell the truth without blame or judgment;
- Stay focused on helping the worker solve the problem;
- Create a balance between providing personal support and maintaining accountability for performance on the job; and
- Develop self-awareness and model accountability for behavior that affects others.

Caring, motivated people can develop these skills through training that includes personal reflection, role-play practice, and discussion (see p. 19). Through this training, supervisors become more skilled at setting a nonjudgmental, supportive tone in their communication with workers. Practice on the job continues to nurture these skills.

Investing the Time

One of the obvious differences between Scenarios 1 and 2 is that the latter was a longer interaction. Instead of the three to five minute conversation of the traditional supervisory approach, the coaching conversation usually takes five to ten minutes. There is no way around the fact that adopting a coaching approach to supervision

does require an extra investment of time, especially in the first three months. In the longer run, however, coaching saves time. When relationships with workers are established on a foundation of mutual trust and support, the need for disciplinary interventions dwindles. Meetings with workers are primarily check-ins about how things are going, or opportunities to help workers plan and meet their long-term goals. Experienced workers stay on the job and express greater satisfaction with their jobs, avoiding the need for frequent new hires.

Coaching also benefits the agency by helping workers reach their highest potential. It develops the problem-solving skills that will serve them on the job as well as in their personal lives. In turn, coaching allows supervisors to focus on the positive and build stronger, more satisfying relationships with workers.

Why Use a Coaching Approach to Supervision?

Potential for Success

Coaching became a widespread practice in the corporate business world during the 1990s, as part of a new emphasis on people as a valuable organizational resource. With its focus on developing problem-solving ability, coaching is ideally suited to working with entry-level employees who have little on-the-job experience and who frequently have trouble juggling the demands of work with personal lives. Through the coaching relationship, workers can dramatically improve their ability to solve problems, see the consequences of their actions, communicate effectively, deal with the demands of working, and handle the complexity of their lives.

Specifically, a coaching approach to supervision has the potential to:

- Improve employee retention rates;
- Improve relationships between supervisors and workers;
- Reduce problems requiring disciplinary action;
- Provide workers with the skills they need to develop to their full potential;
- Give supervisors the opportunity to focus on the positive and on longer-term goal setting; and
- Encourage both supervisors and workers to grow and learn personally.

There is no way around the fact that adopting a coaching approach to supervision does require an extra investment of time, especially in the first three months. In the longer run, however, coaching saves time.

Theory and Underlying Assumptions

The coaching approach assumes workers are capable of thinking through difficult situations, taking responsibility for their actions, and continually learning and growing.

With its focus on developing problem-solving ability, coaching is ideally suited to working with entry-level employees who frequently have trouble juggling the demands of work with personal lives.

It is a relationship-focused approach, based on the theory that lasting behavioral change can only happen with change in awareness, and that change in awareness happens primarily through caring relationship. Creating a caring relationship requires genuine curiosity on the part of the supervisor about the worker's perspective, experience, and way of viewing the job and her world. It is through the supervisor's active interest that the worker is able to get perspective on her behavior and make conscious choices to change.

Unlike counseling, coaching centers on job performance. The goal is to address how the worker's behavior impacts her effectiveness in her job. A coaching session almost always leads to some type of job-related action.

Coaching in a workplace devoted to caregiving has an added benefit. By modeling caring relationships, supervisors encourage workers to establish similarly caring relationships with residents/clients. The value of caring spreads through the workplace, creating an environment that truly supports quality caregiving.

Implementing a Coaching Approach: The Organizational Context

To implement a coaching approach to supervision, it is helpful to review organizational policies and structures to ensure they support and reinforce building strong relationships between supervisors and direct-care workers.

Structuring Organizational Policies to Support Coaching

A coaching approach to supervision requires a fundamental shift in thinking and in practice, and therefore, cannot be simply "plugged in" to an existing organization. Key structural elements of an organization, especially in the areas of personnel policies, supervisory job descriptions, and supervisory training, may need to shift in order to support a coaching approach.

Personnel Policies

In most home health or long-term care organizations, personnel policies are based on a traditional approach to management. These policies reflect the assumption that workers

require the threat of punishment as motivation to do their jobs well. The coaching approach differs from this punitive model in that it assumes that the worker is motivated by her relationship with her supervisor, coworkers, and residents/clients, not the threat of punishment.

This does not mean there are no consequences when a coaching approach is used. Clear policies with consequences for infractions are essential in any organization, but in the coaching model the focus is on what happens *before* consequences are enacted. Instead of reacting to negative behavior as it occurs, coaching is proactive and focused on the future — on *preventing* negative behavior before it occurs.

When infractions do occur, the first response of a coaching approach to supervision is a conversation such as the one detailed in Scenario 2. If the worker does not make the required improvement in the agreed-upon time frame, she meets again with her supervisor to draw up a detailed action plan. Continued problems lead to a meeting in which the worker is given a written warning. Finally, dismissal from employment results if little or no sustained improvement in the worker's performance is evident within an agreed-upon period. Gross misconduct, of course, including safety-related or criminal behavior, must have immediate, serious consequences.

These policies should be clearly articulated in a personnel manual. Moreover, enforcing the policies in a fair and nonjudgmental fashion is essential to the success of the coaching policy. If workers feel that the policies are enforced whimsically — or according to favoritism — there will be no foundation of trust on which to build a respectful and cooperative environment.

Job Descriptions

In many companies, the role of supervisor is an add-on to an already full job description. Busy with countless other tasks, supervisors often actively supervise a worker only in reaction to a rules infraction or behavior problem. With its proactive approach, coaching requires more time, especially in the first few months. If an organization wants to adopt coaching, senior management will want to review job descriptions with the understanding that supervision of workers is a significant task that requires time and training. Traditional job descriptions may need to change so that supervisors have the time they need to coach.

Training

Most supervisors in home health and long-term care settings have had little or no training in management or supervision. In order to adopt a coaching approach, staff may well need basic supervisory training as well as training in the specifics of the coaching

Enforcing the personnel policies in a fair and nonjudgmental fashion is essential to the success of the coaching policy.

approach. It is best if training is offered not only for frontline supervisors, but also for all senior managers in the organization. In this way, the coaching approach is institutionalized throughout the organization. Organizations that have the best results encourage managers to use coaching as the way they approach supervision and mentoring of all employees.

A training program in Coaching Supervision will be most effective if it is customized to meet the particular needs of the people being trained and to suit the context of the work environment. An effective program, however, would likely include the following elements:

- An introduction to the coaching perspective and underlying assumptions;
- Development or enhancement of communication skills, especially active listening, reflecting back, use of nonjudgmental questions, and self-disclosure;
- Skill building in “Possibility Thinking” — supporting and enhancing supervisees’ problem-solving ability by “presenting options” and “re-framing”;
- Leadership skill building, including pro-activity, motivational tools, and use of influence; and
- Opportunities for self-reflection and assessment.

A training program may be as short as three days or as long as ten, depending on the initial skill level and awareness of the participants. Although not optimal, the training can be broken up over several weeks, so that attendees need not take too much time off from their jobs in a single week. ⁵

Establishing a Supportive Organizational Culture

Coaching will not work in every organizational setting. An organization deciding to adopt the coaching model will find it most effective if the following elements are in place:

- **A worker-focused culture in which direct-care workers are valued and treated with respect.** This includes taking workers’ needs for support into account and taking seriously the complexity of their lives and the particular problems they face. Management must also believe strongly in workers’ ability to succeed and be willing to provide consistent support.
- **Commitment from senior management to a coaching-based model of communication and managing people throughout the organization.** To realize this commitment, senior managers will need to provide training opportunities to all supervisory staff, especially those who work directly with aides.

- **At least one person in the organization who is skilled in one-on-one coaching.** This person could be a supervisor, counselor, or another manager who works with frontline workers.
- **Clear policies, consistent with the coaching perspective that are effectively communicated and enforced.**
- **An organizational climate that is open to change and that offers opportunities for personal reflection.**

Having the structural elements in place to support a coaching approach is important, but the values of the organizational culture also need to be evident in everyday practice. If management states that the agency values caring, for example, it is important to find ways to put that value into practice, not only in the treatment of residents or clients, but in how workers are treated as well. Workers at all levels want to feel valued and respected. Employers demonstrate that they value paraprofessional employees by offering high-quality jobs that include opportunities for support, growth, and leadership. Some specific ways employers create these opportunities include:

- Peer support groups;
- Mentoring and preceptor programs;
- Participation of paraprofessionals in care-planning teams;
- Worker appreciation events;
- Daily/weekly/monthly/annual acknowledgement of worker contributions;
- Competitive wage and benefit packages;
- Flexible schedules; and
- Accessible education and training programs that provide opportunities for professional development and career advancement.

Conclusion

The two scenarios described earlier illustrate the significant difference between coaching and the traditional approach to supervision. Their different outcomes show that coaching has the potential to be much more effective. Through a positive, trusting relationship with a supervisor, workers strengthen their problem-solving abilities and are more likely to stay on the job. In turn, supervisors strengthen their connections with workers and spend less time and energy on discipline problems. Improved

If management states that the agency values caring, it is essential to find ways to put that value into practice, not only in the treatment of residents or clients, but in how workers are treated as well.

communication and greater job satisfaction benefit the entire organization.

Coaching is not a “quick fix,” however. Adopting a coaching approach requires training and a greater investment of supervisors’ time, especially up front. It means adapting structural elements such as personnel policies, job descriptions, and training. Its effectiveness also depends on an organizational culture that places workers at the center and creates a climate of respect and caring for all. When these requirements can be met, the organization’s investment in coaching is likely to pay off in significant, ongoing benefits.

Footnotes

¹ PHI has supported the development of a federation of worker-owned paraprofessional health care providers and employee-centered training programs in the states of New York, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Michigan, and Arkansas. These agencies and training programs provide a “laboratory” for development of innovative recruitment and training strategies for direct-care staff.

² See *In Their Own Words, A Report to the Pennsylvania Intra-Governmental Council on Long Term Care*. Pennsylvania Department of Aging (February 2001). Also Kathleen Kopiec, *The Work Experiences of Certified Nursing Assistants in New Hampshire*. The New Hampshire Community Loan Fund (October 2000).

³ Carter Catlett Williams, MSW, ACSW. *Relationship: the Heart of Life and Long-Term Care*. The Pioneer Network (March 2001).

⁴ See *At a Glance*. Report of the Certified Nurse Assistant Recruitment and Retention Project. Iowa CareGivers Association (September 1999).

⁵ PHI’s introductory coaching curriculum, *Coaching Supervision: Introductory Skills for Supervisors in Home and Residential Care*, is available for purchase (\$95, plus shipping and handling). This two- to three-day seminar introduces supervisors of direct-care workers to the key communication skills they need to help workers solve problems effectively and improve work performance. Each of the seven modules includes learning objectives, activities, questions for discussion, and all handouts. To learn more about this curriculum, and how to order, see the PHI website (www.PHInational.org) or contact The National Clearinghouse on the Direct-Care Workforce (our distributor) at: 718-402-4138 (or toll free: 866-402-4138). Email: clearinghouse@PHInational.org

Consulting Services

Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute provides consulting services to home care and nursing home providers across the United States. Our consulting work to improve recruitment, training, and supervision of direct-care workers—and delivery of person-centered care—is nationally recognized for effectiveness and quality. Our consulting services embrace both the individual provider, as well as large provider systems interested in making improvements at multiple facilities and locations.

We focus on immediate needs. Our consultants begin all potential projects with an assessment of your organization's current workforce challenges. We design our consulting services to meet your immediate needs, as well as considering your long-term goals.

We draw on our public policy expertise. The comprehensive resources of PHI—including our extensive knowledge about direct-care workforce policy at the federal, state, and local level—is an integral part of our work with our clients.

We help you get started. Depending on your organization's needs and resources, we are happy to provide targeted, short-term training and/or organizational development assistance. Many of our most successful consulting relationships with home care and nursing home providers begin this way.

We provide ongoing support. Some of our clients work with PHI over an extended period of time. We can provide ongoing support and executive coaching over several years, as you transform your organization's "culture of turnover" to a "culture of retention."

Quality Care through Quality Jobs. Our consultant team is ready to work with your organization to create a workplace culture where the *quality of care* you provide to consumers is positively linked to the *quality of job* you provide to your direct-care workers and supervisors.

PHI consultants are ready to help you:

Create quality direct-care jobs and a stable workforce...

- Design effective recruitment strategies
- Implement peer mentor programs
- Train frontline supervisors to use a "coaching" style of supervision
- Link new workers to supportive services

...and improve the quality of care for consumers

- Create more effective entry-level and advanced training programs
- Improve problem-solving and communication skills of frontline staff
- Identify and adopt person-centered caregiving practices
- Build a leadership team that engages the entire workplace community in innovation and change

Contact us

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