



The effective management of staff

BY KATARZYNA WIECZOREK-GHISSO

Successful childcare centre operators are those who recognise the effective management of human resources as fundamental to their longevity, and thus focus their energy on ensuring that staff members are suitably qualified, have relevant experience, and are able to maintain high levels of performance.

The adoption of three fundamental principles, or what I refer to as the three Rs – recruiting, rewarding and retaining – significantly contributes to achieving this result.

The effective management of staff is feasible when you have the right staff to start with; therefore, strategic recruiting is at the heart of any successful business. Whether it is a new or established centre, making rash decisions to fill vacant positions can be detrimental; thus, forward planning is highly recommended.

Developing a skills register outlining the characteristics required for staff in particular roles is a good way to start this process. That way, when a vacancy occurs, the skills register can be used as a reference point to ensure that you don't lose sight of what you are looking for in a replacement.

Given that approximately 1500 positions are currently advertised on SEEK in the category of 'Early Childhood', attracting the right candidate is critical.

It is therefore advisable that research on what is being advertised is undertaken to determine the current level of competition. Once this information is sought, you are better placed to advertise in a way that appeals to high-quality candidates, and, ultimately, to secure them for the position.

Once applications are culled, an effective way to assess candidate potential is through conducting interviews using questions derived from outcomes, which should be listed in the relevant position description. Aside from determining whether they are adequately qualified, it is especially important to assess each candidate's professional attitude, as well as their ability to work in a team environment, take or give direction, be flexible and spontaneous, and manage their time effectively, as these attributes are essential in any workplace.

Once reference checks have been conducted and original documentation cited, the successful candidate is ready for orientation. The key to starting the relationship on the right foot is to ensure that the new recruit is well orientated, as this provides an opportunity for the centre's practices, policies and standards to be clearly communicated, and further information about the role distributed.

Most managers breathe a sigh of relief when the recruitment process is finalised, as they may perceive that their 'work is done'; however, this couldn't be further from the truth. One of the first tasks following the orientation process is to determine the impact

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of the new candidate on the current staffing team. While their employment provides the opportunity to reposition staff members according to their strengths and interests, it also opens the door for potential conflict, which can arise if the new recruit is not effectively transitioned.

In their studies of behavioural sciences, Ken Blanchard and Spencer Johnson (1981) observed how people relate to others in a workplace environment, and analysed their levels of productivity. Published in *The One Minute Manager*, the concept of ‘different strokes for different folks’ offers interesting insight into effective ways to maximise staff performance. Put simply, staff members in any workplace vary significantly in their personalities, characteristics, knowledge and strengths; therefore, in order to be effective, employees need to be positioned in roles that complement their skill levels, and to be supported by managers who tailor their approach according to staff ability. According to Blanchard and Johnson, staff members are more likely to be effective in any workplace when:

- they feel good about themselves and their work output
- they receive support and are well resourced in their role
- they are recognised and rewarded for their efforts
- their work is assessed based on quality, rather than quantity.

The work of Blanchard and Johnson reinforces the principle of rewarding staff, which is fundamental to effective workplace management. Everyone likes a pat on the back for a job well done, and the provision of feedback is an important component of

maintaining standards and encouraging professional development, especially that of new candidates. Thoughtful, personal and sincere appreciation can inspire staff to achieve high levels of performance, which often exceed expectations. Suggested strategies to encourage this are outlined below:

- recognising an individual’s accomplishments in front of peers, in committee or management meetings, in newsletters and centre mail-outs
- supporting individuals to devise professional development plans that are focused on their interests, or on areas where they would like to improve their skills or knowledge
- encouraging and enabling individuals to seek support and guidance from other colleagues
- providing opportunities for team members to develop leadership skills and to take initiative when such opportunities arise
- providing tangible rewards for individuals and teams when they have made significant progress on a specific task or project
- providing ongoing, consistent and constructive feedback.

The provision of feedback is a particularly important strategy that can be implemented through an annual appraisal. When conducted in a respectful and positive manner, performance appraisals can instil pride and self-esteem, and can encourage staff members to take ownership of their professional progress. This acknowledgement contributes to an employee’s sense of worth and places value on the important work that they perform every day, which can greatly help in retaining valuable staff. The key is to ensure that once appraisals are completed, the process of ongoing improvement is carefully monitored through the strategic setting of achievable short- and long-term professional goals.

Despite our best efforts to support valuable staff members, some can still be negatively affected by day-to-day challenges. When this is ignored, it can lead to significant frustration, and, in worse cases, resignation. Employees rarely decide to move on from a job that they enjoy without a genuine reason; therefore, it is crucial to be proactive and implement retention practices that predict, prevent and respond to instances of disgruntled staff. Such common-sense practices, when taken seriously, can help minimise the angst that often leads to the centre-wide disharmony that is felt when valuable staff members leave.

continued on page 68

continued from page 66

Predicting movement doesn't happen without a deep understanding of staff as individuals, which includes knowing about their families and the challenges that they may face outside of the workplace. Equipped with such knowledge, managers can quickly recognise changes in demeanour and intervene to prevent further unrest. Unhappy and/or deflated staff can generally be identified by a decrease in their work performance and/or an increase in unexplained illness, which consequently impacts the entire staffing team.

Responding to issues in a proactive manner ensures that staff feels valued, especially where grievances are heard and resolution actioned. Ignoring what may be perceived as minor will lead to an increase in stress, anxiety and, consequently, compromised work performance. Members of staff who have their needs met and who are effectively supported and challenged are more likely to maintain a consistent approach to their workplace practices. The establishment of strong relationships where lines of communication are open

and respectful, and where staff members have regular forums in the way of weekly/monthly/quarterly/annual meetings conducted as a strategy to reflect on success and monitor issues, will go a long way towards preventing staff turnover.

In summary, this article has explored three principles (recruiting, rewarding and retaining) as a way of offering strategies to effectively manage staff, which, when adopted holistically, can significantly contribute to positive outcomes in any workplace. The key is to embark on this journey for the long term, and to regularly review approaches against the successful achievement of staff and centre wide goals. **B**

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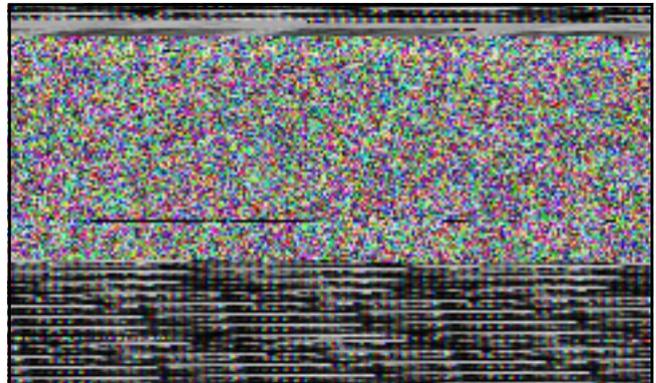
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