

Setting the Tone for Professional Growth

By: Dr. Jill Bella

Note: This resource is part of a self-reflection series focused on professional growth. Read the rest of the series [here](#).

In the resource shared in the previous Points to Ponder, “Getting a Return on Your Investment in Professional Development: Putting Practices in Place that Yield Results,” you reflected on both administrative and pedagogical practices that support professional growth. Having practices in place is a critical step that makes it more likely that professional growth will occur and be sustained.

Another important step is setting the tone for professional growth among staff. The tone you set emphasizes the value placed on professional growth and may impact attitudes and actions.

How are staff introduced to professional growth in your organization? What do you say that demonstrates you support staff in their growth and development along a career path? Do your words express encouragement for professional growth? Or, do your words and tone tend to discourage it?

One of the ways you can set the tone for professional growth in your program is through your spoken words, another is in writing. I often find policies supporting professional growth in employee handbooks. Having a section dedicated to professional growth in the employee handbook indicates that this is an important practice and holds the program accountable for embedding professional growth within the organization. In addition, the specific written words used can make a difference in how professional growth is perceived by staff. Take a look at the following example:

Professional growth is integral to our success and begins during the hiring process. During hiring, you observe the program and learn about our philosophy and mission. You are encouraged to ask questions and discuss ideas. This is the first step in the professional growth process. Once hired, your orientation begins. Orientation is the second step in the professional growth process and includes a review of the employee handbook, viewing training videos, and completing activities. All staff spend time observing in several classrooms. Staff also spend time observing in the specific classroom or other location to which they are assigned. During this time, you are encouraged to learn current practices and procedures, reflect on ideas for improvement, ask questions, and discuss particulars of the job responsibilities. You will also participate in regularly scheduled weekly meetings with your

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supervisor to discuss practices, ask questions, receive feedback, and develop action steps. The weekly meetings last beyond the orientation phase into the third step in the professional growth process, job-embedded learning, which continues throughout your employment. During this phase you will continue to build your knowledge and skills through training activities, reading, and reflective practice as well as participate in bi-weekly peer learning groups. These groups are designed to encourage support and generate ideas that will help everyone in their work.

Twice a year, there are two-day center-wide staff meetings. These occur when the center is closed and they both include a full-day (6 hour) training on a topic that has been predetermined with staff input. Each staff member is required to attend at least 20 hours of professional development training each year that is approved by the statewide registry.

Professional development funds are available to each staff member in the amount of \$100 per year and all staff are expected to use their allotted funds. Additional funding may be requested. Staff complete a Professional Development Request Form (Appendix B) and submit it to their supervisor for approval. You can find information on upcoming trainings on the staff bulletin board and in the staff newsletter, in addition to seeking out opportunities on your own. When deciding on trainings to attend, work with your supervisor to select job-specific experiences that relate to your learning plan objectives. Professional development funds may be used for conference/training registration fees, mileage to and from such events, books, journals, training materials, membership fees to professional organizations, and paid time to observe other programs. After participating in a professional development experience, please complete the appropriate follow-up form to extend your learning and improve your practice (e.g., Classroom Observation Form, Program Observation Form, Professional Development Feedback Form, Request to Present on “What I Learned from My Professional Development Experience” Form).

Individual Learning Plans (Appendix A) are completed by each staff member at the beginning of the school year and reviewed in December and May. They include self-reflection on job responsibilities, strengths, growth areas, goal setting, and action steps. The goals on this form are aligned with individualized performance appraisal goals. In addition, the teaching staff for each age group work together to develop a strategic plan each year and these goals are considered when completing the Individual Learning Plans.

More information on professional growth may be found in the performance appraisal section of the employee handbook.

Points to Ponder

After reading the example from an employee handbook above, what resonated with you? What words and phrases stood out and why?

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Review your own employee handbook section on professional growth with the following questions in mind:

- What is the tone? Does the section emphasize that professional growth is a value?
- Is it clear when professional growth begins for a staff member?
- Are there a required set of staff development hours? Do these hours go beyond the state requirement?
- Is staff development provided on-site or paid for off-site?
- Is there a specific dollar amount available to each staff member for professional development experiences? Are there eligibility requirements?
- Is supervisor approval required prior to registering for professional development training or purchasing resources or memberships?
- Is it clear professional growth is defined as more than attending a required amount of staff development hours?
- Are staff required to receive job-specific staff development (as opposed to requiring all staff to attend a training that may or may not apply to their role)?
- Does the professional growth section in the employee handbook include information about where staff can learn about available professional growth opportunities?
- Are opportunities for learning within the program mentioned (i.e., observing other classrooms, peer learning groups)?
- Is it evident that meetings between staff and supervisor are designed as opportunities to grow professionally?
- Is there a connection between professional growth experiences and individual goals?
- Is there a link between professional growth and performance appraisals?

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