

Manage Your Time to Mentor Your Staff

BY ERIN CETERA

Early childhood program administrators attest that they juggle many responsibilities daily and over weeks and months. Many will also acknowledge that formally and systematically supporting and mentoring staff is a responsibility that is often neglected, as day-to-day happenings take precedence. This is not to say that administrators misunderstand the importance of spending time on staff development. [Research](#) shows a strong relationship between characteristics of a positive organizational climate, such as supervisor support and collegiality, and higher classroom quality.

The tips below will highlight strategies to manage time, offer ideas to use that well-managed time to support staff in their professional growth, and provide forgiving reality checks for the days when less-than-ideal circumstances interfere with your plans.

TIME MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

[Time management](#), or the ability to use one's time effectively and productively, is a perennial topic of interest throughout the business world. The challenges of managing time are universal, and the [benefits of time management](#) are well known. They include getting more done, wasting less time, and perhaps most importantly, spending more time on the things that matter most. For early childhood administrators, managing time to balance work, family, and personal priorities is especially critical for avoiding burnout and providing quality programming for children and families.

There are plenty of time management systems and tips available. They range from the classic [Franklin Planner](#) to [apps for any electronic platform](#) and include the productivity method called [Eat the Frog](#). This is a method where you [do the hardest, most important thing first every day](#). The sheer number of time management systems highlights the reality that no system is perfect for everyone. There are, however, some universal ideas. Most time management experts agree that to-do lists are good, prioritized lists are better, and, lately, [timeboxing](#)—putting a designated time for each task on your calendar—is even more effective.

You'll need to evaluate which system you want to adopt. Remember that a system works if it helps you accomplish your goals. If you've selected a system that takes more time to use than seems worthwhile, or you forget to refer to it and miss deadlines or tasks completely, you can reevaluate and try another one.

MAKING THE TIME MANAGEMENT SYSTEM WORK FOR YOU

For early childhood administrators who want to [maximize time](#) to support their staff best, the following ideas may help you get started.

- Make a list of all your tasks, meetings, and scheduled events.

- Some experts suggest that including work and personal items on the same list can help you find balance.
- Be sure to include weekly meetings with each staff member or team.
- Sort and organize your list. Note which tasks must be repeated regularly and any known deadlines, due dates, or planned events.
- Assign reasonable amounts of time for each task. Remember to think about preparation for meetings and special events.
- Think about your best time of day and when you do your best work.
- Consider whether everything on the list needs to be accomplished. Indeed, some of the things we spend time on don't need to be completed at all. Trim the list as needed.

“People overestimate what they can do in a day and underestimate what they can do in a year.” ~Bill Gates

PRIORITIZING YOUR STAFF

The next step is where your commitment to supporting your staff by managing your time is tested. For many administrators, this is where a shift in thinking occurs. Beginning with regular meetings with your staff, place each item from your to-do list on your calendar. You have moved mentoring staff from something that would be nice to do to something that is scheduled to happen regularly. Your dedication to your staff and their growth shows when you and they consider each meeting an unbreakable appointment. While it may be necessary to reschedule occasionally, each staff member's recurring meeting with you is permanently on your calendar.

In some industries, these regularly scheduled meetings are called “[one-on-ones](#).” In education, we often use the terms “coaching,” “mentoring,” and “reflective supervision” for the time supervisors spend with employees. [Coaching](#) usually focuses on job-related skills and develops trust between leaders and those who work for them. Employees who trust their supervisors generally have positive intent about their jobs. They are more likely to go above and beyond in their work and generally plan on staying with their employers. [Mentoring](#) focuses more on personal and professional growth and is usually part of a more collaborative relationship. [Mentoring meetings](#) can be less structured than coaching meetings but are no less important. Employees who are mentored gain the courage to make decisions in the workplace and gain confidence in their skills.

[Reflective supervision](#) is a process programs can use to support staff development. It is a shared experience of problem-solving, self-reflection, and thinking. Meeting regularly with staff for [reflective supervision](#) allows staff to consider all aspects of their jobs, keeps administrators and supervisors aware of what's happening within the program, provides opportunities to revisit challenges and celebrate successes, and allows administrators to model the kind of caring, supportive relationships they want staff to develop with children and families. Another benefit is reducing “[Do you have a minute?](#)” requests for your time. When staff know they have a protected time to talk with you, they are less likely to interrupt your day with simple requests.

WHEN TIME MANAGEMENT DOESN'T WORK

Early childhood program administrators know that even with the best planning, some days spiral out of control. These are the days when “putting out fires” is sometimes even a literal event! Competing demands on your time can cause you to question your ability to [run your program successfully](#) and smoothly. This is when it helps to step back for a moment of perspective.

If you generally manage your time well, one day of readjusted goals is unlikely to impact your program negatively in the long term. Learning to let go or let others take on responsibilities can be an example to your staff that there are many ways to solve problems. Sometimes, things that seemed urgent are less critical than we thought. As you practice time management, you will become more skilled at prioritizing and recognizing which tasks can be relegated to the next day or week.

Thinking of time as something to be managed, rather than allowing it to manage you, shows that you are an intentional leader and decision-maker. Dedicating time to support and mentor your staff indicates that you value the role of early childhood educators in the lives of young children, and you will work to ensure that they have what they need to do their jobs well.

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