

## Week 7: Problem-Solving

### I. Problem-solving sequence summary:

- A. Step 1: When presented with information, what are the facts?
- B. Step 2: Ask these W questions:
  - 1. Is it really a problem? When does it become a problem?
  - 2. Whose problem is it? Who has the authority to solve it?
  - 3. What needs to be in place to be able to address this problem?
- C. Step 3: Brainstorming solutions. List anything and everything.
- D. Step 4: Clarify, combine similar ideas, then prioritize the top 2-3 to consider.
- E. Step 5: Flesh out those top few ideas using these questions:
  - 1. Do we really understand what the core issue is?
  - 2. What factual data do we need to collect so we can address this?
  - 3. What would happen if we did nothing?
  - 4. Is this a matter of “can’t do” or “won’t do”? How can we move that into “can do” or “will do”?
  - 5. What are the unintended consequences of the ideas we’ve proposed?
- F. Step 6: Implementing ideas takes time, but you can ask these questions to help immediately:
  - 1. What can I do more of? What can I do less of?
  - 2. What can I start doing? What can I stop doing?
  - 3. What can I keep doing? What’s already working?

### II. Homework

- A. Reading reflection paper due April 10 (See handout. Articles will be on Angel.)
- B. Keep reading the textbooks.

### III. Activity: Q-tip = Quit Taking It Personally

- A. When you have an encounter / problem with someone, and those defensive or self-doubt feelings come up, quiet them by looking at this Q-tip.
- B. Decorate a Q-tip and leave it on your desk as a reminder.

### IV. Problem-solving

- A. Brainstorm typical ECE scenarios / problems (no solutions yet please):
  1. New child, dual-language learner, not expressive in English or home language, 3 years old, good receptive language, but other teachers are saying this child is a liability because he has walked out of the classroom when the door is wide open.
  2. Training a new part-time teacher older than I am. Refuses to follow center's protocols, refuses to use center's curriculum (only uses her own curriculum, which is not developmentally appropriate), refuses to set up or clean up the classroom, etc. Sends children to another room whenever they say "no." Is a half-day teacher, so leaves the mess for others.
  3. Teachers in the same room have different comfort levels with messy art, letting children do the cooking, etc. Incompatible dispositions on one team.
  4. Not greeting parents and coworkers, different expectations about manners in adult-to-adult communication
  5. Center / admin not following their own policies, advertised ratios, etc. (false advertising)
  6. Parents who won't communicate honestly. Say he's getting speech starting now, then say it's been going on for six months, then saying they're not going to start because mom is getting a new job and won't have time. Toilet training issues, gives a totally different answer to every teacher. Outright lying to us about their child! Inappropriate communication

7. Staffing problem: too many people calling in sick, not a reliable pool of substitutes, so coverage is inconsistent
  8. Lack of cooperation between coworkers, then one leaves instead of dealing with it. Causes turnover.
  9. Parents in denial, apathetic, refusing to cooperate with staff
  10. Different expectations from the parent.
  11. Lack of parent involvement, lack of buy-in to center philosophy
  12. Too much parent involvement
  13. High expectations, low budget, uber micro-managing by admin (even toilet paper is locked away, has to be requested)
- B. Problem-solving strategies can work well for minor issues, moderate issues, or even big issues to bring them down to more minor steps that are manageable. (They don't work for crazy/irrational people. That's next week's lecture.)
- C. In real life, we wouldn't solve it in this step-by-step tedious way, but do cover these pieces.
- D. Step 1: When presented with information, what are the facts?
1. Skip the emotional background that surrounds these problems. (Often teachers and parents bring more emotion than fact when telling you their problem.)
  2. State the problem in terms of very basic facts, such as "coworkers having different expectations of each other," instead of emotional stories or extraneous details
- E. Step 2: Ask these W questions to help frame/clarify the problem
1. Is it really a problem? When does it become a problem that needs to be actively addressed?
    - a) Is it just annoying, or does it deserve the energy we're going to put into problem-solving?

- b) If teachers jump in and out to grab something, ok. If they're away for a few minutes, or multiple teachers do it at once, so you're out of ratio and kids could get hurt, it's a bigger deal.
  - c) Is this parent behavior just annoying, or is it disrupting the classroom?
2. Whose problem is it? Who should be responsible for dealing with this?
- a) Isn't automatically the director's problem, and you can't solve everyone's problems and still get anything done
  - b) If the person with a problem shows up with a monkey on their shoulder (metaphorically), offer solutions and advice and input, then send them away with their monkey. Don't take it on.
  - c) If the problem really does need your authority to solve it, then it is yours to solve. Then you do need to take on the monkey.
3. What needs to be in place for the problem to be addressed?
- (1) Written systems, rules, policies & procedures
  - (2) Staff has been trained on this thing that you're growling at them for not doing (or are you expecting them to read your mind?)
  - (3) Staff buy-in/ trust/ relationships so teachers agree on what the norm should be, agree something is wrong, and be willing try the solutions
  - (4) Without this, if it's something you as director think should be in place but you've never really discussed it (or just casually mentioned it once or twice), you've got no leg to stand on when you criticize the teachers for not doing it properly
4. Example: for the problem of different expectations among teachers in the same school
- a) When is this a problem?
    - (1) When kids transfer from one room to another and teachers have such different expectations it's like being at a different school

- (2) When one room is strong and structured, but the one next door is total chaos, the parents question the program's competency
- b) Whose problem is it?
  - (1) Is the director's job to hold teachers accountable for following center's policies
  - (2) Not the teachers' problem, because the teachers in the functioning classroom have no authority over the teachers in the chaotic room.
- c) What needs to be in place for the problem to be addressed?
  - (1) Director being present, proactively / directly supervising each room
  - (2) Sense of program philosophy and buy-in, agreement on a system for planning curriculum and running the day. Without those guidelines, extra training or other strategies won't help.
  - (3) Need a solid job description, well-described philosophy, etc. or you won't have a leg to stand on.
5. Example of problem: micromanagement, lack of supplies
  - a) When is it a problem?
    - (1) When teachers don't have supplies, or can't get the requested supplies they need in time to do their curriculum (when it prevents employees from carrying out their very basic job)
  - b) Whose problem is it?
    - (1) The person in charge of the money, supplies/inventory
  - c) What should be in place for this problem to be addressed?
    - (1) Written policies about how far in advance to request supplies
    - (2) Budget/ allowance per classroom
    - (3) Make it someone's job to pay attention to supply levels

6. Example of center not following its own philosophy and policies (example: biting policy not being followed, biters being allowed to stay all day regardless of how many children they hurt)
  - a) When is it a problem?
    - (1) When it's a daily thing, not just once in a while
    - (2) When parents are complaining about it (becomes noticeable, reflects poorly on the program)
  - b) Whose problem is it?
    - (1) Everyone's because it is so disruptive!
    - (2) Director's because teachers don't have the authority to send kids home at this center
  - c) What needs to be in place for the problem to be addressed?
    - (1) Rules are written, shared, with clear expectation that policies are to be followed regularly

F. Step 3: Brainstorming solutions

1. Brainstorming rules:
  - a) Everything counts, everything can be said. There's no such thing as too crazy or impossible.
  - b) Not critiquing the ideas. The purpose is to generate ideas, the more the better. Don't shoot anything down.
  - c) Limit the time (maybe 10-15 minutes) if necessary, because sometimes groups can go on for hours with this part
  - d) Everyone participates, possibly using a "talking stick" to pass around to make sure everyone contributes and everyone gets heard
2. Assuming everything in those W questions (step 2) is in place, how do we address it? What could we do to minimize or eliminate this problem?  
Generate a long list of ideas. Anything goes.

- a) Problem: different exceptions among teachers. Solutions:
- (1) Make sure policies/expectations are in place
  - (2) Mentor teacher for the chaotic room
  - (3) Make sure there's a solid orientation program for new hires  
(individual or small group)
  - (4) Have regular staff meetings so everyone is on the same page about expectations and curriculum
  - (5) Videotape the teachers in both rooms so the teachers in the chaotic rooms can see another way of being
  - (6) Eliminate the policy of letting parents select their classrooms (give teachers/admin the authority to separate bad mixes of children)
  - (7) Have a "blowout room" or backup plan for support to call when a child starts throwing everything off the shelves
  - (8) Be open to discussing alternative placements with parents if the child is not a good fit for the program (hitting/kicking teachers and children, totally disruptive), drawing that line
  - (9) Arrange time for the strong teacher to go mentor the other teachers
  - (10) Send them to training
  - (11) Peer coaching, possibly for everyone so those teachers don't feel singled out or penalized
  - (12) Be open to reconsidering the teachers' placements, possibility of switching up partnership pairings
  - (13) Going over the director's head if she won't support or cooperate.
- b) Solutions to the micromanaging/lack of supplies
- (1) Grant writing, asking for donations from other sources
  - (2) Post a wish list for parents to donate stuff

- (3) Unified voice from staff and parents advocating for even basic supplies to be available all the time
- c) Solutions to center not following its own policies / philosophy, especially about removing a child who bites a lot and hurts other kids
- (1) Documentation of what's happening
  - (2) Take that documentation to the director, or if no response there, take it over the director's head to the owner
  - (3) Could call licensing if children are being harmed by the inadequate ratio/supervision
  - (4) "Scare tactic," give parents a copy of the written biting policy, even if the director might not back you in sending kids home according to that policy
  - (5) Help the director see it's going to be her problem either way, explain the repercussions of not dealing with it (ex: if she's afraid of losing the tuition from the biting child, talk about five other families leaving because their children keep getting bitten)
  - (6) Remove the child from the room (yes, we can say this solution probably won't work, but it's important not to shoot the idea down during the brainstorming session)
  - (7) Rewrite the policy
  - (8) Ask the director to come be with the child for a full day, provide observations
  - (9) Ask/require the parent to come shadow the child
  - (10) Ask the parent to come observe through the one-way mirror (so doesn't change the child's behavior)
  - (11) Go to the community, bring in a professional to offer consultation/ advice/support



- (12) Have teachers not follow director's other policies, see how she likes it (outrageous, but we don't shoot anything down)
  - (13) Teacher enforces the policy if director won't act: it's clearly written, so have the teacher tell the parents their child is not welcome back. Bar them at the door.
  - (14) Teachers band together and mutiny or go on strike
  - (15) Have parents of bitten children storm the director's office
- d) How does it feel to share ideas to the group?
- (1) If you offer an idea and it's criticized, can feel like a personal criticism, even if the other person didn't mean it that way.
  - (2) Good opportunity to practice Q-Tip, don't take it personally! Isn't about you as a person whether your idea gets chosen or not. All ideas become "community property" once they're stated, may work or not, isn't personal.

G. Step 4: After brainstorming ideas:

1. Clarify
  - a) Not critiquing, but clarifying what you mean by those things
  - b) example: "When you say, "go over the director's head," what do you mean? Doesn't mean we're agreeing to the idea or will go with it, but making sure we all understand what the idea is/means.
2. Combine similar ideas
  - a) can often condense a list of 12 things down to 3-4 by categorizing them
  - b) example: going to the owner or going to licensing could both fall under "going over the director's head"
3. Prioritize (select by consensus) the top few ideas to consider
  - a) Take off the craziest ideas, such as getting a \$1 million grant by next week
  - b) Take the top 2-3 ideas you want to work with

- c) The group needs consensus. Doesn't mean everyone has to agree fully, but all of you agree you can live with all of these top ideas. Can do this by vote if it's not clear from discussion.
4. Example of different expectations among teachers. Our top two ideas:
- a) Mentor teacher (outside or peer): work on consistent routines/ expectations/ curriculum in the room, and respectful relationships with children
  - b) Reduce the parents' power, set policy moving forward that parents don't get to decide where their child goes (can request, but no promises, is school's decision)
- H. Step 5: Once you agree on those top 2 viable ideas, flesh them out using these strategies:
1. Do we really understand what the core issue is?
    - a) Example: It's not the chaotic classroom itself. It's the lack of leadership, fragmentation in the program.
    - b) Example: It's not the lack of paint itself. It may a director who won't spend money, or it may be a program that doesn't have any money to spend.
    - c) Example: it's not the child biting that's a problem. It's the director not acting on the policy that's the problem.
  2. What factual data do we need to collect so we can address this?
    - a) Written policies/handbooks
    - b) Documentation of examples of this problem (such as times we were out of ratio)
  3. What would happen if we do nothing? (as a center, or as a teacher?)
    - a) Will we lose families or teachers?
    - b) Will it grow discontent on the staff, contribute to cliques or friction?
    - c) Will children get hurt?

- d) Will curriculum quality go down because there are no supplies?
- 4. Looking at the situation and the personalities involved, is it a “can’t do” or a “won’t do” situation? Is it a lack of skills/resources/training (can’t do), or a lack of willingness/attitude/buy-in (won’t do)? Requires very different approach.
- 5. How can we move it from a “can’t do” to a “can do” or a “won’t do” to a “will do”?
- 6. What are the unintended consequences of these ideas we’ve proposed?
  - a) Example: going over the director’s head might cause the director to quit or to file a lawsuit
  - b) Example: not addressing the problem with one family might cause other families to leave
  - c) Example: providing new training and expectations could cause the teachers to feel overwhelmed and quit
  - d) Example: making the director pay for supplies might lead to lower-quality supplies or no one getting a raise because she feels broke
- 7. Between choosing a solution and feeling an effect takes time. We are working toward those solutions we brainstormed, but for now, given where we are now and what our resources are now:
  - a) What can I do more of? (more documentation, more talking to parents)
  - b) What can I do less of?
  - c) What can I start doing?
  - d) What can I stop doing? (stop protecting/defending the director)
  - e) What can I keep doing? What’s already working/helping?
  - f) Nice to do this part after the brainstorming session. Even the crazy ideas can help answer these questions.