5 Tips for Finding and Keeping Good Staff
The future of the childcare workforce in a covid-19 economy

By Sue Testaguzza, childcare center owner since 1993

We hear so much about the staffing crisis and how difficult it is to find staff for our childcare centers. But what if you could tackle it a different way and not have vacancies at all? Great idea - but how would you pull that off?

While nothing is a magic bullet, there are approaches employers can deploy to learn from other industries and minimize turnover.

Here are my top 5 suggestions:

1. Rethink your Priorities
   …and make staff your focus

I read once that Nick Swinmurn, the founder of Zappos, took a unique approach to building his company. He said he wanted to build the "best customer service anyone ever experienced." He coached his staff to prioritize the "customer service experience…and by the way sell shoes.” In other words, selling shoes was NOT the first priority.

I took that advice, but flipped it a bit. In childcare we have a different business model. We aren’t retail – we are already service sector -- so customer service is already in our DNA. But what if we flipped that, and made the STAFF the focus?

I adopted a top-down pyramid approach, where my role as an employer is my first priority. By focusing on the staff FIRST, I know that they will have longer staying power. Our current average length of tenure is nearly 5 years! And the trickle-down of focusing on staff? We have full enrollment with a waiting list.

Another thing we do each year is close for a day and have a "Staff Retreat." The photo above is from a recent year’s retreat. We usually go to a local park for the day (picnic shelter rentals are very inexpensive) and have a mix of team-building games, catered lunch, and some sort of craft project. The goal of the day? Just relax and have fun!
2. Rethink your Business Model  
…and pay a higher percentage of revenue to staff

While many experts will say that the childcare business model should stay at or below the 50% mark for payroll to revenue, I’ve preferred to go above that. By paying higher than the going rate for staff, we’ve been able to attract and keep quality, educated and motivated individuals. We also offer benefits such as huge discounts for staff who have their own children at the center, free lunch, free uniforms, and paid holidays, sick and vacation time.

Another staffing idea is to be a student teacher site for area community colleges and vocational schools, increasing your access to future staff.

3. Rethink your Staffing Plan  
…and adopt the 4-10 schedule

Ever heard of the 4-10 Staffing Plan? Essentially, here is how it works. Most childcare centers staff rooms for 2 teachers at a time, so let’s take an example of a Younger Preschool (YP) class and an Older Preschool (OP) class. Each class has a Lead Teacher (LT) and an Assistant Teacher (AT).

In the 4-10 model, each teacher works 4 days per week for 10 hours. So – each teacher has a day off in a 5-day work week. Between the 2 classes listed above, there needs to be someone called a “Fifth.” A Fifth teacher is the person who works other people’s 5th day, and works each of their schedules on those days.

The table below shows the example of how this works (assuming the center is open from 6:30am-6pm):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>YP-LT</td>
<td>6:30-R1</td>
<td>6:30-R1</td>
<td>6:30-R1</td>
<td>6:30-R1</td>
<td>OFF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YP-AT</td>
<td>7:30 – R3</td>
<td>7:30 – R3</td>
<td>OFF</td>
<td>7:30 – R3</td>
<td>7:30 – R3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OP-LT</td>
<td>OFF</td>
<td>7:00 – R2</td>
<td>7:00 – R2</td>
<td>7:00 – R2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OP-AT</td>
<td>8:00 - close</td>
<td>OFF</td>
<td>8:00 - close</td>
<td>8:00 - close</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth</td>
<td>7:00 – R2</td>
<td>8:00 - close</td>
<td>7:30 – R3</td>
<td>OFF</td>
<td>6:30-R1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why do **staff LOVE** the 4-10 schedule? Because they have another day off to, perhaps, work at their other job. Sadly, in childcare, many staff work two jobs. Another reason is to have another day for personal responsibilities.

Who do **employers LOVE** the 4-10 schedule? Because happier staff stay longer!! Also, it eliminates the 4-6 schedules at the end of the day that are so difficult to fill.
Why do parents LOVE the 4-10 schedule? Because parents love seeing the same staff at the end of the day that they saw at drop-off. And even more importantly – parents love seeing happy staff and lower turnover rates.

4. Rethink your Dress Code
   ...and adopt a scrubs & crocs uniform

The childcare industry is uniquely positioned with one foot in the education world and one foot in the health care world. Now in the age of covid-19, we have elevated our embrace of the health care world and adopted a new dress code of scrubs and crocs. It just makes sense for optimal sanitary purposes (scrub fabric repels bacteria and viruses; crocs can easily be wiped clean and sanitized).

What you wear affects how you feel about yourself – it’s just a fact. And wearing a scrubs & crocs uniform changes a person’s mindset – for the good. It’s easy to get dressed in the morning, and you know that you matter. You ARE an essential worker. You provide a valuable health care service to the community.

5. Rethink your Facility
   ...and make sure it is a pleasant place to work

Workplace Environment and Culture Matters. When was the last time you walked your building, from the outside-in, with a critical eye? How does your parking lot look? Is it clear of any trash or debris? Is your signage in good shape? How about your front door – is it inviting?

And walking inside – how is your lobby? Do you have flowers or other friendly and inviting décor? How recently have you painted? Are there pleasant sounds, such as music playing?

Take a critical look at every aspect of your facility, from the parking lot, to the inside, to the playground, and make a list of upgrades & repairs that are needed. You may wonder what that would have to do with finding and keeping staff, but environments matter. No one wants to work someplace that isn’t well taken care of.

And what of workplace culture? How well does your staff get along with each other? Is there tension or friendliness? When you have interviews with potential new staff members, they can tell!

By addressing facility and interpersonal environments, you’ll improve your percentage of job offers that are accepted.

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