

Dear Supervisor



Dear Supervisor is our take on the well-known "Dear Abby" advice column. This segment is devoted to helping supervisors meet the challenges of the job. The questions come from you, child welfare supervisors. If you have a challenge you'd like us to address, email us at supervisor@ihs-trinet.com.

Question: How can I conduct team building when my agency doesn't have a budget for team building activities?

Images of remote cabin retreats, high ropes courses, trust falls, and white water rafting are often conjured by the phrase "team building." Alas, these activities never seem to make it into the budget. So how does a supervisor go about team building? Wait...what does "team building" even mean?

Team building is creating synergy within a unit, and a unit characterized by synergy is highly effective in achieving goals and mission outcomes. Advertisers would have us believe team building to be fun activities that can mysteriously transform work units into highly productive, well-oiled machines. In reality, it comes down to hard work. Team building ultimately requires assessing what stands in the way of effective teamwork. Often our units could benefit from improved communication, collaboration, trust, creativity, and honest feedback. Luckily, expensive team building outings are far from the only way to accomplish these goals. In fact, team building skills require routine practice to make a difference in a lasting way. Anyone who has participated in an exciting, expensive team building outing may still find no results the following week.

A supervisor's relationship with individual staff is the foundation of solid team building. A quick refresher from Supervisor Core is in order here:

- The supervisor-staff relationship is *the* most important factor in determining staff success, satisfaction with the job, professional development, and retention.
- It provides a foundation that allows for openness and trust.
- When staff feel respected by their supervisors, they feel appreciated and empowered.
- Effective supervisors understand the importance of nurturing a positive relationship with their staff. They realize that this impacts how staff feel their value as people, professionals, and members of their unit.

An appreciation for the staff's culture is requisite for building genuine relationships. Check in without a specific reason. It's important to know each staff member's professional aspirations and to take steps towards helping them achieve these goals when possible. Effective supervisors ask their staff for their opinions and value their responses. Remember to congratulate staff on their accomplishments and try

to understand what motivates them on a personal level. Supervisors are far more effective at assessing barriers to teamwork when they know their caseworkers well and have established trust with them.

Common barriers to effective teamwork include poor communication, misunderstanding goals, not having goals, role confusion, and lacking trust. When a supervisor has established a quality relationship with individual staff, they are more likely go along with an exploration of these issues. A supervisor can harvest some “low hanging fruit” by facilitating a unit meeting centered on establishing unit goals and mission if it has not already been established. Perhaps a unit’s goals are stagnant or unclear. Redefining and clarifying goals and roles would likely be subject for a productive unit meeting. As the group’s leader, refuse to take communication for granted. Insist the unit set an explicit goal and expectation of effective communication, and make it safe to bring up communication gaps in the unit. Finally, model trust in each of your caseworkers and they will be more inclined to trust one another.

