



3 MUST DO things when leading a team of Paras!

GATHERED FROM
PERSONAL EXPERIENCES
BY COURTNEY KRAUS

When I was deciding what to write, the first question I asked myself was: “what are the top 3 things I think my parads would say about working with me?”

Here are what I think my parads would be most likely to say it’s like working with me:

1. She is organized. OBSESSIVELY organized.
2. She has high expectations of everyone...parads, students, and herself!
3. She views us as people and values what we bring to the table. ❤️

Am I perfect?

Certainly NOT... I am human and make mistakes like everyone else. I don't even strive for perfection; I just do my best and expect the same of others.

Below are my top 3 tips for leading a team of parads.

I. Get organized

This might seem silly, obvious, over-rated, depending on your personality. However, I can tell you that the experience paras have working on specific teams is directly related to how well organized the lead teacher is.

The challenge lies in the fact that the environment must work not only for you, but for your entire team as well. In my program, that means I have up to 12+ adults in my room at any given time. Everyone needs to feel confident finding the necessary materials to do their jobs without the stress of searching.

Try to keep your set up consistent. For example, regardless of what my students are learning, their materials are organized the same way. Anyone can sit down with any child and find exactly what they need.



Organization Continued...

Organization does not come naturally to all people. Here are some of my favorite ways to keep things organized.

- Color coding
My students each have a color and my core programming (verbal behavior card sort) relies heavily on color coded materials)
 - Label EVERYTHING (yes...everything)
 - Same size bins/containers
When you have similar storage, they always stack and store within cabinets and on shelves more neatly
 - Consistency is KEY!

Another important thing is to know what staff will do if they don't have a student. There should always be tasks that can be worked on at a moment's notice if needed. This maximizes efficiency. I have bins labeled with the task "copy", "cut", etc. filled with things that my paras go to whenever they have extra time. This ensures materials are complete BEFORE I need them, and we never waste time.



2. Set clear boundaries and expectations

I always start my year with expectations. These outline what I expect of my paraprofessionals as well as what they can expect of me! I want to make this crystal clear so there is no confusion.

Once the expectations have been set, I follow up on them. I provide immediate feedback whenever possible. I praise them. Like anyone, they need to feel my appreciation for their hard work. This job is not well paid or glamorous.

When an expectation has not been met, we discuss it. Sweeping it under the rug is not helpful. No one will learn if we are not willing to have tough conversations. The same is true if I don't meet an expectation. I make mistakes too, but more importantly, I own them.

3. Be authentic and vulnerable and give them opportunities to lead

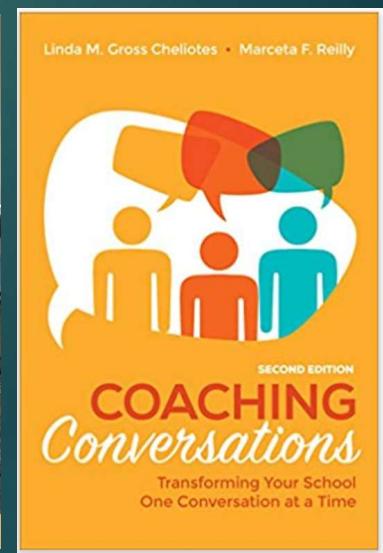
We might have the degree and maybe even experience to be the "teacher" or person "in-charge". However, we could not serve these kids without pads, so we must remember that and stay grateful. If I make a mistake, I admit it. I let them see the human side of me too.

I have found that when they are given the opportunity to give input, ideas, or lead...magical things can happen. More importantly, it boosts morale. When you have buy-in, they are more engaged and find joy too.

Last year on social media, I saw somebody made a periodic table of black history for Black History Month. I lead a very diverse and beautiful team. Very few words accurately describe what happened when I presented the idea to my team, and we decided to build our own periodic table bulletin board with a few modifications of our own.

MAGIC...I am convinced that's what it was. Individuals felt valued and seen in ways they NEVER had before. The team came together in ways I hadn't witnessed ALL YEAR! Our building spent time learning about black history in ways they never had before.

I have witnessed this same phenomena in various scenarios when I give up just a little control and allow them to lead. I am still learning how to lead from a coaching standpoint instead of a place of supervision. It hasn't failed me yet. If you're interested in learning more about this, I am currently studying a book (see image below) called Coaching Conversations.



Other Tips:

- Do your best to build a positive relationship between your team and your administrators. Paras need to feel their support more often than their annual reviews.
- Value your people and their unique qualities, strengths, and weaknesses.
- Open yourself to their feedback and reflect on it objectively.
- Provide tokens of appreciation (they can be small and inexpensive)
- Make sure paras know WHY they are expected to do certain things.
- Ensure that staff can easily see progress. Progress boosts the energy in the room...it's reinforcing! 😊
- When you make announcements, have staff initial/sign so you know who received the info.
- Review performance more often than required reviews.
- Have them complete a self-evaluation prior to performance reviews.
- Model goal setting and encourage everyone to participate.
- Find time to meet as a team...

This one is especially tough sometimes, but it is WORTH it. I have had related service providers and other special ed staff watch my room so we could meet. I have also split my staff into halves so that half could manage children at preferred activities and then we could switch. With the pandemic last year, I used remote learning days to schedule some virtual meetings.