RELATIONSHIPS IN TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Much of the literature on building relationships comes out of psychology, management consulting, and related fields. While it covers a wide range of topics, two interrelated factors are most frequently discussed: building trust and emotional intelligence.

The relationship between a TA recipient and a provider, especially in the beginning, is by nature unequal. TA requests are made because a situation is not as it should be or how some people want it to be, and the circumstances behind a request are often complex and conflicting. The provider possesses expertise the recipient lacks, and the recipient may feel vulnerable, threatened, or uncomfortable. Building a relationship based on trust and open communication is key to getting recipients to commit to the ongoing nature of TA, particularly intensive TA.

Trust

A social relationship based on trust needs to develop between TA recipients and providers that allows both sides to believe that they can take the risk of working together. TA providers should consciously focus on cultivating trust rather than assume it will develop on its own. The following strategies can help.

Explore the landscape and create clear, open communication

As a TA provider, you will often encounter situations where there is a high level of ambiguity (differing agendas, lack of agreement, and unexpressed conflict). Taking time at the beginning to ask questions that help you fully understand the situation and to encourage honest dialogue is critical to the trust-building process and sets the stage for quality TA. This first step should focus as much on making the TA recipients feel heard as it should on gathering information you need. You may want to consider first asking questions that focus on their perspectives and needs, followed by questions that get at some of the things you need to know. Questions you could ask include:

- What are their concerns, what is going well, and what is not?
- What would help them most in their role?
- Who requested the TA?
- Is everyone in agreement about pursuing TA?

- Is there agreement between service providers and families about what the problems are?

For more questions and factors to consider, see the [Readiness Indicators for Child-Specific TA](#).

Show credibility and a positive track record

This involves two components: your reputation (what past recipients say about you and your project) and your credentials (degrees/certificates and the specialized knowledge and experience you possess).

- *Your reputation*. This is, for the most part, based on how successful you have been in providing TA and may be outside your direct control. It is likely that administrators and service providers will ask others you have worked with what the experience was like. Clearly your honesty (being straightforward about what you can and cannot do) and your reliability (sticking to your TA plan and delivering on promised activities) play a role here as well. You can be proactive by requesting that previous TA recipients act as references for you and your project. This can be helpful to potential recipients who may feel reluctant to engage in TA.
- *Your credentials*. It's important to weigh the pros and cons of different methods of displaying credentials (e.g., putting them in your email signature, on your website, in printed materials). Finding a balance is crucial. You want your credentials to indicate to potential TA recipients that you have expertise that could help them, but you don't want to intimidate them and make them less comfortable working with you. For example, with an administrator you might clearly convey what your certifications and degrees are, but with a family you might not.

Clarify expectations

Service providers and families frequently operate in educational environments that have competing goals, administrative priorities, and political agendas. These environments can feel insecure, and TA provision introduces yet another layer of expectations. Discussing, negotiating, and clarifying these expectations early on creates a sense of comfort and security, reducing feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty that are common during the early stages of a TA relationship. It is important to address expectations related to both process and outcomes.

- *Process.* Explain how the TA process works, what the likely duration will be, and what the recipients' responsibilities will be. Be responsive to recipients' ideas and concerns; a one-size-fits-all approach can lessen trust. Address potential challenges, such as limits to technology access in schools, confidentiality policies that staff are required to adhere to,

or difficulties related to teaming and collaboration. This process of discussion and negotiation is best done collaboratively with the team and family.

- ***Outcomes.*** Identifying desired outcomes can often be difficult for recipients at first. Work with them to develop clear outcomes—agreed upon by all—both for themselves as service providers and family members and for the child.

Demonstrate likability and personal fit

TA recipients will be more willing to work with providers if they like them; by nature, people cannot trust those they do not like. Likability depends on factors such as communication style, personal chemistry, approachability, and interpersonal skills. A positive emotional connection with a TA provider helps reduce recipients' feelings of uncertainty and discomfort. The ability of a TA provider to establish such a connection relates to their emotional intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence

"Emotional intelligence" is a broad term that is typically defined as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions, as well as to consider and relate to the perspectives of others. A TA provider's emotional intelligence is closely linked to his or her ability to form trusting relationships. It encompasses internal abilities and knowledge as well as external behaviors. It is something that TA providers should reflect on and seek feedback about from those they work with and potentially from TA recipients with whom they have a long-term relationship.

- To avoid creating emotional barriers, be aware of your strengths, weaknesses, attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and opinions, and be able to regulate them in your interactions with TA recipients. This is especially important when working with families who have a value system that differs greatly from your own. You will need to put your feelings and personal beliefs aside to understand their experiences and point of view and provide information that has value to them (even if it does not to you).
- Adopt a persona that fits with the TA recipient and environment. Simply being aware of the culture of the environment you are going into and respecting the norms of that environment is critical. An external expression of this that sends a powerful signal is how you dress. You may dress casually to meet with a family or formally if you are meeting with a special education director.
- Be empathetic; share others' emotions. Within TA relationships, expressions of empathy can create honest dialogue about needs and deficits. Ways to show empathy include:

- "Reflecting" (repeating and/or summarizing what the other person said). This is one of the most powerful ways to ensure that people feel heard.
- Sympathizing with and validating TA recipients' challenges. In a classroom, when you identify with the difficulties a teacher is experiencing, they are more likely to be truthful with you.
- Engaging in self-disclosure—essentially a display of vulnerability—about topics that relate directly to the experiences of the TA recipient.
- Exploring with recipients their worries and fears about the TA and how it relates to their practice. In the age of high-stakes testing and teacher evaluation, TA recipients may have real and legitimate concerns about how what you are asking them to do will be viewed by their administrators.

References

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