



Creating a culture of training...

cheaply



By Ingrid Maack
 Investing in staff training is a win-win and a way to build profit. Using examples from Norwest Childcare Centre in Sydney's Baulkham Hills, *Childcare Australasia* talks to centre owner and organisational psychologist, Nesha O'Neil*, about how to develop your team while still focusing on profits.

A firm believer in the idea of building social capital in children's services, Ms O'Neil invests strongly in her team, helping to develop their careers within the childcare industry.

Last year she was rewarded for her efforts when Norwest Childcare Centre (a 90-place centre) won the 'Hills Excellence in Business Awards for Staff Training and Development' and earlier this year won the 'Western Sydney Industry Award for Leader in Business Practice – People Management, Learning and Development'.

Ms O'Neil told *Childcare Australasia* she is only able to manage two large centres in her hands-on way by having "two fantastic directors and two brilliant teams of staff" and that staff is key to running a successful and profitable childcare centre.

Investing in staff, she said is a win-win situation for employers, employees, families and children.

"Staff win because they have investment in their career, the centre wins because happy staff are less likely to leave (and therefore drain profits during turnover) and, most of all, the children win because the staff are better educated," Ms O'Neil said.

As a business owner, Ms O'Neil understands the importance of making a profit, however she knows she can't get this by "squeezing profits out of every last corner of the service".

"If you're watching every cent, then staff are watching every hour ... we like to invest in things that really make a difference – our staff."

Train, retain and gain

It's about creating "a culture of training", said Ms O'Neil, who aims to have a "happy team that enjoys working in the industry and won't leave due to burn out".

"Investing in staff makes happy staff. Staff turnover costs a lot of money. Staff who are well-trained require less management, and you get better quality performance," she said.

Ms O'Neil said once a centre has created a culture of training and has opened its eyes to opportunities, then staff will too.

"They'll bring training ideas to you and get excited about learning. It's very rare that we have to make them go to professional development days.

"One staff member recently arranged for the RTA to visit. My staff has the impetus to make such arrangements; it's no longer just up to me," she said.

Last year the centre had tai chi classes. Ms O'Neil subsidised the course and had a trainer come once a week for three months to do classes. One staff member had high blood pressure and Ms O'Neil was also pregnant at the time.

"In the end, I got relaxed staff and new techniques to teach to the children."

The other reason the centre doesn't lose staff is her flexible approach to employment, including part-time work, the option not to work during school holidays, flexible maternity leave arrangements and other family-friendly options.

Training staff economically

Norwest Childcare Centre supports staff to pursue formal education (i.e. Cert III, Ass Dip, Bach Ed) through either paying for the course, offering time off or by sponsoring study. However, training needn't be accredited training or expensive long-term study. There are many low-cost or no-cost training options available, according to Ms O'Neil.

Training types include guest speakers, on-the-job training, voluntary attendance, parent-paid training, Government grants, mentoring programs, staff-paid training, traineeships, team-building days, correspondence and cross-training, or free workshops.

Ms O'Neil said there is a certain amount of money she's prepared to invest in every staff member (depending on the length of their employment, their current level and future prospects), but she says once there is 'a culture of training' in the workplace,

many staff members are prepared to pay for themselves.

"If it's a course I insist they go on then I pay for their course and time. If it is a course they're voluntarily going on, then they go in their own time and we pay for all or part of the course."

In the past, Ms O'Neil has paid for courses and had no staff turn up. To avoid this scenario, she now asks staff to pay up-front, keep a receipt then be reimbursed either partly or in full.

"If staff feel valued they will be motivated and remain loyal."

Training is generally after hours to avoid replacing staff, however, because the centre has a large casual workforce, staff can take a day off for a training course if necessary. Staff studying accredited courses externally can take as much leave without pay as they need, and for exams can take paid leave.

Ms O'Neil tries to find courses that are nearby and whenever possible she arranges free training on-site at the centre.

There are various organisations and government departments who can do talks at children's services. In NSW these include the Department of Community Services (DoCS), Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA), Macquarie University or Families First (www.familiesfirst.nsw.gov.au), but each state has similar departments, think tanks or training initiatives.

Offering traineeships is another cost-effective way to invest in a centre's future.

Ms O'Neil recommends owners and directors contact the Government's New Apprenticeships Centre (www.newapprenticeships.gov.au).

"All traineeships are done by correspondence so staff 'earn as they learn', and when recruiting trainees we aim to keep them on afterwards. By the time they have their qualification we have a great staff member who knows how to do it 'our way'."

Parental involvement in training

Ms O'Neil recommends involving families in the training process by asking them what areas they'd like to see the centre's staff trained in, and if they themselves would like any training.

Organising training that parents will pay for at your centre or inviting other centres along to get a host discount are low-cost alternatives and are ways to connect parents, staff and the wider community, she said.

"Parents appreciate our focus on training and see we have happy staff and continuity of care. From a business perspective, it helps retain families."

Arranging centre-based first aid, anaphylaxis, child protection or positive parenting training is a way of involving parents and getting them to help foot the training bill. If a course costs \$300, parents pay \$30 each, allowing staff to go for free.

"Parents are more than happy to pay for the staff when they know it will benefit their children."

The centre has hosted parenting courses such as the Triple-P Positive Parenting Program (www1.triplep.net) and recently had a nutritionist visit.

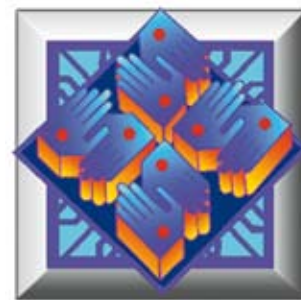
Rewarding your team

Having incentives in the training process and

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Winners are grinners ... Centre owner Nesha O'Neil (front, right) and director Lorna King (front, left) with the Northwest Childcare Centre Team at the Western Sydney Industry Award ceremony.



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rewarding staff is important, according to Ms O'Neil, who from a manager's point of view, said it is "essential for staff to feel valued".

Rewarding staff with training days, workshops or conference attendance is also a great way to motivate your team, and money is not always the best incentive or the right 'carrot to dangle'.

Ms O'Neil said training in itself is a great reward and a way to show staff you're investing in them for the long haul.

"The reward they're getting is not a bottle of wine, it's something that's useful for their career!"

"I honestly think raising someone's salary by five cents an hour has little effect. Don't give them cash they're just going to get taxed on."

Rewards can also take the form of girl's nights out, team-building activities and networking events. These work particularly well if they are off-site and after hours, she said.

Ms O'Neil said it is also important to "celebrate training", so when staff complete a long-term course of study, it is announced to parents in the centre's newsletter and she takes the staff out for drinks.

And formal training isn't always the answer,

she said. Cross training and tapping into your senior staff's skill-set can also be a solution. Having been both a 'mentor' and 'mentoree', Ms O'Neil suggests developing a mentor program between staff at your centre or even with neighbouring centres.

"We assign mentors to new staff and sit down and create a training program. As a manager, I have benefited from mentoring myself and can admit 'that I don't know everything'." (Ms O'Neil is part of a business-mentoring group and is also involved in the Young Women's Leadership Project in Western Sydney.)

She said services should not be afraid to share their expertise or resources with each other, but that sadly most centres see neighbouring services as competition.

Empowering staff with knowledge

Six-monthly staff appraisals and annual performance reviews are an opportunity to assess a staff member's future, acknowledge their hard work and plan future training.

Bi-monthly staff meetings also have a strong training focus at Norwest Childcare Centre and are dedicated to professional development.

"All housekeeping is taken care of in a newsletter prior to the meeting, so we use this time to train instead."

Staff members attend meetings where they are encouraged to share information, show off their new skills and teach others what they have learned from the course.

"Everyone who has been on a course has to do a 10-minute presentation to other staff. It is empowering for them and they get a thrill out of being the 'knowledge provider'."

Ms O'Neil also tries to lead by example and attend courses herself as often as possible, often accompanying staff to workshops to provide moral support.

"One of my staff is doing her Certificate III so I said to her, 'right, how many more modules do you still need to do? Let's go along together'."

**Nesha O'Neil is a registered child psychologist and former organisational psychologist and trainer. She has worked in organisational roles, learning about recruiting, HR, staff management, training and development. She currently owns two centres and is the owner of Norwest Child Care Centre in Baulkham Hills, Sydney. ■*

Fast-track and upskill while on the job

In response to the childcare sector's skill shortage, TAFE NSW – Northern Sydney Institute (NSI) Crows Nest College together with Expect A Star Education Services has created two new fast-tracked face-to-face intensive programs that enhance professional development and recognise previous study and experience in the childcare sector.

TAFE Plus Intensive Programs in Children's

Services are suited to people who are already working in the childcare industry, are looking to update existing qualifications, or who have previously worked in the childcare sector.

The intensive model allows NSW students to complete their qualification in half the usual time. On offer are an intensive 12-week Certificate III in Children's Services

and a one-year Diploma in Children's Services, as opposed to the usual 18 weeks and two years.

TAFE NSW – Northern Sydney Institute associate director, Community Services and Health, Francesca Saccaro, said the new initiative would help attract skilled staff back to the sector and allow individuals to upgrade their qualifications.

"It's an opportunity to formally recognise existing skills and knowledge in a short time-frame.

"Our target group are existing childcare workers or

mature age people who have knowledge of the childcare sector, people with other childcare knowledge (primary school trained) or who have overseas qualifications."

Each candidate is individually assessed for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to determine an individual learning program, and a GAP program is available to those students who have a Certificate III in Children's Services or overseas qualifications.

Candidates who enrol directly into the Diploma Program also have the opportunity to gain the Certificate III qualification. There are also additional family day care modules in both the Certificate III and Diploma to give graduates work opportunities in family day care.

Expect A Star Education Services will provide casual work placement for students enrolled in the course. A recruitment consultant will be appointed to each student throughout the program and a job placement service at the end of the program is also provided.

For more information, visit TAFE NSW's website at www.tafensw.edu.au or Expect A Star's website at www.expectastar.com.au. ■



A practical play session for students at TAFE NSW – Northern Sydney Institute.