

BoggsCast Episode 24: Gina Brelesky

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JESSICA SHORT: Welcome to BoggsCast, where faculty and staff at The Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities explore best practice, showcase success stories, and help listeners envision possibilities for innovation through interviews with state and national experts. Part of Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, The Boggs Center is New Jersey's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities and Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities program. I'm Jessica Short, Training and Consultation Specialist.

JOYCE JELLEY: I'm Joyce Jelley, also a Training and Consultation Specialist.

JESSICA SHORT: In this episode, we'll be discussing person-centered supervision with Gina Brelesky. Gina Brelesky is founder and Lead Coach at Experience Human. She has worked more than 30 years supporting leaders and their teams. Thanks for being with us, Gina.

GINA BRELESKY: Of course. I'm grateful to be here. Thanks, Jessica. Thanks, Joyce.

JESSICA SHORT: So let's start with the first and obvious question. In human services, we hear person-centered supports, person-centered services. What is person-centered supervision? And why is it important for employees working in human services?

GINA BRELESKY: So, it's very similar to what you've heard before about supports and services, except we're putting the team member at the center of the supervision or the conversation. So, it's really a framework of supervising team members in a way that is for their growth, their development. We talk about things that are important to them. It's a nice model of supervision that really builds trust and respect.

It takes into account perspective taking so that we take the perspective of the team member and try and understand them and have empathy for them. It's also very positive and supportive. And it helps to maintain a productive work environment because it gives the team member an opportunity and a forum to talk about things that might be bothering them. And then it also supports their well-being and their achievement by focusing on them. So that's kind of it in a nutshell.

And in terms of-- oh, your second part of your question was in terms of human service itself and team members working in human service. And really, I would say to that, when we think about the caring professions, many jobs are stressful, of course. Lots of jobs are stressful. But I think when we have people who are working supporting other human beings, there's a different level of stress.

And this is a way that we can help them to maintain that well-being, or give them strategies because we are talking with them about what is actually stressing them out, and how can we support them, and how can we help them. So I think it's hugely important that we do that with our team members. Because if we expect them to be there for the people that they're supporting, we need to be there for our team members.

JOYCE JELLEY: Excellent. Can you sketch out a basic structure of what a person-centered supervision would look like?

GINA BRELESKY: Sure. There is sort of a basic structure. And this is based on some research by a gentleman named Mark Horstman and some of the work that he's done over the years. But basically, there's a structure where it's a 30-minute meeting that happens frequently. He talks about it scheduled weekly. And the agenda is driven by the team member.

That's what's really key here, that you're talking about things that are important to them. So it's very deliberate, intentional time with the team member. The supervisor does always come prepared with an agenda, of course. And certainly, in the beginning, when you start doing this, you sometimes have to kind of role model what the agenda might have on it and what it looks like.

And then the supervisor takes notes, and there is some data from the research on the importance of the supervisor taking notes. It just sort of lends itself to be viewed as a really important meeting in the team member's eyes. So that's really just the basic structure, making sure you have dedicated intentional time with the team member, having a conversation about things that are important to them, coming prepared with an agenda, and taking notes. It's very simple. Nothing really earth-shattering there, but it is important.

JESSICA SHORT: Would you say that taking the notes is kind of a way for supervisors to go back and follow up?

GINA BRELESKY: Yeah, yeah. So taking the notes-- so a couple of things. Yes, exactly what you said, Jessica. It's important for us. We're busy, right? We're all busy. We have lots of people that we talk to and lots of people that we meet with. And so if you're anything like me, you have to write everything down so that you can remember, right?

But it's also very respectful of the person sitting in front of us because during the research, when team members were interviewed just kind of about the process and how things were going, one of the things that they said was that when their supervisor takes notes, they felt like they were important, that this meeting was important. It sort of elevated the meeting.

And to your point, when their supervisors did not take notes, they didn't trust that they would actually follow up on the things they said they would follow up on. So yes, it's a way of keeping us organized, being respectful so that when we get to the next meeting, we kind of know where we are. We're not

rehashing things. We're like, OK, we're caught up. We know what we're doing. But it's also sending a message to team members.

JESSICA SHORT: That's great. So how can person-centered supervision support the oh so important retention of direct support staff and reduce turnover, which we experience a lot in this field?

GINA BRELESKY: Yeah, of course, there's no one magic bullet that'll do that. But there are certainly things that we can do to mitigate some of that turnover. And with this model, because you're giving this message to the team member, you are important to me. You're important to the organization because you're setting up dedicated time with them. So they know, hey, my supervisor's busy, but they are carving out time in their schedule to sit down with me. That means something to the person.

So, you're building loyalty to the supervisor, to the organization by doing that. That's a really important message. We all want to feel seen and heard. And this is a way of doing that. The research does support that the more we get to know folks-- and the way we get to know them is through one-on-one time with them-- the better chances we have of retaining them and increasing their performance.

So, we're increasing their performance because we're supporting them. We're giving them more training or whatever it is in those one-on-one meetings that they need. And then as we do that, they're more loyal to us, and we're helping them to stay longer with us.

So, an agency that I support that operates in two states, Pennsylvania and Maryland. And this was person-centered supervision. Those real dedicated one-on-one meetings was something that they absolutely wanted to put in place.

So, back in 2017, we, in earnest, put forth these one-on-one, dedicated person-centered meetings that every supervisor would have with every person that reported to them. And this was just in the state of Pennsylvania, we did this. And so in 2017, we got a decrease in turnover by 5%, which that's great, right? You get that little decrease. Hey, we'll take any decrease.

If you don't have turnover issues, I want to meet with you. That's awesome because I want to learn from you. But most of us experience turnover issues. So that was 2017. And then 2018-- so now we're into the second year of really trying. We trained everybody on, how do you do this? And we did all that in 2016. So when we rolled it out in 2017, people had that information. So in 2018, we got a decrease of 6%, another 6% that year. Yay, that was great, right?

But then what was really interesting is that in 2019, we got a 17% decrease. So that was huge. So we went-- we did 5%, we did 6%, and then all of a sudden, we went 17%. And we sort of asked ourselves, well, that's interesting. Why might that be? And one of the things that we really thought about was people started to trust the process. Because when you first start, you go from doing whatever kind of supervision that we're doing, and none of it's bad.

It's great that we're supervising folks and helping them grow, but to a system that's really very kind of prescriptive in a sense that you're being very frequent and intentional with these meetings. And they're always scheduled, and that's key.

So it took a couple of years for, I think, people to trust the system, both on the side of the supervisor and the team member. And so we got more compliance with supervisors doing it and staff realizing that, oh, this is good. Like, they do want to support me. This is helpful for me, and it started to sort of catch on. And so in that third year, we got a really nice decrease in turnover. So that was great. That was Pennsylvania.

So now in Maryland, we did not start rolling this out until 2019. And I just have one year of data here because then we had the pandemic, and things changed a little bit.

So, first year out of the gate in Maryland, in 2019, we got a decrease of 12%. So that was interesting too. And we sort of attributed, at least in part, to the fact that in Pennsylvania-- and these programs are close. They're sort of on the border of Maryland, on the border of Pennsylvania. They're right near each other. Team members do go back and forth. So the ones who work in Maryland sub in Pennsylvania. And they were exposed to it, and they heard people talking about it.

And they saw it happening because a supervisor might be having a meeting with somebody, and they're working, and they're like, ooh, what's going on here? So they had more exposure, and it didn't take them as long to trust it because they were talking to their colleagues about it. So that was one thing that we thought about. But first year out of the gate, getting a 12% decrease was a home run for us. We were really, really excited about that.

JESSICA SHORT: That's great. And I mean, I think the fact that these agencies just started talking about it and started to put a focus on it and measure it--

GINA BRELESKY: Yes.

JESSICA SHORT: And then you can improve, right?

GINA BRELESKY: That's right.

JESSICA SHORT: If you don't have data, you don't know what to improve on.

GINA BRELESKY: That's right. You're absolutely right. When we measure things, those are the things that we focus on because we have that metric in our mind. And we know-- and it really sends that message. If we're doing all this training to train people up on how to be person-centered supervisors, how do we coach up our staff, and what does it look like, what is that framework for this model of supervision, what does it look like, and then what do I say when I'm in there, all of that, that takes time.

And if the agency is dedicated to doing that, that sends a message in itself. And over time, people start to believe that, yeah, this is the way we're supposed to act. This is our culture now. And it does. It takes time. It takes a few years to really get it ingrained in that culture. But this organization was very dedicated to it, and they never really took their foot off the gas.

And there were setbacks, of course. We had a pandemic. But even in that, if you think about all the stress and craziness that went on during that time, I'm not sure where we would have ended up if we didn't have this forum for people. Thank goodness that we put it in place before that happened because it gave people that safe space to have the conversations with their supervisors. And that was a really important thing during such a high stress time.

JESSICA SHORT: You're absolutely right. So I have a question.

GINA BRELESKY: Sure.

JESSICA SHORT: When you're working with agencies and you're teaching and training them on how to do this, the idea of setting up an agenda and the idea of what am I supposed to talk to my staff about, do you have a framework that you start off with with agencies?

GINA BRELESKY: Yeah. I mean, it's, again, nothing new or earth-shattering. Probably lots of people are already doing this, and they just haven't put that sort of frame around it yet. But, again, focused on the team member. And I will tell you that when you first start this process, there's often a good number of team members who are not comfortable with it because, one, they've never maybe done it before. And they're like, oh, why are they meeting with me so often and asking me to bring an agenda and do all this?

So that's why I said earlier that we have to sometimes model that for them. And so we always want to come prepared with an agenda that still focuses on that team member. So even though they might not know what to ask you or what to say, we can ask them so we can start by talking about things around professional development, things that they've accomplished or things that they would love to accomplish over the next few months, something they want to learn, something maybe that they're struggling with and just want to get better at or something they're great at. And we could tap into that, and they can do something fun with that, maybe help others.

We could also talk about recent wins or successes, whether that's programmatically or with someone in specific that they're supporting. We can look at if there's support needed for specific kinds of challenges that they're having, again, whether that's a challenge they're having with a team member or a challenge they're having with somebody that they support. So any of that kind of stuff-- their interests, their ideas.

And then letting them know that part of the process is to follow up. So if there's anything that you have that you'll follow up on as the supervisor, there might be something they're going to follow up on. And then you'll always discuss that the next time and letting them know that we'll come back prepared with that.

And then as they catch on, the goal would really be to have them kind of come in with their agenda. And that's what's important, getting them to that point. But you're always modeling that, certainly, in the beginning. So those are the kind of things that we start with. And then once they catch on, they're going to bring you whatever they bring you. And so then you won't have to worry too much about what the agenda is because it really is their meeting, and that's important.

I usually say plan that 30 minutes weekly if at all possible or as frequently as you can. And you come prepared with that agenda. And you may or may not get to that agenda that you bring because it's their meeting. Now, you bring it because there may be time. So sometimes we start off with them talking 15 minutes and you talking 15 minutes. If that works, that's great. In the beginning, you might be talking more. But the goal is that the supervisor talks a lot less in this meeting. It really should be the team member who talks much more in this meeting.

And you'll get there. You'll get there eventually. If we keep plugging away and they keep seeing and then they start to trust that, oh, yeah, it is really about me, they'll start to bring things, right? So it is their meeting. So if there are other things that you need to talk about-- maybe there's a project they're running or working on or something, and you need to follow up on that-- that's a separate time. This is truly the meeting for them.

If we're talking about increasing performance and increasing retention, this is the meeting that we're doing that in. It is a focused, intentional meeting for that person. And yes, this takes time. And I know we're all super, super busy. And we always get that pushback, and we can talk about that in a second. But just to clarify that separate meetings are the meetings where we're following up on a project or anything else that you have to do. This is their meeting. So I hope that makes sense.

JESSICA SHORT: Yeah. I mean, I think that when you're thinking about it, working with the individual on who they are within the organization, who they want to grow into—

GINA BRELESKY: Yes.

JESSICA SHORT: --how they want to grow professionally.

GINA BRELESKY: Yeah.

JESSICA SHORT: And then a staff meeting stuff would be a staff meeting stuff. Like, what's going on within the organization? What's going on within the program that needs to happen? So I think it makes total sense. But I can definitely see how in the beginning, there could be some pushback.

GINA BRELESKY: Oh, absolutely. Yeah.

JESSICA SHORT: Whether it's from the supervisor who-- I mean, you get different types of supervisors. Some supervisors who are really open that want to connect with their staff, other supervisors who may have a hard time making those connections and not knowing how to do that. But then also from staff too.

GINA BRELESKY: Absolutely.

JESSICA SHORT: You get staff who maybe have had bad experiences and have only seen supervisors call them into meetings because, uh-oh, what happened?

GINA BRELESKY: 100%.

JESSICA SHORT: So I can see how there could be some pushback in the beginning.

GINA BRELESKY: And you're absolutely right. It happens every time. And I don't want people to think, oh, that won't happen to me. It probably will happen. And, again, you're really on point with it could be the supervisor feeling one of those ways and/or the team member feeling one of those ways. And so, yeah, so you will get pushback when you ask people to do this.

It's taking on something else. And so there there's going to be some sort of short-term pain for sure. And then hopefully over time, we will see that gain in the long run. But we are going to have to think differently in the beginning because this is one of those systems that if we put this in place and we do it well over time, we will see the benefits of it.

And so there's a couple of things that we get pushback on. One, oftentimes I'll hear, I feel like I'm micromanaging my team because I see them all the time. I work with them all the time. Like, another meeting with them? I have a staff meeting, and I see them in the hallway, and we talk about these things or whatever. It's really the opposite of micromanaging.

Because if you think about a micromanaging relationship, it's very intrusive, that the supervisor's hovering or taking over. They're just constantly over you. They're not trusting you to do it yourself, whatever it is. So it's very intrusive. And this is really the opposite of that. This is, I trust you to do these things. And what you need me for, as long as-- we're not talking about emergencies. That's a whole separate thing. But if things come up, they'll be on your agenda, and we'll talk about them every week.

So we'll have this flow, and I won't need to interrupt your work. I won't need to run over every time I think of something as the supervisor, or the opposite, if it's the team member coming to the supervisor. They know they have this dedicated time. And so they don't need to constantly be on top of each other or emailing or doing all of that. They just have a system for it. So it's really the opposite of micromanaging.

The other thing that's huge is I just don't have time to meet every week. And absolutely, we're all busy. And if I were to look at my calendar next week, this week, I probably couldn't fit in another meeting either. Like, you just can't.

So, a couple of things with time. And the research really does bear this out that a 30-minute scheduled meeting weekly had the greatest impact on performance and retention. And, look, if we can't do 30 minutes every week in the beginning, then I always say, just start where you can, right? So if you could do it every other week, fine. Start there, with the goal maybe being every week and figuring that system out.

And we have people that work all sorts of shifts. So there may be a shift where meeting every other week is actually really OK with that shift, that person. If it's maybe an overnight person or something, maybe that's OK. Maybe it's not. I'm just throwing that out there that it could be. And maybe somebody else you do have to meet with every week. Who knows? But start somewhere.

And the other thing with time is, like I said, if I tried to put a meeting on my calendar this week or next week, I'd be hard pressed to find a time. But if I look out four weeks, then I probably have some openings. I probably am not quite as booked four weeks out. Maybe I am. Maybe I'm not. But I have a much better chance of starting this system if I start it four, even five weeks from now. And that gives me the prep time to also talk in a staff meeting about what this new system might look like and why we're doing it and why it's so important for us to meet together and how we want to support our team members.

So it gives that lead-up time. People can ask questions. And we can book it further out when we might have a little more space in our calendar. So the trick is to start somewhere, whether it's weekly, every other week, whatever you can do, I mean, even if it's monthly. I would just encourage you to do it more frequently when you can, when you can get that system going just because the data really does support that. And just don't throw up your hands and say, I'll never be able to do it. Really just take a stab at it, and try and put that on your calendar.

JESSICA SHORT: And really, there are some staff that may just go up to their supervisors. That might be a personality thing too. You might have staff that feel more comfortable and are a little more extroverted. But then what happens to the more introverted staff?

GINA BRELESKY: Right.

JESSICA SHORT: Do they just not get that time because they didn't go up to their-- but now with this, the supervisor can dedicate time. So it's not just the extroverts that are getting the supervisor's time.

GINA BRELESKY: That's right.

JESSICA SHORT: But now the introverts can have that time from their supervisor, too, because it's dedicated time. So I love that. I love that.

GINA BRELESKY: Yeah, that's a great point.

JESSICA SHORT: I am definitely-- depending on the supervisor. And there might be-- [LAUGHS] and depending on the relationship that you have with the supervisor, you may feel comfortable. But there have definitely been supervisors that I've had in my past that I did not feel comfortable just opening a conversation up with.

GINA BRELESKY: Yeah. I love that point. And to that point, like you said before, we have staff meetings. There's going to be people that don't speak up in those meetings. So you're exactly right. So giving them that forum to have a voice. Again, people want to be seen. They want to be heard. They want to feel valued. And this is how we can help with that. And when we are that-- when we feel that in a place, why would we want to leave?

JESSICA SHORT: Do you also suggest or have you seen agencies do a combination of in-person and virtual?

GINA BRELESKY: Oh, yes. Absolutely, absolutely. In fact, the organization that I was using as my example before does that, obviously, since COVID and was forced to do everything online. Now they've kind of developed a healthy respect for that virtual environment. And actually, have learned they're very good at being able to manage the virtual environment, feel comfortable in it. So absolutely being able to do a combination.

And it's kind of interesting too. I think sometimes when we have some virtual meetings-- and I don't know if you've ever felt like this, but I certainly have, where I'll meet with somebody virtually. And I've been a coach in a virtual environment since way before COVID, so in the days like we were using Webex and some other things, like a long, long time ago, and being able to do that.

But then when you see the person in-person or in real life, like we call it now, it's almost, like, so cool. Like, oh, my gosh. Like, I don't know. It feels even better sometimes when you-- I don't know. Is it that absence makes the heart grow fonder thing? I don't know. But we see each other in-person on Zoom. But when we finally get to be in real life, it's almost like we've been-- I don't know-- like we've been missing it. So it's, like, so awesome to see that person in real life. I don't know. That's my experience.

JESSICA SHORT: No, I completely agree. It's almost like you get that celebrity feeling almost. Like, I've been seeing you on screen, and I now you're in real life.

GINA BRELESKY: That's right.

JESSICA SHORT: And you've already got this developed relationship started.

GINA BRELESKY: That's right. Yeah. So I think the blended is sort of a great strategy. And if that works, I think that's wonderful.

JOYCE JELLEY: Excellent. We've probably already touched on this somewhat. But how can using person-centered supervision improve the supports that people receive?

GINA BRELESKY: Yeah. So when we're doing this model with our team members, we're actually modeling for them. So we're modeling ways of asking great questions. We're modeling ways of problem solving or how to draw people out so they can share information, develop that psychological safety. Being able to model that and actually have our team members experience it, we can relate it back.

Like, here's the conversation you and I had. Is there something in that that would be useful for you to take away now and use with this person that you're supporting? So as things come up, I think being able to link it back to, here's how you and I have been working together. Can you use some of the way that we've been working in this person-centered supervision as a guide for doing something as you meet with this person that you're supporting?

So, I think it sets up a nice dynamic in terms of the supervisor relationship but also how that person can then take that forward and create that with the person that they're supporting. The other thing that it does - so that's sort of just the modeling piece. But, again, you're giving the team member the opportunity to discuss things in a safe environment about the people they're supporting.

So, if I'm struggling with somebody, I don't have to worry. Like, I don't want to sound stupid, so I'm not going to bring it up. Well, if I don't bring it up, then that person may not be getting served in a way or supported in a way that they really need to be because I'm afraid to look stupid. I feel like I don't have somebody I can go to. So that sort of hinders the way that person might work with that individual.

So, we create the forum, and we can share ideas or training or, hey, this person's great at that. I'm so glad you brought it up. I'm going to send you to this person. You guys can work together, and you can see how that person supports the individual they're with. So, we can tackle problems or deal with issues, talk about challenges. All of that is going to help that team member to be a better support person.

JESSICA SHORT: That's great. And I think, Joyce, you and I talk about this in the supervisor trainings that we do. In person-centered supervision, it really sounds like exactly what you said, Gina, about modeling, modeling support and showing staff that they are supported and what support looks like and so that they can move that forward or pay it forward and do it in the work that they're doing and provide support because they've seen it. They feel it.

GINA BRELESKY: Yes. And it's so much more powerful, Jessica. If you think about what you just said, they've seen it and they feel it versus just sitting in a training learning about it. So we can certainly train people on it, which is great. And we have to do that, of course. They have to understand it.

But to experience it is when the light bulb moment happens. It's like, oh, that's what you mean. That's what it feels like to be supported in this way. Or, oh, that's what it means when you are trying to explore

what's important to me. Those are the types of questions you ask. Now I get it, that kind of thing. So you're spot on there for sure.

JESSICA SHORT: The other thing, too, is I think with these meetings, you're really empowering staff to take on their own professional development and discuss it and take an interest in their career. And that idea of empowerment is also something that we constantly talk about when we're working with individuals to empower the individuals that we're supporting. But if staff doesn't even feel empowered, how can they support individuals in being empowered? So, I think this is such a great model for that.

GINA BRELESKY: Yeah. No, you're absolutely right. We want people to have that control over their destiny. We want them to talk about, this is really important to me, and I need help getting there, whatever it is. So yeah, you're absolutely right. I love that. I love that you made that connection.

JESSICA SHORT: Thanks for being here. This was really great information and bringing it all together.

GINA BRELESKY: Well, thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it.

JOYCE JELLEY: Thank you so much, Gina.

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