Supporting Early Career Staff in Today's Context

November 18, 2025

CHANGE IMPACT

Introduction

Today's early career staff entered the workforce at a time unlike any before. Members of Generation Z are beginning their professional lives in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, racial justice uprisings, increasing political polarization, and the constant influence of digital media. These conditions affect how they view and experience work, equity, and leadership.

While we do not want to make assumptions or generalizations based on age, we recognize the very real conditions shaping the current generation of early career staff: economic precarity, shifting workplace norms, and heightened attention to wellness and inclusion. These factors are reflected in rising turnover trends, with 31% of Gen Z employees planning to switch jobs within the next six months, up from 25% in 2024[1]. At Change Impact, our review of turnover data for 1,600 staff found that approximately 50% were no longer working for the same organization after two years[2].

Supervisors who understand how these factors influence motivation and retention are better positioned to create environments where younger staff can thrive, both in their current role and as they advance in their careers. The goal is to ensure that younger staff feel included, respected, and prepared to contribute fully to the important work of youth development. This paper reviews the context surrounding early career staff, and a set of coaching topics and approaches to support them.

[1] State of the Workplace 2025, TriNet.
[2] Dual Impact: A Vision for Developing the Out-of-School Time Workforce, Change Impact 2024.

Context Shaping Today's Early Career Staff

The pandemic disrupted traditional career starts.

Many young professionals entered the workforce remotely, missing out on in-person mentoring, shadowing, and informal learning. This created gaps in confidence and familiarity with workplace culture that supervisors may need to fill intentionally.

Social movements raised expectations for equity.

Renewed calls for racial justice in recent years, along with attention to gender equity, LGBTQ+ rights, and accessibility considerations, have reshaped what inclusion looks like. Personal and professional identities are no longer necessarily distinct. Anecdotally, we have learned that younger staff tend to expect organizations to apply their values actively and respond visibly to current events.

We know more about brain development.

The prefrontal cortex, which supports impulse control and prioritization, is still maturing in early adulthood. Additionally, high and sustained levels of cortisol caused by chronic stress can reduce activity in the prefrontal cortex by up to 30%, impairing attention, decision-making, and emotional regulation.[3] Through supportive supervision, organizations foster a culture where staff strengthen their competencies and evolve in their roles, approaching developmental needs as part of continuous improvement, not as deficiencies.

Mental health and belonging are critical.

Today's early career professionals are more open and candid about mental health, and they expect their workplaces to acknowledge and support well-being explicitly. Across the nonprofit sector, 95% of leaders cite staff burnout as a major

[3] "Stress signalling pathways that impair prefrontal cortex structure and function" Yale Stress Center, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (Arnsten, 2009)

concern, and more than half of nonprofit leaders report challenges retaining employees under age 30.[4] Nearly one in five nonprofit employees leaves their organization each year, underscoring how issues of inclusion and belonging are not simply cultural aspirations, but are essential to workforce stability. Belonging is more than social connection; it is a foundation for engagement and retention. When staff feel excluded or unseen, they are far more likely to disengage or move on, especially in environments already strained by burnout, salary competition, and financial stress.

Coaching Early Career Staff with an Equity Lens

Supervisors can respond to these realities without lowering expectations by leveraging strategies and resources like those found in our **Supervising Early Career Staff with an Equity Lens Toolkit.** In fact, the combination of support and expectations is what best prepares staff for success within and beyond the workplace. **Four priorities for coaching early career staff stand out:**

1. Balance care and accountability.

Support staff with wellness resources and flexibility where possible while also providing clear, consistent expectations. One without the other is not sustainable. Moreover, be transparent about what is required by law and what is discretionary. Consistency prevents inequities and strengthens trust.

> ⚡ **Tip:** Review The Management Center's **Guidelines for Giving Feedback with Care**[5] to apply a human-centered framework in feedback discussions.

[4] Nonprofit Quarterly, "Burnout and Staffing Shortages Continue to Challenge Nonprofits" July 2, 2024.
[5] The Management Center, "Give Better Feedback with CSAW" August 16, 2021.

2. Help staff navigate authenticity and professionalism.

Help staff bring their whole selves to work while understanding organizational norms. Recognize and name bias when it shows up in expectations around dress, language, or behavior, while helping them to understand how to show up at work in a way that showcases their skills and competencies.

> ⚡ **Tip:** This guidance[6] from Harvard Business Review on giving feedback about appearances helps ensure concerns are not informed by bias.

3. Encourage healthy self-advocacy.

Model advocacy yourself and make it clear that staff input is valued. Structured opportunities for feedback ensure that advocacy strengthens the team rather than creating tension. Developing the skill of pushing back or asking for something while maintaining appropriateness is an important early career lesson.

> ⚡ **Tip:** Watch Jeff Su[7] discuss how to advocate for a promotion at work as an example of self-advocacy, and discuss what the team learns.

4. Create intentional, explicit opportunities for staff to grow.

Ensure workshops, coaching resources, and stretch projects are shared with all staff consistently, as junior staff may not always know how to navigate professional learning, mentoring, and other opportunities to grow. Preparing staff to own their development journey creates a culture of care and growth mindset for sustainable self-determination.

---

[6] Harvard Business Review, "How to Give an Employee Feedback About Their Appearance," May 26, 2017.
[7] Jeff Su, "5 Steps to Get Your Next Promotion at Work!" Dec 6, 2022.

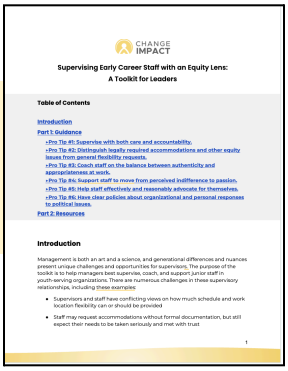
⚡ **Tip:** Share the [Individual PD Plan][8] from Change Impact with all staff, and hold regular check-ins to document progress.

Looking Ahead

Early career staff are not a monolith. What unites them is the fact that they are entering the workforce during extraordinary circumstances, with unique social, cultural, and developmental factors at play. Recognizing this is not about stereotyping based on age; it is about being responsive to real needs.

When supervisors take these realities seriously, they send a powerful message: Early career staff are not just welcome in the youth development workforce, they are essential to its future. With the right support, younger staff can step into their roles with confidence and purpose, carrying forward the values of inclusion, equity, and care that the field depends on.

For more strategies and resources, explore our [Supervising Early Career Staff with an Equity Lens Toolkit].


CHANGE IMPACT

Supervising Early Career Staff with an Equity Lens:
A Toolkit for Leaders

Table of Contents

Introduction
Part 1: Guidance
- Pro Tip #1: Supervise with both care and accountability.
- Pro Tip #2: Distinguish legally required accommodations and other equity issues from general flexibility requests.
- Pro Tip #3: Coach staff on the balance between authenticity and appropriateness at work.
- Pro Tip #4: Support staff to move from perceived indifference to passion.
- Pro Tip #5: Help staff effectively and reasonably advocate for themselves.
- Pro Tip #6: Have clear policies about organizational and personal responses to political issues.

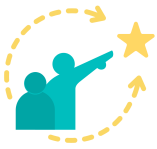
Part 2: Resources

Introduction

Management is both an art and a science, and generational differences and nuances present unique challenges and opportunities for supervisors. The purpose of the toolkit is to help managers best supervise, coach, and support junior staff in youth-serving organizations. There are numerous challenges in these supervisory relationships, including these examples:

- Supervisors and staff have conflicting views on how much schedule and work location flexibility can or should be provided
- Staff may request accommodations without formal documentation, but still expect their needs to be taken seriously and met with trust

1



[8]Change Up Learning | Change Impact, *Professional Development Plan Template*, 2024.

About Change Impact

Change Impact is a capacity-building organization with specialized experience in education, youth development, and workforce development. Since launching in April 2017, Change Impact has trained over 60,000 professionals, raised $240 million in grants, and designed strategies for more than 140 partners. Change Impact is a certified minority- and woman-owned business (M/WBE). In 2021, Change Impact launched Change Up Learning, an equity-driven online training platform for youth work professionals and educators, with live and self-paced courses designed to deepen learning, bolster professional habits, and support career pathways. Change Up Learning is approved by most states to provide required training for child care, after-school, and education professionals. To learn more, email info@changeimpact.net.