

C H A P T E R 1

Flexibility - The key word for survival

The word “flexible” as defined by Learner’s Dictionary (www.learnersdictionary.com, 2019) is “...capable of bending, easily changed, able to change or to do different things, and willing to change or to try different things”.

It would seem that if you were to cross-reference PSST in the dictionary, the definition would be the same.

If there is no other quality in a PSST that is required, that of flexibility should be mandatory. For, in order to survive, keep your wits about you, and maintain your professionalism, it is a key component to possess. Even when I interviewed prospective SLPs (speech-language pathologist), if I did not

sense flexibility in their demeanor, the interview was short and sweet. One can learn the specific tasks of a job, however, if one does not have flexibility, you only establish barriers to your work setting for yourself (and your sanity rapidly disappears)!

When working in the public schools, you must be able to shift roles in a heartbeat! If a child comes to you for speech and all of a sudden a personal problem arises, counselor mode sets in. In the public schools the luxury of a social worker, guidance counselor, or principal being available at the moment the child needs them is slim to none.

I remember one time, and it only happened once, that I was told I would be testing in the boiler room due to the limited amount of space in the building. Now at first thought my flexible mind is thinking, well it will be away from all of the classroom hustle, there won't be a lot of disturbances since the bell didn't ring in that area, but it only took me one time to agree before I realized that was not going to happen again. I would test in my car if need be. See, the boiler room had poor lighting (that is an understatement), it was the dead of winter (so the furnace was running constantly), the janitor did not like me invading his space (I decided he could claim

that all for himself), and it was also the area that staff back then, would go to have a smoke break. We sat on the floor, the student and I with a sheet under us for approximately fifteen minutes, until we began to get looks from staff and the janitor. I calmly took the child back to his classroom, thanked the janitor for his space, and went straight to the principal and politely said that if you needed additional students tested for speech therapy, the parents would have to transport them to another school, or he would have to find a more suitable area for me to work in. The next time I got a referral to test, there was a note attached to it stating that I would be working in the office off of the library...that went better than I expected.

I can't tell you how many times I was "nudged" out of my space. Now there was a schedule hanging outside every door in every building I ever worked at, and yet oftentimes I would show up to do therapy and either someone or a group would be in my space when I needed it. I learned over the years that typically going to the principal doesn't change anything. It didn't matter who it was, I was always the one to move temporarily. So I would be the "gracious" staff member, the FLEXIBLE staff member that would move to another area of the building for just that day. Unfortunately, those days

happened a lot. This generally resulted in my groups moving to the hall, gym, library, front office, or any other place I could land.

I think one of the ironic twists that occurred ninety percent of the time was that when they were finished with the space, no one ever came to tell me I could move back in. Now you might think I was a pushover, but having the least amount of time in a building just causes that kind of domino effect.

Another test of flexibility usually came from teaching staff asking after about two to three months into the schedule for the school year, if I could change my time, or heaven forbid my day of therapy for their kids. This is a true test of being flexible or standing your ground. See, teaching staff unless you have been around for a while really have no idea what your teaching assignment is or how many schools you have. So a combination of communicating and standing up for your self-worth is generally in order. Now you might be able to move a student from one group to another, but AM vs. PM, or another day is way beyond your switching group. You need to be flexible.

I loved when the teachers would tell me that the grouping was not going to work for their schedules. "I need you to

move these particular students to the students already in my class.” What they sometimes didn’t understand was that that particular student was coming for fluency or voice therapy. Now if I was doing articulation and/or language therapy, I was pretty good at combining both skills into one therapy session, but the last thing I wanted to do is put a child with fluency issues or a voice issue in with kids that don’t have that issue. So it usually took a little mini training session with the teacher to help him/her understand why a particular student was coming individually instead of in a group. You know, there was always part of me that wanted to say, “Listen, I don’t group your reading or math groups based on skill level, that is your expertise. So please respect my skill level when it comes to communication skills and let me do what I need to do for my students to be successful”. However, I never said that, just thought it...

Also, when it comes to flexibility, it was always nice if it could work both ways on occasion with teaching staff. When I would enter a school system, back in the day, I would do my best to try to work with the teachers and set up. Unfortunately they always wanted the kids to be missing PE, music, or art. Another suggestion was to take them during lunch. Now even

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though that is hopefully their social time with peers and an opportunity for them to use their communication skills, I did not want to work with kids in speech while they were eating! I have even had them say "...have the kids come before school or stay after school". Now, for those of you who have ever, ever, pulled a student out of a special, it is very unfair and totally not ok with the kids. I feel as though I died many times from looks by kids. Not only that, but when you were able to get them to come with you, they certainly weren't going to be happy about it and were not going to perform. See children can refuse to be flexible, but PSSTs, not so much.