



THE ART OF SUPERVISION

By ROBERT B. DOWNS*

When I was first asked to talk on the art of supervision, my immediate reaction was that I couldn't think of any subject about which I know less. In the course of writing various and sundry books and articles, and preparing speeches on a multiplicity of subjects, I did not recall

ever having previously mentioned the word "supervision." It had always seemed to me to be a term reserved for high-powered personnel officers, superintendents of large school systems, and civil service executives — all of whom I hold in great awe.

But then it was pointed out to me that for the past twenty-nine years, as a college and university librarian, I have been engaged in the practice of supervision. The idea struck me with as much surprise as did the revelation to Moliere's bourgeois gentleman that he had been speaking prose all his life without realizing it.

Anyway, it was hinted that if I hadn't learned something about supervision after more than a generation of practicing it, there could be some question as to how my time had been spent. So, as the celebrated detective, M. Hercule Poirot, is accustomed to remark, perhaps the "little gray cells" should be put to work.

In the process of cerebration, I have reviewed in my mind both my own experience and observations of the work of other administrators. I have tried to sort out principles of effective supervision — what contributed to the success of the organization's operations, and what had proven undesirable, or even downright injurious, in practice.

The primary purpose of supervision, as I interpret it, is to accomplish certain ends. In order to achieve those objectives, one must, for better or worse, work through people. That's where the complexities begin, for as Charles Darwin discovered in studying the origin of species a century ago, no two individuals in the animal kingdom are ever exactly alike. If some way could be found to function without people, life for supervisors and administrators would be vastly simplified. But in that event, it is likely the supervisors wouldn't be needed either.

Assuming, then, that people are here to stay, and we shall have to learn to live with them, and perchance even to like them, let's examine some of the trade secrets, the important principals of supervision that may help to make the job easier.

1. Key-word number one in my book is *Availability*. A top-notch supervisor should never tuck himself away behind closed doors in an office, to be seen only on formal appointment, made two weeks in advance. As a minimum, he ought to maintain an open-door policy, allowing anyone who thinks he has business important to bring to the boss' attention to walk right in and get it off his chest. Inevitably, some of your time will be wasted by bores, by people who stay too long and talk too much, but I am convinced of the essential soundness of the principle.

Even better than the open-door policy is a circulation policy. How easy it is to become bogged down in office routine, correspondence, and committee meetings,

*Dr. Downs, a native of Lenoir and former librarian at the University of North Carolina, is now director of libraries at the University of Illinois. This address, delivered at the annual meeting of the College and University Libraries Division of the Oklahoma Library Association on April 12, 1953, is reprinted through the courtesy of the *Oklahoma Librarian*.

and never stir out of one's office. I know, because I am often guilty. Either your staff must come to you, like Mahomet to the mountain, or you never lay eyes on them. Soon you are virtually strangers, a gulf of misunderstanding may grow up between you, and the staff will be persuaded you have no interest in getting acquainted with it or in its activities. Circulation involves some wasted hours, as does the open door, but it also pays rich dividends. Get out and visit the various divisions of your organization as frequently as possible, get to know what individual members of the group are doing, be able to call them by name, and observe operations at first hand. You will, as a consequence, be a far more intelligent and efficient supervisor.

In making yourself available, please forget the sacred cow called "channels." If a member of your staff wants to talk to you, presumably he or she wants *you*, and not one of your assistant supervisors. I am not implying you should go over the heads of other persons in a chain of command, but I do insist on the inalienable right of everybody in the organization to discuss his problems with any administrative officer. The matter of decisions is another question. "Channels" is a term we have taken over from government and military circles, and it is an administrative convenience. We should not, however, allow it to become a straightjacket, with the Lowells speaking only to the Cabots and the Cabots speaking only to God.

The principle of availability, of course, includes the willingness to lend an ear. One of the supervisor's most essential duties is to be a good listener. Be prepared to hear sympathetically grievances of any kind, to listen to expressions of opinion as to how the organization might be improved, and to ideas for new projects. And I mean *listen*. It is extremely irritating for a person with a definite problem to discuss to meet with his superior officer, and then to have the conversation monopolized, with little opportunity to present his point of view. Some administrators are so enraptured by the sound of their own voices that a conference with them is likely to turn into a lecture. If a staff member is allowed to open his mouth in such cases, there are so many interruptions, contradictions, and questions that he cannot tell a connected story. I have found, personally, that it is much more rewarding to listen than to talk. There is always a possibility one will learn something of value.

2. The second key-word, after *Availability*, is *Recognition*. The most concrete form of recognition, naturally, is an adequate salary, with suitable merit increases, whenever the budget permits and with status suitable to responsibilities of the position. But, important as those things are, they are not enough. The staff member almost invariably craves appreciation and praise for a job well done. No salary check can ever fully take the place of a sincere expression of commendation for one's accomplishments. The knowledge that your work is valued by your superiors, that they realize your performance is top-notch, and are grateful for your contributions to the success of the organization, is worth more than money can buy. I do not mean fulsome and meaningless flattery, but genuine and intelligent appreciation, with evidence that the supervisor understands what and why he is commending. Properly used, praise is the most powerful tool at the supervisor's command for getting a job well done, and for maintaining high morale. People are important to themselves, and should always be considered as individuals, not as cogs in a big machine. It is never amiss to build up their egos, and to increase their pride in themselves and their work. A word of praise brings a lift, a feeling of happiness, and a brightness to days that might otherwise be dark and discouraging.

A basic side of recognition, of course, is to give credit when credit is due. The administrator or supervisor who attempts to claim sole credit for new ideas, successful innovations, a smooth-functioning organization, and all other achievements, is probably nursing a large inferiority complex. He certainly will not win the esteem or loyalty

of his associates. After all, he is only one member of a team, and a successful team requires the cooperation of every player.

I have known cases of administrators who deliberately refused to employ persons with educational or other qualifications superior to their own, for fear of being overshadowed and outshone. Such an attitude seems to me completely ridiculous. In my view, the more outstanding people one can have in an organization, the more brilliant it will appear to the world at large, and the more glory will be reflected on the persons at the top. My theory is to go out and find the very best staff members procurable, to stimulate them to produce their best work, encourage them to be fertile with ideas, to use their talents to the utmost advantage of the organization, and then to give private and public recognition of their contributions.

One of the greatest university librarians we have ever had in the United States scarcely ever, I believe, had an original idea. He was extraordinarily skillful, however, in surrounding himself with able colleagues and building upon their ideas. He could sort out the sound from the faulty, or we might say "screwball," proposals, and then bring his administrative ability to bear to put the good ideas into effective operation. Thus by full utilization of the talents of capable associates, he not only developed a great library, but in the process established an international reputation for himself. Because he never hesitated to accord full credit to everyone associated with him, the widespread respect, loyalty, and devotion among those who have worked with him are truly remarkable.

3. After *Availability* and *Recognition*, the third key principle in supervision, I think, is *Responsibility*. In an organization of any size, it is a physical impossibility for any one person to keep tab on every detail of operation, no matter how efficient or hard-working he is, or how many hours he spends in his office. Even to attempt such perfect control is inviting a nervous breakdown, not only of the supervisor but also of his staff members, for he will drive them crazy, too.

The alternative is for the supervisor to assign as much authority and responsibility as may be needed. If one has followed the policy recommended of appointing the most highly qualified people one can find and can afford, it would be an injustice to them not to give them free rein to get their work done in their own way. Perhaps I can illustrate the point by citing two horrible examples. At one time, I worked with a university librarian who had an insatiable love of detail and routine. He would go into the catalog department and personally inspect every card being produced. He went to the marking division to check on bookplates and call numbers. In the order department, he ran through the records of books being ordered and examined those received. Similar procedures were followed in the circulation, reference, periodical, and other departments. Staff members soon gained the impression that he was spying on them, and lacked faith in their judgments. They lost respect for him as well as confidence in themselves.

Another illustration is the case of the director of one of the nation's principal university libraries, with a large staff, a book collection of more than a million volumes, and an annual budget well in excess of a million dollars. He, likewise, was convinced that this great organization would fold up and collapse if he didn't keep a finger on everything that went on. Books requested by departmental librarians for transfer from the main library, for instance, were rolled in on a truck for the director's personal inspection, to decide whether the transfer would be approved. He regularly worked twelve to fourteen hours each day, trying to stay on top of the mountain of routine that constantly threatened to engulf him. Meanwhile, there was no time left for important faculty contacts, for getting acquainted with his staff, for the formulation of broad plans for the library's future development, for participation in the activities

of professional associations, or for filling the leadership role expected of a person in such a major position.

So we come back to the alternative: Find the right person and make him responsible for getting the job done. It is probable that he will need direction and guidance, especially at first, but if he is competent, he should be able to carry on without minute checking. Force him to stand on his own feet, to make routine decisions without taking the supervisor's time, develop his self-confidence. Like an orchestra, every member has an instrument or a part to play, while the supervisor's job is to wield the baton. If there is a sour note, it will soon be evident where it is coming from and corrective measures can be taken. Much more disastrous it would be for the director to take over and attempt to play all the instruments by himself. There will be much noise, but little harmony.

In my estimation, the best library system, or any other type of organization, is the one which requires a minimum of supervision. This condition can be brought about by proper delegation of authority and responsibility. Where it exists, it is a sign that we have found the right people for the right jobs.

4. The fourth key-word in my supervision vocabulary is *Information*. "Communications" is a term much in vogue these days, and it has some very practical applications to supervision. All of us like to feel that we are on the inside and that we know what is going on. We want to have a sense of belonging, to feel that we are partners in an important enterprise, that we belong to an institution, and it belongs to us. Therefore, we have a keen desire to be kept informed of its progress.

Actually, this is a two-way street. Not only should staff members know about policies, plans, changes, new programs, and other matters which may affect their own positions; it is equally essential for the supervisor to learn about the problems and needs of staff members. Without such two-way communication, misunderstanding, misinformation, false rumors, and poor *esprit de corps* are inevitable.

The practical machinery for getting information back and forth may take various forms. If the supervisor makes himself available as much as possible, a great deal of communication will take place through individual conferences. Individuals can also be given urgent messages by form letters. To reach larger groups, frequent staff meetings are desirable, providing there is ample time for give-and-take discussion. Staff committees to deal with matters of concern to the organization serve a similar purpose. Another medium I like is a staff news organ, preferably run by the staff rather than by the administration. A well-edited, newsy staff bulletin will be read by everyone. It can be used for official notices and announcements, but its principal function is to carry news of staff activities—for example, any honors received by members, offices to which they have been elected, participation in professional societies, and such personal items as births, marriages, vacations, and anniversaries. There should be a reporter or correspondent in every division or department to make certain no one gets overlooked.

5. My fifth key-word is *Loyalty*. If we expect loyalty from our associates, we must be loyal to them. Nothing, I think, will win the support and cooperation of your staff faster than the knowledge that you have their interests at heart. When the members deserve salary raises or promotions, I believe it is the supervisor's responsibility to go all out to obtain them. If the staff's status is unsatisfactory, work to get it changed. Whenever possible, try to improve working conditions, such as providing adequate light, ventilation, comfortable furniture, pleasant rest rooms, staff rooms, and coffee breaks. Be prepared to fight for liberal vacations, holiday allowances, sick leaves, study leaves, and generous retirement arrangements.

In connection with promotions, it is excellent policy, in my opinion, to promote from within, insofar as practicable. When vacancies occur, why save the choicest plums among staff positions for newcomers from the outside, if you have equally competent persons in line for promotion already in the organization? We have doubtless come to know the weaknesses of those with whom we associate regularly, and are not always so conscious of their strong qualities. The outsider doubtless has some weaknesses, too, that we do not learn about until later. Of course, one ought to guard against excessive inbreeding on a staff, and an infusion of new blood from time to time is wholesome. But the principle stands.

A couple of other topics I will consider more briefly.

6. Number six might be termed *Flexibility*. The supervisor's or administrator's backbone does not have to be made of rubber. A certain amount of compromise or flexibility, however, in one's makeup will accomplish wonders in oiling the administrative wheels. Too much rigidity, too many arbitrary rules, the insistence that there is only one way to do a thing, kills ambition and initiative, paralyzes new ideas, and may easily cause a staff to go dead. If a staff member wants to reorganize a reading room, prefers to take a vacation in January instead of July, asks for a leave of absence for further professional study, try to see his point of view, and if it appears reasonable, feasible, and for the good of the organization, try to arrange it. Some supervisors seem to get hardening of the mental arteries early in life, and become increasingly uncompromising and inflexible. In a way, the maintenance of the *status quo* is the easiest, simplest kind of administration, but I'll guarantee it won't bring any growth or progress.

7. Number seven might be called *Decisiveness*. This is the place where starch in the spine is essential. The successful supervisor must have the ability to arrive at a decision. The supervisor who procrastinates and vacillates, who blows hot one day and cold the next, who never seems able to make up his mind, is likely to be completely ineffective in leading and directing other people. A general with that attitude would never win a battle, regardless of the quality of his army. I have known administrators for whom it was excruciating to have to act, who struggled for days over a minor decision, and then having made it, lay awake nights wondering whether they had decided correctly. That's the way ulcers are born. These individuals should never have been given supervisory responsibilities in the first place.

You may recall the story of the soldier who was given the assignment of separating the little potatoes from the big potatoes. After several days, on the verge of a nervous breakdown, he came to his commanding officer and asked for a change of assignments. "What's the matter?" asked the officer. "You have an easy job." "I know," replied the soldier, "but these decisions are killing me."

I am not suggesting that everyone should play the big-shot executive, making decisions with split-second, machine-gun rapidity, under terrific pressure. What I am proposing is sensible, reasonable decisions, made with a fair degree of promptness, on the basis of sound information, advice from one's colleagues, and such study as may be indicated. If one cannot operate in that fashion, the probabilities are that he is misplaced as a supervisor.

Personally, the decisions I have most often regretted are those made hastily, without consultation and without fully informing all concerned. Those are the decisions most apt to be half-baked and to bring a kick-back. Generally, I have found the advice of good committees helpful, unless they are too much dominated by persons with axes to grind. And, by the way, if the administrator makes a bum decision, he shouldn't attempt to place the blame on subordinates. He is the boss, and is being paid to use his judgment and to take responsibility.

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There are, of course, other aspects of supervision worthy of discussion, but the seven mentioned I think are among the most fundamental, that is: Availability, Recognition, Responsibility, Information, Loyalty, Flexibility, and Decisiveness.

Recently, I came across a definition which seems to me to describe the ideal toward which every administrator and supervisor should aim. It is entitled "The Good Boss." It states, "You will know the good boss by the pleasant atmosphere throughout his office, his division, or his section. He gives credit ungrudgingly, frankly, and openly where credit is due. He inspires his employees with his own enthusiasm. Anyone under him can come with a problem, business or personal, with the feeling that he will be encouraged or helped. He knows how to give out the work fairly and how to value it when completed. He does not drive his people; he leads them. He knows the job thoroughly and the ability of his workers. He is alive to new methods and is eager to try out those presented by others. He makes careful progress reports on employees. He keeps nothing secret that, within limits of company policy, he can reveal to stimulate interest. He trains conscientiously, promoting as soon as he can. When employees deserve it, he fights to get them more money. He upgrades with pleasure and demotes with sorrow. He is genial and friendly, but at all times conscious that the command and responsibility are his. He keeps himself free of routine that he may cope promptly with the unexpected."¹

Such a paragon may seem unattainable in this imperfect world, but I know there are such people, and all of us with administrative and supervisory responsibilities should do our best to emulate them.

¹Tootle, H. K. *Employees Are People*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947. p. 95-96.