

# Supervising

## What they didn't teach you in library school

by Melinda Dermody and Susan Schleper

The decision to get an MLS usually is not motivated by the desire to manage or supervise people. Check out the courses provided at any ALA-accredited university program, and it's doubtful that you'll see classes that teach you how to deal with the real-life situations of being a supervisor in a library. And yet many of us out here in the real world of librarianship are asked to become supervisors overnight, often with little or no training. Here are some of the kernels of wisdom that we wish someone had told us before our responsibilities expanded from books to people.

### **I am the supervisor, right?**

It's natural to expect that you will need some confidence building when coming into a new supervisory position. Confidence as a supervisor is gained through experience and learning how to deal with people in the work environment. This is unfortunate because initially, experience is the very thing you don't have. Don't let that stop you. Make a mental note that you were hired because you are the best-qualified person to fill the position, and remind yourself of this often. Be confident that you have the skills to get the job done and that eventually you will feel comfortable taking charge.

One way to jumpstart the confidence building process is to attend a supervising workshop that can help you gather important information about personalities and people's work styles. You may find that some of these workshops, especially those sponsored by national training companies, emphasize and cover the same basic information. Remember that learning to supervise is an ongoing process, and like any skill that is improved over time and with practice, you will need to continually hone your skills.

Confidence is required to address difficult supervisory challenges, so it is well worth the time, effort, and courage to develop it. Although it is sometimes easier to put a problem on the back burner, "situations" only grow worse if they are left unaddressed. By tackling a problem early and confidently, you can often stop it from escalating.

It also takes a sense of confidence to communicate to your colleagues the fact that you are in charge. Defining your territory with your colleagues can help you visualize the actions and course you need to follow in order to achieve the goals you have for your area of responsibility. It also demonstrates to them that you can work collegially while being a confident manager.

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### **Who's got the monkey?**

Especially for an unseasoned supervisor, learning how to delegate can feel like a monkey on your back, but it is an important part of supervising. For many of us delegating is very difficult for various reasons. One reason may be that we feel we can do the job better. But the purpose of delegating is to allow you, as the supervisor, to be freed from certain tasks in order to orchestrate the direction of your area. Also, there is every possibility that the tasks you let go can be done more efficiently by those you supervise. Along with letting go of certain tasks, you should allow your staff to work in a style that is comfortable for them. When you give up a task, let it go for good.

Another reason that delegating can be difficult is that you may feel like you are imposing on your staff. But remember that ultimately, the success of the area you coordinate is your responsibility. Your training in the field and dedication to the profession have prepared you to see the big picture and will help you make decisions based on a comprehensive understanding of the library in which you work. Moreover, your employees may also share the larger sense of mission and indeed feel proud of their contributions.

As a new supervisor, be aware that your staff may inadvertently delegate tasks back to you. The literature on management calls this phenomenon "Who's got the monkey?"<sup>1</sup> If you find yourself reporting to your staff on any issue, you may find the task that you once delegated has returned to you. When staff members come to you with a legitimate problem, give them the initiative and leeway to find a solution until your direct action as a supervisor is needed. Doing this leaves the task with the appropriate person, allows you to use your time more constructively, and tells your staff that you rely on them to solve problems, as well.

### **People . . . people who need people**

By definition, supervising involves people, and it's a well known fact that people can have conflicting personalities. Something to consider as you strive toward a good working relationship with your staff is that you don't necessarily have to be their friend. Of course, the ideal situation would be to get along socially and professionally with

the people with whom you work on a daily basis. However, if that isn't feasible, settle for a good, professional working relationship. Define tasks and responsibilities based on the positions that are held by your staff, rather than on personalities. Being able to separate the personal from the professional is a very valuable skill to have as a supervisor and will gain you the respect of your staff.

When people are involved, another workplace reality is gossip—both positive and negative. It can be a good way to learn about the people with whom you work and to gain insights into the culture of the workplace. It's also possible to learn informal information without becoming involved or passing on anything that you learn. But don't repeat gossip! A good rule of thumb is to not say anything that you wouldn't want everyone to hear. Also, if you are uncomfortable with some information or topic that's being discussed, it is completely appropriate to point out your discomfort and ask that that topic be avoided.

Remember that you have an obligation to all of the individuals you supervise. Problem employees have a negative effect, so for the sake of the morale of all your employees, it is best to isolate the negativity of a problem employee as much as possible. Doing so minimizes their negative energy and helps to foster a better working environment for the others in your area. Of course, this can be a difficult task, but try to look at the big picture and think creatively to determine how best to limit the harmful impact of a difficult person on the rest of the employees for whom you are also responsible.

### **Is this thing on? Testing, one, two . . . testing . . .**

Establishing good communication is one of the best things you can do as a supervisor. Formally, regular meetings can be scheduled with your employees, and informally, you can have an open-door policy, if that is consistent with your supervisory style. Either way, it is good to keep all necessary people, including your supervisor, in the loop to ensure that everyone is getting the information they need to do their job and stay informed.

Regarding challenges, it is important to promptly communicate problems to the people involved. As further discussions develop, you may find it necessary to establish rules

of interaction, so that overly emotional or upsetting situations do not arise. Another aspect of setting up these rules may be defining what is and is not open for discussion. Remember, however, that communication is a two-way street and what you are trying to communicate may be as important as what is being communicated to you, verbally and nonverbally, so listen and watch carefully.

It is imperative to acknowledge and communicate your recognition of the hard work and successes of your staff. Positive actions and events should be recognized and encouraged. This positive encouragement can be done in a variety of ways, including informally through personal contact and formally through evaluations.

And, a final word on communication is that it is very important to clearly establish and communicate the mission of your area with employees, patrons, supervisors, and colleagues. It is this clear mission that will guide the services, resources, and responsibilities that you manage.

### **Details, details, details**

Maintaining accurate and consistent documentation is an important job of the supervisor. Make sure that employee evaluations and assessments are done on a timely basis and that they accurately reflect your employees' work and your assessment of their efforts. If an evaluation does not truly address an employee's work, then you are unfairly misleading the person, and leaving yourself without key documentation if further actions are necessary.

Goals, responsibilities, and expectations should be made very clear to the employee. If there is a problem, address it early either verbally or in writing, and keep it in your records, as well. Know and understand the human resource policies and procedures. Read the policies, union contracts, or any other documents that exist relating to your being a supervisor, from how to perform an evaluation to the steps taken for disciplinary actions. It is also helpful to have a good and knowledgeable contact in your human resources office.

Remember to keep a written record for yourself of every significant event, positive or negative, especially if you are in the midst of a challenging supervisory situation.

Sometimes your memory fails or something may not seem important at the time. Take a moment to write down a quick summary of all situations, with the date, so that you can put them out of your mind and know that they are there if and when you need them.

Finally, you must recognize the confidential nature of your supervisory position. Discussion of your employees, incidents, evaluations, and the like should be avoided with individuals not involved in their supervision. You never want your supervisory situation to become a topic of gossip, so avoid any improper discussion to which that could lead. Of course, speaking with your supervisor or a mentor may be appropriate as long as it's understood that the conversation is confidential.

### **Hello, is there anybody out there?**

Remember that even though you may feel like it, you are not the first supervisor in the process of gaining experience, so take advantage of the resources available to you. Talk to other supervisors, a mentor, colleagues, and friends who may have new and helpful perspectives. In fact, you might find a lot of help by simply talking with another supervisor in your library. They may be able to help you avoid pitfalls and give insights into the people you are supervising. A friend or family member can also be a good sounding board, even if they can't provide answers.

Most importantly, remember that being a supervisor is only one aspect of your life. Be able to walk away from the situation and put it out of your mind as much as possible when you are away from work. This may be harder than it sounds, but it is crucial in maintaining a balanced life. In fact, in walking away, you may be able to find a better perspective and maybe even some humor in the situation.

### **Ready, set, go!**

You may find supervising is one of the more challenging aspects of your job, and library school may not have prepared you for it. But, be assured that with experience comes knowledge and wisdom, and the moment you get started as a supervisor is the moment that you begin gaining experience.

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**National Library Legislative Day 2004 a success!**

National Library Legislative Day, cosponsored by the District of Columbia Library Association (DCLA) and ALA, is held every year in May to bring librarians, library trustees, board members, and other library friends to Washington, D.C. to talk with their representatives and senators about issues of concern to the library community. This year's events brought more than 500 librarians and friends of libraries from 49 states to Capitol Hill to advocate on behalf of libraries and library programs. Nearly 60 academic and research librarians attended the ACRL Legislative Luncheon on Monday, which included an advocacy session specific to their issues.

Each year ALA's Washington Office prepares information on key legislative issues for discussion with Legislative Day participants at an all-day briefing. The following day, library advocates bring our messages to their members of Congress and they cover issues, including copyright and intellectual property, appropriations and funding for library programs, and issues relating to access to government information as well as the Internet and telecommunications.

FOLUSA gives an annual public service award on National Library Legislative Day to a member of Congress who provides leadership on and demonstrates commitment to important library issues. This year, FOLUSA presented two awards: Sen. Russ Feingold (D-WI) and Rep. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) both were honored at the Congressional Reception. Feingold and Sanders each delivered rousing speeches to the crowd, reinforcing their commitment to scaling the USA PATRIOT Act so that it does not infringe on civil liberties.

After attending National Library Legislative Day events, participants are encouraged to maintain and promote the relationships they built with their representatives and

senators through regular communication with legislators' offices in Washington, D.C., as well as with staff in their local district offices. We also encourage participants to invite their legislators to local library events being held in their communities.

The ALA Washington Office and DCLA express our thanks to the attendees of this year's National Library Legislative Day events. The events provide an important opportunity for each participant to educate senators and representatives about all the terrific programs at your library and on issues that are important to the larger library community. Your Congressional representatives want to know how libraries and library programs impact the lives of their constituents—and who better to tell them about the continuing importance of libraries than a strong group of library advocates?

The ALA Washington Office is continually reminded by comments from House and Senate staffs of just how important the presence of library supporters is on Capitol Hill.

Staff will say, "People visited me in May and talked about . . . libraries, copyright, school libraries, government information," whatever the subject is that you are discussing. This proves to us that Congress understands the message delivered by constituents who are interested in the subject matter and can be counted upon to pay attention to Congressional action. ■

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These suggestions and bits of advice are meant to smooth the way and help guide you as you begin developing that inevitable experience of your own.

**Notes**

1. William Oncken Jr., *Managing Management Time: Who's Got the Monkey* (EnglewoodCliffs: Prentice-Hall 1984). ■

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