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The Importance of Good Supervision in Libraries

The importance of good supervision is obvious, so this paper will concentrate instead on the meaning of good supervision and some of the problems of supervision in libraries. In the general personnel management of libraries, supervision is an extremely difficult and sensitive subject and is becoming more so every day. In fact, the direct supervision of experienced professionals probably runs counter to the best ideals of the profession of librarianship. Once a professional librarian has passed a kind of probationary period, one in which the theory, skills and attitudes formed in the library school are modified by the demands of actual practice, and the librarian's abilities have been judged to be at least adequate for general performance, there shouldn't need to be any more direct day-to-day supervision. Since our profession is in transition, the difference between theory and practice in library supervision is substantial. It is best here, however, to discuss problems of supervision from a positive viewpoint.

Although comments here are made from the perspective of an academic librarian, I believe they are nevertheless pertinent to public libraries or library systems, wherever the structure is large enough to permit subdivision. Whether librarians are "tenured" or "protected by civil service" makes little difference. The common denominator is the librarian employed in his or her professional capacity; this is not limited to either academic or public libraries. In some libraries, professional librarians are not always treated as such; it is impossible to categorize the way people are treated by the kind of library in which they are employed.

Assuming, then, that our colleagues in tenured and other protected

positions don't need constant supervision, it seems that the library administrator's role is one of evaluating the quantity and quality of output, rather than the quantity and quality of daily work. One of the hallmarks of our profession is that, as individuals, we are able to approach reference questions, cataloging problems, acquisition puzzles and patron problems differently while producing results that are remarkably similar. This situation alone requires that there be parameters on the types of direct supervision that should be employed. The very nature of librarianship, i.e., the possibility of using different means for a given end — for instance, to achieve an adequate catalog record (now one that conforms to AACR2) — limits the kinds of supervision we can use.

Thus, along with the responsibility for training the people joining our profession, we are also responsible for dealing with those people, once they have been admitted as full colleagues, with a management style which respects their individual judgments, work habits, and methods of accomplishing assigned tasks. Not only is it theoretically better to operate in this fashion, it is probably the only method acceptable today. Any other approach will probably soon become increasingly unacceptable.

When one supervises through output evaluations, there is a hidden requirement that the task, be it cataloging, reference service, acquisitions or circulation, be one which can be measured. It is easier to measure quantity than quality, yet this is probably the less satisfactory of the two. However, it is the one employed most often in my experience, even by those supervisors who are trying to do the right thing. It is a dangerous choice. Another problem with supervision through use of output evaluations is the likelihood of long time lags between the performance of a task and the evaluation. In such situations, the good can go unrewarded and the bad uncorrected for extended periods of time.

There is also a problem of documentation — provision of the raw material from which to make the evaluation. This is probably easiest to obtain in the catalog departments, where traditionally every cataloger's work is evaluated, in the form of a revision, until that person has reached some level of competence (usually just after they've received their 25-year pins and are headed for the St. Petersburg Golden Age Home for Retired Librarians). Sometimes this evaluation takes the form of a review rather than a revision. After twenty years of librarianship, I've only just discovered the difference between review and revision. A review occurs when the supervisor insists on analyzing the cards *after* they have been filed rather than before. The reviewee must pull the cards if they are wrong. Review is considered more liberal than revision, which occurs when the cards pile up on the head cataloger's desk until he or she has had a chance to proofread each one. Reviews rather than revisions will take place for the senior members of the department. In departments

other than cataloging, however, it is most likely that evaluation takes the form of an annual review of performance.

Reviews of a librarian's work are most likely done annually, because salaries are traditionally evaluated and budgets provided on an annual basis. This is not the case in all libraries, of course, but an annual review is the *least* that an employee should expect. An annual evaluation is the easiest to fit into other administrative demands, but it is probably a minimally satisfactory arrangement. More frequent evaluation is usually preferable. An enormous burden is therefore placed on the middle manager, since in most cases the library director will be unable to evaluate every person, and consequently unable to provide direct supervision, in any other than the smallest library. Thus, the task of the middle manager or "department head" is changing from supervision of departmental tasks to one of evaluation and quality control.

Evaluations should be performed in terms of the person being evaluated. In the end, one individual has to make the decision to say: "Yes, this is good work, the kind of performance we want to encourage"; or "No, this is a mediocre performance." In arriving at this decision, the evidence should include the perceptions of the person being evaluated. These evaluative decisions, which are, in fact, the supervising activity, are not of an "assembly line" nature — they are decisions which affect careers, and therefore the opinions and views of the people involved are quite important. In fact, they may be one of the most important aspects of job performance. There are cases when a person is obviously doing a good or bad job: a librarian who catalogs a book as educational psychology when it should have been classified as psychology of education is clearly in error. However, the way in which a librarian approaches a reference interview, circulation work or material selection has a lot to do with that librarian's perception of the work itself. Since those perceptions may be quite accurate, they should be brought into the evaluation.

A word of caution is in order here. Reference librarians, heads of cataloging, bibliographers and library directors are all personally responsible for a reasonable level of performance and are therefore accountable for that performance. One of the great dangers involved in the shared responsibility of participatory management is that those responsibilities might be ignored. I do realize, of course, that the people who talk about responsibility are usually library administrators who say "responsibility" means getting to work on time. However, the library administrator is also responsible and accountable, and his or her telling a subordinate to get to work on time is an attempt to live up to that responsibility. The responsibility is on both sides — on the answering of the reference question or the quality of the cataloging, as well as participating in evalua-

tions. Not making evaluations is far more serious than not getting to work on time, not getting the cataloging done, or not answering a reference question completely.

One of our most common mistakes is the confusion of competence and enthusiasm. The library profession has had to undergo a great change from being an old-fashioned, authoritarian system, so that quite often we've proclaimed that we would accept anyone with the right attitudes. That problem is partially traceable to the library schools which gave priority to attitudinal change over solid training in professional skills. Although they are getting better at providing substantive education, many are still working under the burden of the past. In evaluation, it is not only attitude which is important, but also competence.

Enthusiasm and commitment are not librarianship itself — they only make good librarianship possible. These two qualities are not sufficient for good supervision, either. In evaluating job performance, a good supervisor doesn't report whether the person likes being a cataloger, but whether he or she is a good cataloger; not how well he or she likes being a bibliographer, but whether he or she can select one book over another; not how he or she feels about meeting people, but whether he or she is a good reference librarian. Recognizing these attributes of enthusiasm and commitment is part of the hiring process as well, but mistaking them for competence in evaluation can be disastrous.

The kind of supervision being discussed here — basically, the evaluation of one's colleagues' work — has several requisites. First, a written report either must be provided by the person being evaluated, or must come naturally out of his or her work. An example of such is an annual report. The importance of these reports for performance evaluation cannot be overemphasized, because they constitute the primary documentation for the evaluation. The monthly reports common in many businesses and nonprofit organizations are probably important for libraries as well and can provide the basis for more frequent evaluations. Very often the people most interested in evaluation and who frequently speak about governance and management are least likely to provide such documentation. They are the people who talk about the new programs for children but in their annual reports forget to note how many hours the library was open, whether or not the student assistants were paid, and how many reference questions were answered — all irritating details necessary for a full evaluation. A reference librarian probably hates to fill out forms every time he or she answers a question, or make the little marks that produce the statistics for that department. Nevertheless, that documentation is extremely valuable and as much a part of performance as the reference answer, the department's management,

the cataloging, or the selection of books themselves. It should be remembered that these forms of documentation which provide the basis for the evaluation contain the perceptions of the writer as well as the facts. (Even the number of titles cataloged is occasionally, but not often, a question of perception.)

Also important in evaluating performance is the testimony of those served. For public libraries this includes the patrons and the city council; for academic libraries, the students and faculty; and for a library system, the member libraries. The reactions of these clients are an extremely valuable part of the evaluation, just as necessary as the annual or other periodic report. The role of the head of the library — or the personnel officer — should include compilation of this documentation in a logical fashion so that it can be used in conjunction with evaluations. Thus, one of the primary roles of the personnel office can be performed without interfering with the authority structure. I think all of us worry about past excesses in the use of personnel files, but without such files we return either to the situation where no evaluation of the institution takes place, or to one where such evaluations rest purely on the personal whim of the evaluator. While my suggestion may not be the best solution, a personnel file system, containing documents a person can examine and respond to, provides at least the basis for rational decision-making. When complaints are received, such as a letter saying, "Mr. Y misinformed me when I asked him about the train schedule from Hinsdale to Chicago. I went to the train station and found it didn't run on Saturday," Mr. Y can then indicate his reply, saying, "I thought he said Sunday." An evaluator can then see both sides of an issue.

Each time an evaluation takes place, it should include an interview with the person being evaluated. If the director or middle manager actually talks with the library employees once a year, it doesn't hurt either of them too much. They seldom transmit anything loathsome in those few minutes and I think that it serves a higher purpose. However, aside from concerns of social interaction, some record of the interview must be incorporated into the evaluation. Simply a nice talk between subordinate and supervisor is not sufficient — not just because of the traditional worry that the supervisor is saying nice things while acting on a bad evaluation, but more importantly because the only way to force people to make the evaluation at all is to insist that it be in writing. The problem is not that bad evaluations will occur, but rather that none will occur. Most of us will avoid making a negative statement about another person rather than perform our duty as a department head or even as a colleague. People are reluctant to say bad things because they don't want them to interfere with a personal relationship or with the smooth running of the library.

This negates the personal accountability of the supervisor or administrator. Our debt of accountability to society should be the overriding factor here.

Good performance must somehow be rewarded. In many highly structured systems, the reward for "barely acceptable" performance is often the same for "highly meritorious" work. I'm not certain what can be done in these situations, but to encourage good librarianship some kind of motivation must be provided. It may have to be outside the collective bargaining covenant or the civil service system, but some reward that says to the whole library that the person is an outstanding librarian — such as a better office or first claim to new furniture — has to occur. Public recognition of the good, the outstanding, the more-than-barely-adequate, is the positive reward that everyone has a right to expect as a professional, in this field or any other.

As I grow older, beyond the days when I thought of libraries as places for great intellectual and social change, the importance of simple house-keeping becomes increasingly apparent. Do not ignore the basic, daily library activity in the process of evaluation. Opening the doors on time and filing the catalog cards accurately are responsibilities of primary importance to our patrons, as are the hundreds of other basic library tasks. We may not have to perform these mundane tasks personally, but we must ensure that they are done. That is our personal responsibility: to do it right or to see that it is done right. Attention to these details is important because they allow the professional administrator to exist.

I will conclude by commenting on what I think are some of the effects of automation on supervision. Part of the documentation referred to here can or will be provided by various automated systems. Those machines will turn out statistical reports rapidly and efficiently, but the data may not really mean much. When LCS was installed at Ohio State University, one of the things it provided was an hour-by-hour, terminal-by-terminal statistical report on each type of command — a pile of paper two feet thick. I never read it; I always sent it to the systems analyst's office with a note saying, "Anything strange in this?" As far as I can tell, he never read it either, because he never replied. On the other hand, the statistical report of total activity by location was interesting because it could be used to assign more student assistants where needed, or — heaven forbid! — take some away from those libraries which reported that they were circulating a lot, while in some cases their circulation figures included reshelves. That is one of automation's advantages — it clarifies what is actually happening, and it is quite consistent. Automation will also eliminate many clerical tasks; that is, not clerks, but clerical *tasks*. This means there will be even less supervision taking place. Con-

ferences such as this one may eventually be a waste of time, since the machine will do it all for us.

However, automation too has to be supervised. Supervision of machines requires the same evaluation as supervision of people — except you don't have to be nice to a machine. You will have to be nice to the computer center directors and the operators, because they may forget to turn on your system if you are not. Since the machine is not human, it will eliminate some problems of interpersonal relations. However, gleaning valuable information from the mass of statistics provided will be an additional problem in terms of the supervisory documentation.

One of the most important points to remember is that you can't use the computer as a scapegoat. It is simply not acceptable to decide not to renew any books this month "because the machine won't do it." Any librarian who delegates to the machine the basic responsibility for getting materials into the hands of patrons, analyzing those materials accurately, or selecting the right book, has failed. A basic relationship of automation to supervision is that the former cannot be used as an excuse by the latter. That supervision is important is unquestionably true; that its nature is changing is equally true.