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The Role of the Supervisor in Training and Developing Staff

My experience indicates that there are two key elements in getting work done through people. The first is to select the right person for each position and the second is to give each staff member the training needed to do the job well. I believe supervisors should be evaluated on and held accountable for the degree to which their units contribute to the achievement of organizational objectives. That is why, as a personnel director, I believe supervisors must be given the authority to initiate recommendations in the areas of staffing and training. They should be able to justify their recommendations of who they believe should be hired and of what training their staff members should receive. Thus, supervisors should in turn receive the training they need in order to make and justify these recommendations successfully.

My conviction that staffing and training are the two most important elements in successful supervision was, until recently, based only on intuitive feelings. Now, however, empirical data have been collected in support of this conclusion. Unfortunately, librarians seldom believe that studies conducted in industry have any relevance to libraries. The study I am about to describe, however, was conducted in the Rutgers University Library. In a 1976 dissertation, Alan Bare studied the relationship between the performance of forty-three work groups and the participation of the groups' supervisors in the following activities: (1) counseling and team building, (2) coordination and control, (3) staffing, (4) formalizing, (5) training, (6) external representation, (7) communication and feedback, and (8) performance-reward contingency management. Posi-

tive correlations at a level of significance too great to be attributed to chance were found to exist between group performance and four of these eight supervisory variables, i.e., staffing, training, performance-reward contingency management, and counseling and team building.

The supervisory activities with the most significant relation to group performance were staffing and training. These were related at the .01 confidence level, i.e., this relationship was so strong that it would randomly occur in less than one in one hundred cases. Bare measured the supervisors' staffing activities by examining the degree to which raters agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

s/he hires the most competent people available;
s/he hires people who fit well with job requirements;
s/he makes sure the group has the talents it needs;
s/he has good ideas;
s/he tries new ways of doing things; and
s/he defines jobs in a way that makes good use of the talents we have.[1]

Note that there may in fact be differences between the first and second of these statements. There are situations in which the most experienced, competent or best-educated person available is not the one who best fits the requirements of the job, or in which the most trainable candidate may have fewer of the qualifications required to succeed in a job than other candidates. In university libraries, even low-level clerical openings will attract applicants with a fairly high level of education. Often a choice must be made between a college graduate with a background in one or more foreign languages and a high school graduate with business and/or clerical training. Which is better qualified for a library clerical job? It is generally assumed that the better-educated and/or more intelligent candidate will learn the routines of the position more quickly and require less of the supervisor's time before reaching an acceptable level of independent performance. However, this person may become quickly bored and more readily turn to another employer offering a more challenging and/or better-paying position. A supervisor may have to train several of these "quick learners" for a single job over the same period of time needed to train one employee less easily bored with the work. However, there is no easy way to be certain beforehand, so whichever choice is made, the supervisor should be aware of the possible consequences.

In measuring a supervisor's training competency, Bare asked raters to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

s/he provides opportunities to learn on the job;
s/he encourages participation in formal training programs;
s/he encourages self-development; and
s/he delegates challenging assignments.[2]

It is not hard to understand why the work units with supervisors highly rated in these areas were also the most productive. It is especially true in libraries that people are the most important resource. In most libraries, about two-thirds of the budget is spent on wages and benefits. Therefore, unless these human resources are well managed, there is little chance that patrons will receive their money's worth in services. Unless staff members have the knowledge and skills needed to perform their job responsibilities competently, they cannot be expected to contribute what is required for the library to reach its service objectives.

On the basis of both common sense and Bare's empirical data, it seems unquestionable that time spent in training and developing staff is time well spent. Yet, I still must question that assumption — even though it leads to a threefold conflict of personal interests. As a librarian, I have a strong belief in the value of education to society. As a member of the academic staff of an institution of higher learning, I have invested a portion of my life in contributing to the liberal arts background and professional training of its students. As the library staff development officer, I have a responsibility for the training and development of the library's entire staff. In spite of these commitments, I believe it is necessary to place some limitations on the training and development activities of supervisors.

Libraries do not exist to provide training and development for their staff members, but rather to provide services to their clients. Staff training and development should never become an end in itself. There is little reason to believe that the most trained and developed staff is the most productive staff *unless* there is a strong correlation between the areas of training and development and the areas of competence needed to perform work assignments. At least one study has shown that there was no apparent difference between the performance of engineers who took continuing education courses and those who did not.[3] Training should always provide the specific knowledge and/or skills needed to improve the ability of a staff member to perform a specific task in the most effective way. This training is the legitimate and necessary responsibility of every supervisor.

However, the training which makes the best use of human resources includes more than simply the knowledge necessary to perform a specific job. Orientation and training efforts must go beyond this. An old story will illustrate this point. Four workers performing identical duties were

asked separately what they were doing. One replied, "I'm making ten dollars an hour." Another answered, "I'm laying bricks." A third stated, "I'm building a wall," while the fourth responded, "I'm helping to build a great cathedral."

Supervisors must be careful not always to take an employee's comments at face value, however. They may not really indicate the employee's actual level of understanding due to real or false humility or any number of other reasons. Certainly there are many times when a supervisor would be happy to settle for workers who understood that the task at hand was to lay bricks; it is therefore easy to appreciate how helpful it would be if workers understood that the individual bricks were to become a wall. It is the supervisor's role to see that employees understand how the quality and quantity of their personal efforts contribute to the success of the organization as a whole. If staff members are to view their work in this manner, it will be as a result of a well-conceived and well-executed plan. Such a plan involves matching the library's needs with the abilities of individual staff members. Two management consultants suggest the following strategy:

1. The tasks performed by each employee constitute outputs in goods and services that are explicitly related to achieving the recognized goals of the organization.
2. The majority of each employee's work time is actually devoted to performing these tasks.
3. The majority of each employee's time is spent working at his or her highest knowledge/skill level as perceived by both supervisor and employee.
4. The majority of employees are responding to a climate that encourages the expenditure of levels of energy and effort that are perceived as high by those both inside and outside the organization.
5. The workflow in most production or service units is structured to minimize both slack time and duplication of effort.
6. Formal and informal organizational structures are integrated with technology in a way that improves task performance.[4]

These conditions are likely to be achieved only if staff have learned to analyze their own performance and to adjust it as the occasion demands.

Once beyond training staff for a specific job, it is often difficult to know how far a staff development program can go and still be cost-effective. In making this determination it is useful to distinguish between staff development and continuing education.

Continuing education as a part of the concept of lifelong learning is

clearly an idea whose time has come. The obsolescence of technical training has rapidly escalated in recent years, due to the greatly increased rate of change. This trend is likely to continue to accelerate. Some means must be found to help individuals continue to grow and develop. Whose responsibility is it to provide these opportunities for individuals?

Some staff members have no interest in personal development, while others have development interests that have very little to do with their jobs. As Edgar Schein recently pointed out: "Work and career are not as central a life preoccupation as was once the case. Perhaps because of a prolonged period of economic affluence, people see more options for themselves and are increasingly exercising those options. In particular, one sees more concern with a balanced life in which work, family, and self-development play a more equal role."[5] An extreme stereotype of this kind of person was illustrated in a 1975 Doonesbury cartoon in which Mark was having a conversation with his father:

> *Father:* Son, have you given any thought to the sort of job you want when you graduate?
> *Mark:* Oh, sure. I don't know what field it'll be in, but I know that it will have to be creative — a position of responsibility, but not one that restricts personal freedom. It must pay well. The atmosphere, relaxed, informal; my colleagues, interesting, mellow, and not too concerned with a structured working situation.
> *Father:* In short, you have no intention of getting a job.
> *Mark:* I didn't say that.

The concepts of staff development and continuing education have existed for a long time. However, they did not reach their current state of importance in libraries until the 1970s. As with most fads, the "pendulum effect" was operating: in the excitement of applying a new idea, society generally gets carried away, and swings from one extreme to the other. This physical science phenomenon is imitated by organizations every time a new idea is introduced. Too often new ideas are rejected without a fair hearing. However, once an idea is adopted, its advocates often go overboard in implementing it; it is expected to solve everyone's problems. No single idea or innovation is likely to satisfy this kind of expectation. The foray of libraries into the areas of staff development and continuing education has led toward a more complete use of the available human resources, but it has also contributed to some very unproductive use of staff time. Supervisors are only beginning to learn when concentrating on staff development may be beneficial to ultimate productivity and when it may be counterproductive to the delivery of services to patrons.

In learning to differentiate judiciously, it is important to remember

the difference between staff development and continuing education. It is in the area of overlap of the developmental interests of the staff member and those competencies needed in the library that the most effective training and development takes place. The initial employment interview is the ideal time to begin to assess whether this overlap is sufficient to make training of that person worthwhile. In this process, it must be recognized that individuals have legitimate continuing education interests that do not coincide with the library's needs, and libraries require certain competencies that particular individuals have no interest and/or ability to develop. However, both these elements — the interest and ability to learn on the part of the individual, and the need of the library — must be present before training will result in successful staff development.

It is very important that the collective goal of the staff be similar to the stated goal of the library. If they are not, then neither goal is likely to be harmoniously satisfied. A brief examination of vectors may help illustrate this point (see Figure 1). Vectors are lines which represent the direction and intensity of certain forces. The longer the line, the more powerful the force. The direction and intensity of the management's efforts to achieve the library's stated goal affects the actual role the library plays in providing its services. However, the direction and intensity of staff members' efforts also have an effect and must be taken into account. It is the interaction of these forces that is most important. In a laboratory setting, the vector representing the result of this interaction would indicate the direction and intensity of the library's actual performance. This model from elementary physics can easily be applied to the goals of the supervisor and employees of a library to describe some very complex organizational behavior.

So much for theory; what most supervisors really want are practical suggestions that can be applied on the job. With that in mind, I suggest that the process of identifying training needs begin before initiating the recruitment process. Before even advertising a position opening, the supervisor should list the areas of competency that a fully functioning staff member is required to master for that position. Then the supervisor should decide which of these competencies can reasonably be learned in the context of the work environment. All other competencies should become minimum qualifications for that position, that is, pass/fail requirements that *must* be met before the candidate can be seriously considered. The competencies that could reasonably be gained on the job become desirable qualities to be sought in the candidates who have met the minimum qualifications. Theoretically, the best-qualified candidate is the one that has demonstrated all the minimum qualifications and offers more optional competencies than any other. Other factors, such as dem-
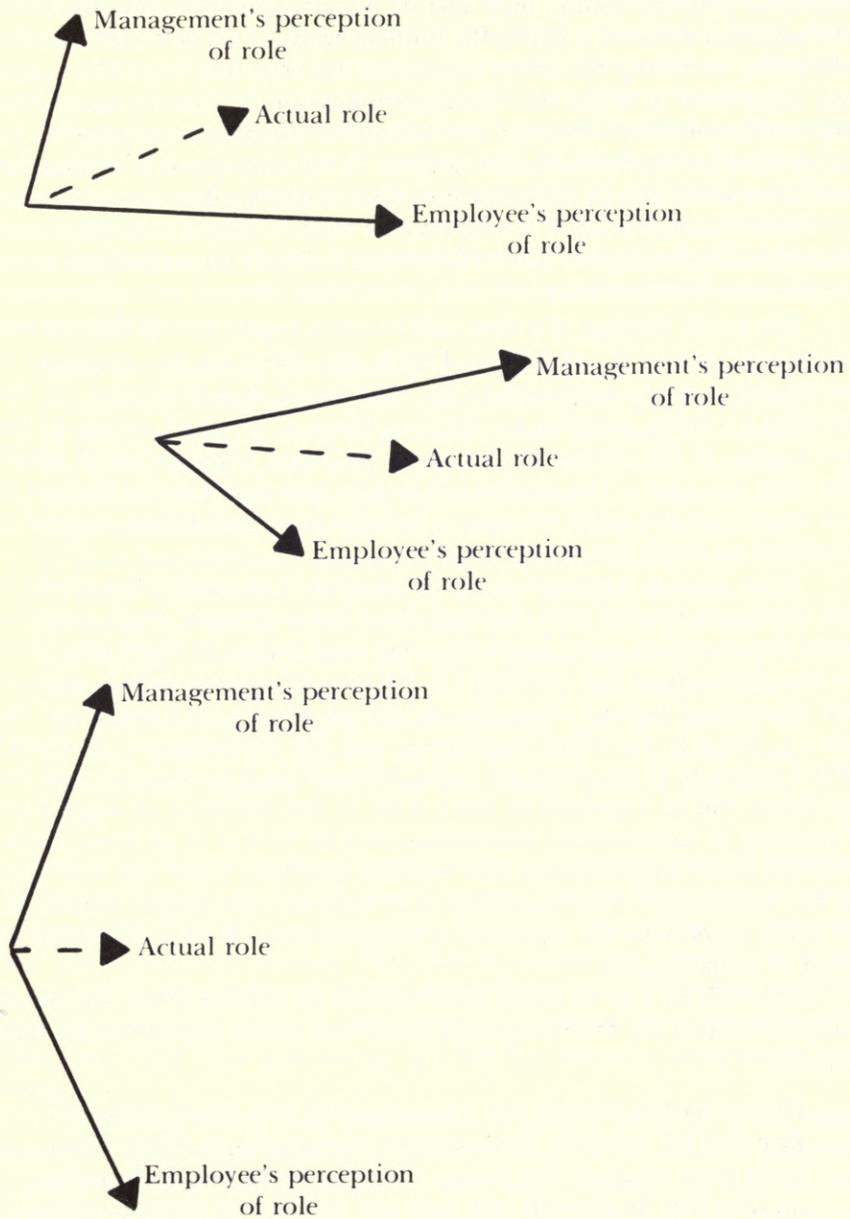
FIGURE 1. VECTORS ILLUSTRATING HOW THE DEGREE OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN MANAGEMENT AND EMPLOYEES WILL AFFECT THE PERFORMANCE OF AN ORGANIZATION.

onstrated learning ability, may also be a legitimate consideration. Once the selection decision is made, the training needs of the new staff member should be obvious *if* the above suggestion has been followed. The task of the supervisor is to provide the opportunity and assistance needed for the staff member to develop the additional competencies required for successful job performance, as well as to develop those competencies that were satisfactorily demonstrated when the hiring decision was made.

This process sounds much simpler than it actually is. However, thought and planning will save a lot of time and prevent wasted and counterproductive efforts later.

The actual training of a new staff member begins during the employment interview — if not before. During the interview the applicant is participating in an orientation to the interviewer as a supervisor, to the position available, possibly to other members of the work group, to the work area, to the library itself, and to the larger organization of which the library is a part. The session can lead to wise decisions on the part of the supervisor and applicant as to whether it is in their mutual interest to establish an employment relationship.

What kind of messages does the supervisor as interviewer send? Is the candidate treated with respect? Does the supervisor really listen to what the candidate says? Does the supervisor appear to know what is to be accomplished in the interview? Is the time effectively used in discussing job-related issues? Does the supervisor appear to know what the library, the job, the other employees, and the applicant are all about? What attitudes about them are being relayed? Is it made clear that the applicant will be expected to think if he or she becomes an employee? Tentative, if unconscious, impressions will be formed in all these areas. Without care, counterproductive learning may take place that will have to be "unlearned" if the candidate is to become a productive employee. In many ways, how the interview is conducted is at least as important as what is actually said.

This will be true of many other aspects of training. Fran Tarkenton recently related the following example of how actions speak louder than words:

> I was recently told by the vice-president of a major industrial firm that his superior, the executive vice-president, wanted him to be more creative. But, he recalled that every time he brought an idea that he thought was new and creative to the executive vice-president, he was told all the things that were wrong with the idea. The executive vice-president wants and is directing his managers to be more creative, yet punishes creativity. He is not likely to get, and certainly will not maintain, creative thinking and innovation in his organization.[6]

As supervisors you should try to recall the last time a subordinate or a peer offered an idea or a suggestion. Has it been a long time? What was your response? Would it encourage or discourage the person to volunteer an idea again? As Tarkenton put it, "People, not dollars, create."[7]

The reader is probably wondering why I am belaboring the apparently self-evident importance of staff training and development. The fact is, most supervisors do not give sufficient attention to this responsibility. This is not necessarily because they believe that training is unimportant. According to Samuel Phifer, Executive Training Director of Allied Stores Corporation, the reasons supervisors give this activity insufficient attention are subtle:

> They are afraid of surrendering vital information derived from experience. Holding on to this information gives them a feeling of being needed, a sense of personal power and control. Yielding information is seen as a weakening of this power. Another frequent reason for avoiding the responsibility to train is that supervisors do not know how to go about it and are not anxious to have that deficiency exposed. Still others feel that to train and develop subordinates properly, it would be expected that they know all the details of each of their jobs. To have this lack of knowledge revealed would also be an embarrassment. And, finally, there are supervisors who are not at all sure where to draw the line between managing and developing. They are unclear as to what constitutes training as distinguished from good communications, capable direction, and sound control and discipline.[8]

Although I have observed ample evidence to support each of Phifer's points, I believe he omitted the most prevalent reason library supervisors do not fulfill their training obligation. Many see themselves as workers first and supervisors second. They fail to realize that supervising is as much their responsibility as is the work of their unit. They feel guilty if they are not doing as much of the routine work as their subordinates. Therefore, little time and energy are left for uniquely supervisory activities.

No training should take place unless a specific need for it has been identified. This can be done in a number of ways. If the above suggestion is followed, some training needs will have been identified by the time an applicant is offered a position. In this case, the training needs are those competencies which are required and have yet to be developed. In other cases, employees may ask specifically for training to increase their ability to perform their jobs. It may be that an employee is observed as hav-

ing difficulty performing his or her job due to inadequate knowledge or skills. Perhaps changes, such as the introduction of computers or the reorganization of workflow will require knowledge and skills not previously needed. However, as training needs manifest themselves, it is the supervisor's responsibility to recognize and act on them.

However an apparent need for training is recognized, the desired outcome is much more likely to be achieved if the supervisor can articulate to staff members exactly what new abilities the training will provide. Only then can the precise nature of the training be determined. The object during training is to minimize the disruption of current services while at the same time maximizing the potential of future services. This is no mean feat, but such is the nature of supervision.

One method of analyzing training needs is presented in a monograph by Robert Mager and Peter Pipe entitled *Analyzing Performance Problems, or "You Really Oughta Wanna."*[9] Mager and Pipe present a series of questions in a simple decision flow-chart. Working through the flow-chart to the solution involves a very useful thought process. However, as supervisors learn, solutions to many problems are not easily reached, and while no single method or technique will solve all problems, many of the ideas of others can be adapted to advantage.

Once a supervisor has clearly defined a training requirement, it must be decided who can best provide the needed training. Research indicates that training will be mastered more completely if two elements are included. First, if the trainee believes that the trainer controls the reward system, and the trainer actually has a high degree of control, more effective training will take place.[10] This finding indicates that the most effective training may be that provided by the supervisor if the supervisor is seen by the employee to be able to initiate recommendations for hiring, firing, promotions, salary increases and disciplinary action. Second, research also indicates that the trainee will learn more completely when the trainer is perceived to be competent in the task being taught.[11] This finding too may suggest that the supervisor is the most appropriate person to provide the needed instruction; on the other hand, it may suggest a better choice.

There are also criteria to consider when determining whether training should take place "on the job" or in a classroom setting. Martin Broadwell, author of *The Supervisor and On-the-Job Training*, uses a very practical and often entertaining handbook approach. Following is a summary of Broadwell's main points on the advantages and disadvantages of on-the-job training:[12]

Advantages of on-the-job training	*Advantages of classroom training*
Communication on a one-to-one basis	Fewer distractions
Can build on existing and ongoing relationships	More efficient use of trainer time
More natural setting (under actual work conditions)	Not all supervisors are good teachers
More efficient use of trainee time	Teaching technology is easier to apply
Less interference with production	

Whichever setting is used, appropriate training methods should be employed. There are a number of good books on this topic. Broadwell's book provides a practical, down-to-earth approach. Mager's *Preparing Instructional Objectives*[13] is also highly recommended. Two periodicals that provide practical help to first-line supervisors are *Supervision* and *Supervisory Management*.[14] Malcolm Knowles's classic *The Modern Practice of Adult Education*[15] is a very useful, substantive work. (If a supervisor does not have reason to believe a potential trainee can respond as an adult, perhaps that supervisor should be contemplating some other kind of personnel action.) No training method is appropriate in all settings, for all learning objectives, or for all trainees. Nor is one training method appropriate for all instructors. Rather, the method must be carefully chosen for the particular combination of circumstances.

Whatever method is employed, the results should be evaluated. Repeating failures with successive generations of workers must be avoided. Also, in the event that a training method is judged to have failed, an alternate method must be instituted. Evaluation will clarify whether the fault was with the training, or if the trainee is incapable of learning that particular skill or is simply not interested. Another possibility is that environmental factors may interfere with learning. Whatever the result of the training, if the need for it was sufficient to invest the time of the trainer and the trainee in the first place, it is worth knowing to what extent the original objective has been met.

The best way of evaluating whether the training has achieved its objective is to answer the question: Can the employees satisfactorily perform the task which they previously could not? The primary objective should not be to change attitudes; there is little convincing evidence that this type of training is effective. Moreover, attitudinal change is impossible to measure. Phifer suggests that "if we have trained well, we will have brought about a change in attitude as a consequence of our efforts."[16] Staff members who are confident that they have received the

training and support they need to contribute productively to the library will have more positive attitudes than those who feel inadequate because of a lack of such preparation.

The ultimate measure of a supervisor's success as a trainer and developer of staff is improved services to the library's patrons. As the 1980s approach, library costs are increasing faster than the general rate of inflation. Now, more than ever, patrons deserve the best service libraries can afford to provide.

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