Making the Transition from Employee to Supervisor

In preparing the institute program, the planning committee decided to invite representative professional librarians who had recently experienced the role change from supervisee to supervisor (which frequently includes the responsibility of supervising former colleagues) to describe the experiences and problems they encountered in making this shift. Following is a summary of their observations.*

The first speaker was David Passmore, Head of the Cataloging Department at the University of Kansas Library. Before coming to the University of Kansas, he had served as a paraprofessional language/literature cataloger at the University of Iowa, and had had no previous administrative experience. He had been at the University of Kansas only a year when his department head requested a transfer, and a quick decision was made to replace him with Passmore. He now supervises a staff of eleven full-time professionals, approximately twenty full-time paraprofessionals, and three student assistants who work about ten to twelve hours a week. He described the feeling of being a supervisor as knowing that while one employee was making love to him, another was in the basement boiling tar and plucking feathers.

Passmore inherited many problems with the job. Among these was poor inter/intradepartmental communication. No clear chain of command existed and Passmore discovered that several units were doing the same thing. No one had established any standards. Most of the policies and

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* Since the panel members' remarks were presented somewhat extemporaneously, rather than from formal papers, the summary of this session was prepared by Holly Wagner of the Graduate School of Library Science Publications Office.

procedures being used had never been written down. Rectifying this oversight was a difficult task, made even harder by the superimposition of OCLC on the existing poorly organized manual system. There was also a lot of infighting; the paraprofessionals (whom Passmore found to be dissatisfied and thus career-paranoid) especially were in disagreement with each other, their department head and other professionals.

There were problems that developed directly from Passmore's promotion as well. For instance, he found himself in the uncomfortable position of having to direct not only former colleagues but also his former supervisor. She was a woman with twenty-one years of library experience, a member of the "old guard." He preferred not to have to oppose her and instead tried to call upon her experience. Eventually they both adjusted to their changed professional relationship.

Administrative problems built into the job included complicated interdepartmental practices. For example, the civil service forms which the library was required to use were confusing. Passmore found cover notes on employee interview forms with personality characteristics such as "pleasant" and "crabby" written under *disposition,* i.e., whether or not the employee was hired. The library was also embroiled in an uncomfortable situation with civil service job reclassifications, a process which was to take two years and made a lot of people edgy.

Another shock resulted from Passmore's confrontation with his first annual faculty report assignment; he found that none had been written for the preceding year. He was suddenly responsible for setting goals and precedents after having been in the position only six months. Other headaches: 300,000 volumes in the library were unavailable because they had not been cataloged, and a newly-hired science librarian wanted permission to "clean up" the old files.

In an attempt to deal with these problem areas, Passmore instituted governance by committee. This system involved a lot of meetings and presented the difficulty of coordinating a large number of people. The final analysis was, however, that although it was hard, it was worthwhile and even fun.

The question of how to deal with employees who are having personal problems prompted Passmore to ask: What do employees do with a supervisor who has such problems? Recognizing that his own personal difficulties would make him unable to counsel his employees with similar problems, he openly informed his staff of his troubles and asked them to cooperate with him by understanding that he would judge whether he could help them or should defer assistance because of his own difficulties.

The second speaker, Tom Tomczak, Coordinator of General Materials and Services at the Milwaukee Public Library, explained first

that General Materials and Services was not a subject catalog, but rather included materials such as serials, documents, microforms, maps, vertical files, and newspaper clippings, and services such as telephone and general reference service as well as interlibrary loan. Tomczak supervises a staff of nineteen full- and part-time employees, of whom nine are professionals, seven are paraprofessionals and three are clerical.

Tomczak was very familiar with the Milwaukee Public Library when he became a supervisor. Beginning as a library page, he has worked there for twenty years, taking time out for military service and to attend the University of Denver Graduate School of Librarianship. He described his promotion at the age of forty as a "midlife crisis": he felt he was abandoning his career in librarianship to become an administrator.

Tomczak now enjoys his change in position, however; he finds it brings both advantages and new problems. For instance, he is administratively over one of his first supervisors, and all the people in his department were once his peers. In his opinion, there are two errors that can be made in adjusting to supervising coworkers: to pretend that nothing has happened to change working relationships, or to attempt to establish distance. The first alternative is nonsense, and the second doesn't work either. Neither the staff nor the supervisor should lean on their former relationship for favors or in expectation of extra effort. The only solution is to allow relationships to regain their naturalness after a period of adjustment. As a result of this attitude, he does not perceive an excessive distance between himself and his staff, or believe that anyone is trying to take advantage of past relationships.

According to Tomczak, delegation of responsibility is the most important part of a supervisor's job. Even while working as a page, he had acquired some management experience and skills, and he continued to do so throughout his career. It is the supervisor's responsibility to train his employees to become supervisors. He must think of himself as a manager and not a "doer," and must concentrate on management tasks. Authority must be delegated along with responsibility; one supervisor cannot effectively manage a large number of employees alone. Specific people should be appointed to handle specific tasks. They in turn report back to the supervisor and as a result, learn which kinds of decisions they can make themselves and which ones should be reserved for the supervisor. This hierarchy of command is necessary and above all, must be instituted openly in order to succeed.

Barbara Halbrook, the third speaker, is Assistant Librarian at Washington University School of Medicine Library in St. Louis. She is in charge of the library's daily operation, which includes supervision of public

services, technical services and the office, as well as automation; in all, she heads a staff of forty-seven people. Her experience is similar to Tomczak's in that she was promoted "from within" and had been working at the library for several years. In her opinion, supervising former peers has its advantages: everyone is familiar and the problem of adjusting to a supervisor brought in from outside the library is thus avoided.

The difficulties she experienced in changing from employee to supervisor were ones of personal adjustment. She found it difficult to relinquish her old reference job. As a supervisor, she had to get others to do the work, even though she missed doing it herself. She also realized she was spending too much time in the reference library and neglecting the other departments under her direction.

Halbrook was surprised to find that her social position had changed. People were still friendly, but in a new way. She was not invited to lunch as often as she had been before her promotion, and was excluded from staff "gripe sessions." The staff members were wary of her past relationship with them and attempted to use their former friendship to gain information. She had to be careful to compromise neither old trusts nor new responsibilities; she could not be as casual as before. In attempting to compensate for the new professional distance imposed by other staff, she withdrew from the group. This was not a good solution either, as she was then accused of being bigheaded and secretive.

Halbrook also found that she had to establish an entirely new working relationship with the other administrators in the library: they were no longer "them," but "us." She had to overcome her reluctance to express a personal opinion and at the same time learn when to defer. All of these adjustments took time and she occasionally felt sorry for herself.

The sudden role of authority was also hard to get used to. She had to be objective when recommending salary increases and performing job evaluations of former coworkers; she knew the staff too well. She feels now that, during her adjustment, she perhaps leaned *too* far toward absolute objectivity — but has come to realize that it is impossible to please everyone.

As a result of her new role, Halbrook discovered that, rather than thinking of the library on a personal or departmental basis, she began to view it as a whole. For instance, when the library copier had been placed in the reference department, she and her coworkers had been upset; the perspective afforded by her new position, however, has enabled her to understand and approve of the reasons for such a decision.

As a result of these personal changes, Halbrook feels that she has become less flexible in terms of a job change. She has become accustomed to making decisions and delegating authority, and would not feel com-

fortable changing back to supervisee. The transition from employee to supervisor seems to her to be a one-way street.

Marian McMahon, Head of the Copy Cataloging Unit of Northwestern University Library, gave her personal history: she trained as a flight instructor and then traveled, and at the age of forty-five — following twenty years as a housewife — decided she wanted a job, and took one as a copy cataloger at Northwestern University. The cataloging unit subsequently split and she was chosen to head part of it; there are three senior and five junior staff members under her supervision. She feels that being older than the people she supervises helps to establish authority.

The problems McMahon encountered were a result of seeking a balance between her former role as "one of the boys" and her new position of authority. She found it difficult to take herself seriously; she felt she was not supervisory material and expected her employees to ignore her when she gave them an order. When giving instructions she found it helpful to clarify that she was not simply making a suggestion and to observe the reactions of the person being instructed. She tried to hearken back to her days as an "underdog" in order to avoid making the same mistakes her past supervisors had.

Her attitude toward her former coworkers changed also. The news that an employee was leaving the library for a new job or to attend library school was no longer greeted with enthusiasm; now all she could think about was the annoyance and problems of interviewing, hiring and training a replacement. McMahon noted the conflict inherent in the supervisor's position, i.e., the sense of duty to encourage staff to progress in their careers and the problems caused by the resulting job vacancies.

McMahon misses cataloging work. She fears becoming a "closet cataloger," sneaking particularly sticky problems off the top of the assignment pile in order to handle them herself. The new job-related tasks are not always pleasant. She finds that employee evaluations are terribly embarrassing situations and the horrendous amount of paperwork makes her feel that she is getting nowhere (although in retrospect, she admits it has value).

McMahon has instituted staff meetings with her employees, which she holds immediately following administrative staff meetings. The higher-echelon meetings are enjoyable because they present her with a broader view of the library, and she can see the progress being made in other departments. She personally handles all training of new employees. In this way, she pointed out, if something is being done wrong, at least the entire staff is doing it wrong the same way — and "that's consistency." Often she finds that she learns something in the training pro-

cess. In conclusion, McMahon offered the consolation that time cures the fears and the unfamiliarity; endure — if you hang in there long enough, you may be promoted.

The final speaker, Tony Siciliano, is the Head of Circulation at the Skokie Public Library. Unlike the others, Siciliano did not have to adjust to a change in status from employee to supervisor; he was hired into his present position directly from library school. As he was replacing a woman with twenty years of experience, the first problem he encountered was to accustom the staff to having a man as department head.

To learn his new job and to get to know his staff, Siciliano began by holding both conferences with each employee, and staff meetings in which he openly announced his own anxiety about being new and requested the staff's support. He then worked a few weeks in every job in the department in order to gain an understanding of what was being done and to suggest improvements, which were primarily aimed at eliminating drudgery.

He believes that job descriptions and performance evaluations are his most important responsibilities. As no job descriptions had ever been written, his staff wrote them, and also compiled an operations and procedures manual. At the Skokie Library, job evaluations had been used only for determining pay raises, but Siciliano felt that regular evaluation ought to be made standard policy. He now performs job evaluations daily and makes every attempt to reinforce the positive behavior of his employees. He also instituted a formal quarterly evaluation process in which his staff evaluates him and themselves; then he evaluates them and they compare notes. He finds this to be a good approach to reinforcing the goals of the library as a whole, the goals of the department within the library, and goals as structural changes.