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The Research Basis of Employee-Centered Supervision

As supervisors in libraries, our job is to achieve, through the efforts of others, those results for which we are responsible. On the surface, the task appears to be relatively simple. However, if we were aware of all the variables involved and had control of them, there would be no need for conferences like this Allerton institute.

As supervisors, we are fully aware that unknown variables influence the supervisory process and that, even when variables are known, we do not always know how to handle them. Managing people in a library or any other organization can be a very tenuous affair. One of the main purposes of interludes such as this conference in our busy work schedule is to provide an opportunity to step back from the activities that constitute a major portion of our lives and reflect on their meaning. We must understand them in order to perform effectively. The volume and complexity of the work that must be done make it impossible for us to complete it all and to achieve all the desired results.

Supervision is by no means a new activity, but it has only recently been investigated in a meaningful fashion. Libraries are one example of the developing organizations that brought out the need to approach supervision in a more systematic manner. At the turn of the century, theorists first concentrated on the task to be performed as one of the major variables to be considered in any study of supervision. Frederick Taylor's theory of scientific management exemplified this approach.¹ The next variable to come under scrutiny was human relations, which brought to light factors that intervened significantly in the work process. Interest in this area was stimulated by the Hawthorne studies conducted by a group

of Harvard sociologists at the Western Electric Company's Hawthorne Works near Chicago.² The recognition of these two variables defined an area which could be researched with the possibility that conclusive findings could be applied to influence behavior in actual work situations.

Studying management or supervision is like studying metaphysics in that, as Aristotle remarked 2000 years ago, 40 is an appropriate age to begin since experience is an essential ingredient. Management is an art, not just a science, and good results are obtained only when knowledge and action are combined. Thus, valid research findings must necessarily be of great help to the successful supervisor.

The way we learn, or should learn, to supervise will partially explain the role of research in supervision. The basis of all learning and decision-making is experience.³ The experience on which we base our understanding of a situation or problem in order to learn or make decisions is inherent. In the attempt to understand, insights are gained. To determine whether or not these insights are true, we hearken back to past experience. True judgments about the underlying realities of this past experience are the basis for good decisions. The validity of such decisions can only be verified by experience. Theories are used to organize our experience into meaningful patterns so that we can understand the supervisory process and predict (with some probability of success) what course of action will obtain the desired results most effectively and efficiently.

We can all improve our supervisory talents. The first thing to do is raise our level of consciousness and become aware of what is happening with regard to the supervisory process. Research is the formal tool allowing us to verify the judgments of management theorists. Decisions based on these judgments are subject to the same review.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN STUDIES

Rensis Likert performed a set of studies at the University of Michigan which were primarily concerned with discovering the principles and methods of effective leadership.⁴ The studies were conducted in a wide variety of industries and data were collected from thousands of employees.

Two distinct styles of supervision were identified: job-centered and employee-centered. The job-centered leader closely supervises subordinates so that they perform their tasks using only specified procedures. Coercion, reward and legitimate power are used to influence their behavior and performance. Concern for people is viewed as necessary, but is not always taken into consideration. The employee-centered leader, on the other hand, believes in delegating decision-making and in helping followers satisfy their needs by providing a supportive work environment. He or she is also concerned with the personal growth and achievement of subordinates.

These two behavioral styles were tested by Morse and Reimer in a study involving more than 500 clerical employees for a period of one year.⁵ These employees were located in four divisions which were organized in a similar manner, used the same kind of technology, did much the same kind of work, and employed similar kinds of people. In two divisions, job-centered supervision was used for the one-year period, and in the other two, employee-centered supervision. During that time, production output was measured continually. Supervisor and employee attitudes, perceptions and other variables were measured before and after the experimental year.

Production under both systems increased about equally. However, under employee-centered supervision, the employees themselves reduced the size of the work force and developed many procedural changes which helped increase productivity. The satisfaction indicators (e.g., absenteeism, turnover and attitudes) also improved. In the job-centered divisions, rewards and promotions were integrated mainly with production results, which helped attain short-term improvement but which could become counterproductive in the long run. The conclusion reached here, and by Likert and other researchers involved in similar studies, is that employee-centered supervision is more effective.

Likert's studies at Michigan led him and his coworkers to postulate System 4, a theory aimed at integrating all our experiences as supervisors into a whole. This in turn would enable us (1) to formulate yet more research, and (2) to supervise, knowing that at least some practice has been verified.⁶ The whole notion of organizational development is based on the assumption that an organization's most important resource is the people who function within it. As they develop, the theory goes, it is probable that organizational objectives will be achieved more effectively.

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY STUDIES

Another significant research study on leadership was conducted at Ohio State University after World War II.⁷ This study was based on a 2-factor theory of leadership: initiating structure and consideration. Initiating structure refers to a supervisor's behavior of organizing and defining work-group relationships as well as establishing well-defined channels of communication. In this model, the means of getting a job done are defined by the supervisor, not the work-group members. Consideration refers to behavior in which friendship, mutual trust and rapport exist between supervisor and employees. These two factors were used to describe leadership behavior in organizational settings. The researchers sought to assess supervisors' perceptions of their own optimum behavior in leadership roles as well as employee perceptions of supervisory behavior.

Part of the study compared supervisors with different consideration and initiating structure scores in terms of various performance measures. These performance measures were obtained from proficiency ratings made by plant management and included other factors such as unexcused absenteeism, accidents, formally filed grievances, and employee turnover. Data on these variables were gathered for an 11-month period for each supervisor's work group.

Supervisors who worked in production divisions were compared to supervisors in nonproduction divisions. In the production divisions there was a positive correlation between proficiency and initiating structure and a negative correlation between consideration and proficiency. The findings were reversed in the nonproduction divisions.

In extrapolating these findings to libraries, proficient technical services supervisors ought to score high on initiating structure, and proficient public services supervisors should score high on consideration. However, studies also concluded that high initiating structure and low consideration scores correlated with greater absenteeism, accidents, grievances and turnover.

THE CONTINGENCY LEADERSHIP MODEL

The third study to be considered is that which Fiedler conducted over a decade ago at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.⁸ The model he developed and researched hypothesized that leadership is a relationship based on power and influence, and that group performance is dependent on the interaction of leadership style and situation favorableness. Two questions were formulated to address the influence of these two variables. The first concerns the degree to which the situation provides the supervisor with the power and influence needed to be effective, and the second questions the extent to which supervisors can predict the effects of their leadership styles on the performance and behavior of employees.

Three situational factors were proposed which would influence a supervisor's effectiveness: leader/member relations, task structure and position power. The interpersonal relationships between supervisor and employees are considered to be the most important variable. This factor reflects the acceptance of the supervisor and is measured in two ways: (1) a sociometric preference scale on which employees indicate whether they accept a superior, and (2) a group atmosphere scale which consists of ten 8-point items to be answered by employees.

The second most important measure of situation favorableness is task-structure. This variable includes the following components: goal clarity, goal-path multiplicity, decision verifiability, and decision specificity. These four components indicate the degree to which employees'

jobs are either routine or nonroutine. Goal clarity refers to the group members' understanding of a task's requirements. Goal-path multiplicity is an index of the degree to which the task can be completed by various procedures, methods or alternate solutions. Decision verifiability targets the degree to which appropriateness of the solution can be demonstrated either by appeal to authority, logical procedures or feedback. Finally, decision specificity refers to the degree to which there may be more than one correct solution. (For instance, in cataloging there may be only one correct main entry, while there may be a multitude of ways to answer a reference question.)

The third situational factor is position power and refers to the power inherent in the leadership or supervisory position. This variable includes the rewards and punishments usually associated with the position, the official authority based on ranking in the hierarchy, and the support that the supervisor receives from superiors and the overall organization.

Leadership style is measured by evaluating supervisor responses to a Least-Preferred Coworker (LPC) questionnaire. Supervisors who rate their least-preferred coworker in favorable terms (high LPC) are identified as people-oriented and supportive. Those supervisors who give low LPC ratings are considered more task-oriented.

By using his 3-dimensional model, LPC scores and research findings, Fiedler postulated that job-centered supervisors function best in certain types of situations and employee-centered supervisors function best in others. Thus, a manager's effectiveness can be improved by assignment to a situation that is appropriate to his or her managerial style. For example, a supervisor in a structured situation with a strong position of power who has a good relationship with the work group should find that a job-centered style would be effective. Supervisors of catalog card production units in large academic libraries, who are popular with their employees and whose word is law, could use a very directive managerial style that emphasizes task completion and expect both effective and efficient results. On the other hand, a supervisor with an unstructured task to perform, a weak position of power, and only a moderately good relationship with the work groups, would be more effective with an employee-centered style.

Fiedler and Chemers advocate engineering the situation to fit the style of the supervisors.⁹ Supervisor/employee relations can be restructured to make background, educational level or technical expertise more compatible. Unions and civil service rules, however, can make this kind of adjustment difficult. Tasks can be made more structured by precisely spelling out the details of the job, and less structured by providing only general instructions. Supervisor position power can also be modi-

fied in many ways, e.g., a higher rank in the organization or more authority to do the job can be given.

Fiedler does not advocate leadership training.¹⁰ In fact, his own studies indicate that such training is not effective, that supervisors with a lot of training perform about as well as those with little or no training. The practical suggestions offered by the results of Fiedler's research may not be feasible in every organizational setting, including libraries. Reality has a way of thwarting the implementation of possible situational changes.

A more recent set of studies deals with the path-goal theory which suggests the four different leadership styles that can be and are being used by supervisors: directive, supportive, participative and achievement-oriented.¹¹ The path-goal theory assumes that these four styles are used by the same leader in different situations. The directive style of leadership is characterized by the assigning of particular tasks, specifying of procedures and scheduling of work. The supportive leader reduces frustrating barriers to task completion, especially in times of stress. The participative style can be recognized by the subordinate's involvement with the leader in task assignment, procedure specification and work scheduling. The achievement-oriented leader is more concerned with the task to be completed than with the feelings and expectations of subordinates. As this theory is relatively new, there have only been a limited number of studies testing its assumptions.

The last model to be considered here is the Vroom and Yetton Model.¹² The purpose of this model is to identify the appropriate leadership style for particular situations. The leadership styles are defined in terms of subordinate participation in decision-making. At one end of the model spectrum, the leadership style specifies that the leader will make the decision, and at the other end, that the leader and the rest of the work group will arrive at a consensus decision. A matrix has been developed using five leadership styles and seven key situational questions, answers to which indicate the appropriate leadership behavior. While the research findings on this model are not yet available, the theory has a certain attractiveness to practicing supervisors who are looking for training to aid them in becoming more effective.

CONCLUSION

The practical conclusions that can be drawn from the research findings concerning job-centered and employee-centered supervision are not entirely conclusive. However, the spectrum of both situations and leadership styles, ranging from job-centered to employee-centered, accommodate most of us.

In libraries, as in other organizations, we should learn what styles

we are capable of using. Even though we may have a propensity to exhibit one style rather than another, most of us are able to adjust to different situations and interpersonal relationships. The art of supervision, then, first calls for an awareness of oneself and one's leadership style. Then we must become aware of the relevant needs of employees and the significant factors in the job situation. Effective supervision requires appropriate adjustment to employees, situations, particular tasks and oneself. Supervision is a creative act in which we participate to bring about desired results. To be effective supervisors, we need to use the research findings that have been verified in order to improve our own effectiveness.

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