

Supervisor's Breakout

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The rising STAR of Texas

Supervising and Managing Staff

“Supervision is. . . a helping process, which is designed to support staff as they seek to promote the goals of the organizations and to advance their professional development” (p. 194). This implies that supervision continues throughout a career and that supervision is a collaborative enterprise. Winston and Creamer (1997, p.196) call their model “synergistic supervision,” the components of which follow.

Supervising and Managing Staff

Dual Focus

The supervisor is concerned not only with essential unit and institutional functions, but with the personal and professional well-being of subordinates. Responsibility and decision making are shared to the full extent practicable, so that all come to feel ownership in tasks and for unit identity. Supervisees, on the other hand, experience a pleasant work environment that is responsive to their needs and goals and come to understand that success for the unit will enhance their personal growth as well.

Supervising and Managing Staff

Joint Effort

Supervision is a cooperative venture, a collaboration in goal setting and strategizing between and among the supervisor and coworkers. A commitment to shared effort is essential. The traditional breakdown of “management and labor” simply will not work, especially among student affairs professionals, whose goals and progress are not always clear.

Supervising and Managing Staff

Two-way Communication

Concomitant to joint effort is meaningful dialogue around personal and work styles and processes. Open, direct feedback and a more-than-typical depth of knowledge of non-work and professional activities are key characteristics of synergistic supervision. Supervisors must work to create a comfortable, non-punitive environment.

Supervising and Managing Staff

Focus on Competence

Synergistic supervisors do not look for weaknesses, but concentrate on strengths, both present and needed. Where present, the strengths are capitalized upon through appropriate coordination of duties, delegation of responsibilities, and clear and open mutual recognition. Where absent and needed, the supervisor and the supervisee cooperate in assessment and plan for development through reading, formal and informal coursework and professional association involvement among others. The WCSM suggested that staff competence be thought of in four areas: knowledge and information, work related skills, personal skills, and attitudes. Positive attitudes are considered to be as essential to job performance and work environment as any of the foregoing.

Supervising and Managing Staff

Growth Orientation

Clearly, employees of different ages and career stages have different needs that must be taken into account in the synergistic supervision model. Time is not spent on correcting employees or creating elaborate systems to assure compliance to top-down rules. Rather accountability springs from shared ownership of activities and results. Hence, professional and personal goals, development, and growth are somewhat merged. This makes for a more satisfying work environment, but also complicates supervision because many more variables and contexts must be taken into account.

Supervising and Managing Staff

Proactivity

Traditional supervision models have often relied upon a “gotcha” mentality. When employees made mistakes, they were “caught” by supervisors and “punished” or corrected. With synergistic supervision in place, employees and supervisors would have scanned the environment for imminent problems well in advance and have a jointly constructed plan in place for dealing with them. Employees would have no need to hide activities or issues. Supervisory meetings take the form of update and brainstorming sessions, integrated, common and free of fear and trepidation.

Supervising and Managing Staff

Goal-based

Synergistic supervision does not discard the brain to soothe the heart. Mutually arrived at goals, established within the context of unit, divisional, and institutional planning mechanisms, create written, specific expectations and measures.

Winston and Creamer (1997) recommended that individual goals be set every six months for subsequent six-month, year, and five year periods, then monitored in meetings held for that purpose at two month intervals.

Supervising and Managing Staff

Systematic and Ongoing Processes

Effective communication and shared responsibility are the hallmarks of synergistic supervision and are only possible within the context of systematic information sharing, updating of expectations, and the absence of continual crises. The model requires a fundamental commitment to group process and a true sharing of authority and power by the supervisor with the group. Staff meetings, as traditionally understood, are not adequate, because scheduling and announcements are not the point. Rather, all members of the unit should engage in a meaningful discussion of progress, potential problems, and shifting priorities regularly.

Supervising and Managing Staff

Holism

Staff members are whole people, no less than students. As such, they deserve support for their personal goals as well as their professional ones because after all is said and done, the two are inseparable. Synergistic supervision suggests that this is as it should be.

Supervising for Professional Development

Staff development and continuing professional education in student affairs is like tending a lawn--most people do it and regard it as a good thing, but few know exactly why. The WCSM holds that staff development is tightly coupled with supervision and performance appraisal and hence subject to the same ethical/moral imperatives to further professional and personal growth.

Supervising for Professional Development

Dual Purposes of Staff and Organizational Development

As in the synergistic supervision conceptualization, developing a staff member ideally contributes to the organizational mission and goals. However, in practice this requires negotiation and a long-term perspective. A person performing a given role may need specified skill training that may not always be of interest or preferred. This could be balanced with a later opportunity to branch out in directions that may be peripherally related to function, but of more intrinsic appeal.

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Supervising for Professional Development

Developmental Plan

The primary problem with staff development activities that are decoupled from other staffing processes is a lack of intentionality. Job functions, short and long term staff member goals, and organizational needs should be joined in a developmental plan. For example, if budget management skills are required for a particular position, the incumbent might be encouraged and supported in taking a course on higher education finance. Not all of the material may be related to current job function, but enough will and the rest may help the division and the person later or in a different context.

Supervising for Professional Development

Process and Product

Student affairs professionals do not expect students to learn facts in isolation. Indeed, the theory of the field recognizes the potency and synergy of many different kinds of cognitive and experiential learning interacting in marvelous and unpredictable ways. Similarly, the very action of assessing, intentionally planning, and then executing developmental goals across a staff creates a cultural parallel to the larger purpose of the organization. Both destination and journey are important.

Supervising for Professional Development

Anchored in Day to Day Work

Sometimes the connections between the need for staff development and changing position requirements are obvious, other times less so. If staff development is viewed as being linked to supervision and performance appraisal and communication lines are intact, then the relationship between professional development over time and the specific mission will be clear. This may sound circular, but in reality is profound. It bespeaks a fundamental change in the way that many student affairs units do business.

Supervising for Professional Development

Multifaceted, Ever Changing

Humans change constantly. Likewise, organizations, also have shifting needs, priorities, and forms. Staff development that depends upon traditional forms exclusively is virtually doomed to failure in that attendance is not enough--learning requires reflection and practice. Also, staff development may not require “attendance” in a traditional sense. A creative, focused staff development plan can include self-teaching activities, cross-training with other offices, readings, discussion groups, and many other options, limited only by the creativity and needs of those involved.

Supervising for Professional Development

Recognizes Maturation and Growth

Staff development occurs at the nexus of individual professional and personal goals and the needs of the unit, division, and institution. Individual staff members will have varied interests, short and long term goals, dreams, abilities, and backgrounds. We can't expect allied professionals (such as nurses) to undergo the same updating activities as persons who have extensive preparation in student affairs theory. But it may make sense to give allied professionals a basic grounding in such theory and student affairs professionals a short course on student health or alcohol and drug education.

Supervising for Professional Development

Recognizes Maturation and Growth

New professionals require different kinds of activities than do seasoned ones. Mid-managers may need specialized training related to job function while entry level staff members need additional orientation to a functional area. And all staff members will be dealing with the vagaries of lifelong personal development. Taken as a whole, staff development can be seen as a tapestry, rich and full of color. At the individual level, the pattern is less clear. What is clear is that individual and organizational vitality depend upon continuing development in complex and negotiated ways.

Performance Appraisal

The final piece of the WCSM puzzle is performance appraisal and it is the weakest area in practice (Winston & Creamer, 1997; Creamer & Winston, 1999). If good supervision and staff development processes are in place, then performance appraisal ought to follow naturally, as an outgrowth of ongoing conversations and activities. Yet, too many managers appear to consider it as an innocuous waste of time at best or a major irritant and threat at worst.

Performance Appraisal

Dual Purposes of Evaluating Job Performance and Staff Improvement

If there is a consistent failure to meet certain “standards” or goals and the supervisor(s) and employees are convinced that they have done everything possible to correct the problem, the issue is one of improper expectations and the solution is to change goals or realign job descriptions. An “imposed” institutional process can be rendered individually meaningful through synergistic supervision and an active staff development program. Unit and division goals are likewise served through constant scrutiny and attention.

Performance Appraisal

Productivity and Reward Structure

In resource-poor student affairs environments, salary increments are scarce and often contested. Hence, openness and patience in the ideal model may fall prey to a “look good” orientation for employees and a “productivity now” mode for supervisors. When raises and rewards are episodic, variable, competitive, and zero-sum structured, they are detrimental to a negotiated supervision, development, appraisal schema. Rewards will almost invariably be considered one of the things that stimulate employee development, but only one, and therefore should be kept in proper perspective throughout the institution.

Performance Appraisal

Contextual Standards

Things change. Goals set six months ago may seem ludicrous in retrospect. Staff changes resulting in realignment of duties, realization of barriers not previously obvious, and any number of time-consuming disasters can radically impact expected performance. Consequently, the supervisor/evaluator must take the entire context into account when appraising performance. This is reasonably feasible to accomplish in the WCSM because of the constant communication that makes the issue moot by the time the formal evaluation conference occurs.

Performance Appraisal

Participative and Interactive Appraisal

It makes little sense on the one hand to posit a system of interaction in supervision and staff development and on the other impose an appraisal process from the top down. Even when a prescribed institutional process is in place, there should be a humane, thorough, and stakeholder-owned process extant in the division and unit. Even a prescribed process should be open to negotiation--that is what synergism means.

Performance Appraisal

Attributes of Clarity, Openness, and Fairness

Ethics, a growth and improvement orientation, attention to variety and diversity of views and cultures, and professionalism all demand a transparent, equitable performance appraisal system. There should be no surprises. However, it must be recognized that any human system is fallible. It is conceivable that one or more of the values of clarity, openness, and fairness may be abrogated by complex events in rare cases. Even when this happens, if the overall staffing model is positive and consistent, the damage should be minimal.

Performance Appraisal

Ongoing Review of Position and Performance

Like all aspects of the WCSM, performance appraisal requires time, energy, and commitment. It is easier to complete meaningless forms once a year and treat them as if they have meaning (the current practice in many institutions) than to enter into a constant state of negotiation and adjustment. Nevertheless, complex systems and processes require flexibility and vigilance.

Performance Appraisal

Workable Formats that Avoid Systematic Bias

Everyone in an organization knows when the appraisal system is not working. Supervisors, those evaluated, and those using the data all come to participate with disdain and work around the bad process.. The WCSM principles will result in a member-owned system if followed properly. It will also forbid systematic bias of illegal, unethical, or senseless types. Supervisors must be careful to look for patterns in their own evaluation results and debrief themselves with peers and supervisors, as appropriate.

Performance Appraisal

Workable Formats that Avoid Systematic Bias

A good performance appraisal system considers context, rejects bias, fits the organizational culture, and is integral to other staffing practices. It is ongoing, consistent, and genuine. Both formal and informal practices are honored. Rewards are distributed as fairly as possible, but they are not, in and of themselves, the point. Rather the goal is to get the organization's work done in a way that is respectful of employees and their personal and professional needs without sacrificing hard-minded cost effectiveness.