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An Applied Model for Supervision in Student Affairs

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Abstract

Supervision is an essential part of the operation of a division of student affairs. However, staff who supervise often receive no formal training. While supervision is discussed in the literature, there is insufficient direction for supervisor behaviors based on an assessment of supervisee level of development and performance. This article outlines the rationale for a more in depth analysis of four possible supervisee levels with recommendations for appropriate supervisor behavior based on two guidelines: Task and Emotional Proximity.

An Applied Model for Supervision in Student Affairs

Supervision of personnel is a primary task for most professionals in student affairs. A staff member might find him/herself supervising colleagues ranging from graduate assistants to directors of programs. However, approximately half of student affairs professionals do not receive any formal training in supervision skills (Winston & Miller, 1991). Moreover, while there are models of supervision in student affairs literature, only one (Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003) has a developmental focus.

A number of authors have attempted to clarify the role of supervision in student affairs. Dalton (1996) defines it as "talent development" and includes recommendations for performance goals, outcome measurement, and training. Schuh and Carlisle (1991) define it as the opportunity for one staff member to provide structure and support to another staff member with a focus on the relationship. Arminio and Creamer (2001) address the nature of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee, which they believe can impact productivity and morale. Upcraft (1988) focuses on the needs of the organization, with the supervisor primarily responsible for outcomes. Specific concerns related to supervision have also been addressed: recruitment and orientation (Saunders, S. & Cooper, D., 2003), staff development (Cooper, D., 2003), issues of diversity (Roper, L., 2011), and appraisal of performance (Creamer, Janosik, 2003).

Several models for good supervision in student affairs are described in the literature (Upcraft, 1988; Winston & Creamer, 1998; Janosik et al. 2003; Stock-Ward & Javorek, 2003). Upcraft offers a four-step model of recruiting, orienting, supervising and evaluating with an emphasis on the needs of the organization. Winston and Creamer's model of synergistic supervision focuses on the interaction between the individual and the institution; it is a helping

tool with "dual focus; joint effort; two-way communication; focus on competence; goals; systematic, ongoing processes, and growth orientation" (Winston & Creamer, 1998, p. 30). Janosik et al. address professional development and performance appraisal.   Ignelzi and Whitley (2004) link the supervisees' personal and professional development. Stock-Ward and Javorek (2003) come closest to describing a developmental model. Drawing on the Integrated Developmental Model (IDM) from the field of psychology (Stoltenberg, McNeill, & Delworth, 1998), they apply the concept of three levels of supervisee development. A recent edition of *New Directions for Student Services on Supporting and Supervising Mid-Level Professionals* (No. 136, Winter 2011, Jossey-Bass. Wiley: San Francisco), while not offering a specific model of student affairs supervision, draws on several broader areas including self-authorship, leadership, and supervision of graduate students.

The above models and recommendations offer helpful strategies for supervisors; however, none provides sufficient texture and context to address the complex nature of supervisee behavior and requisite supervisor behavior. For example, most of the models do not elaborate on the developmental process of the supervisee and the need for the supervisor to have the skills to adapt his/her approach accordingly.   More specifically, the characteristics of the underperforming supervisee and implications for the supervisor are not addressed. What is needed is a model (or map) that takes into account the possible developmental levels of supervisees at particular levels — including underperforming — and clarifies the requisite behaviors for supervisors in consequence. If there are specific themes in behaviors common to supervisees, effective supervisors can adapt their supervision skills to attend to both the growth of the supervisee and the achievement of institutional goals.

As mentioned, other professions—specifically psychology and leadership— have developed models of supervision that contain relevant context and application to student affairs. The IDM model (Stoltenberg et al., 1998) also referenced by Stock-Ward and Javorek (2003) describes supervision for counselors-in-training, and is based on the concept that supervisees are or should be in a process of growth. The authors describe three developmental levels of supervisees with distinct characteristics for each: beginning, intermediate, and advanced. At the beginning level, supervisees must feel safe and therefore supervisors need to create a secure environment where supervisees can admit to mistakes and ask for clarity regarding tasks. Frequent and structured contact is suggested. At the intermediate level, supervisees tend to vacillate between independence and dependence and need a more collaborative approach from their supervisor. Encouragement of self-exploration but with firmness when necessary can be helpful. At the advanced level, supervisees are well-developed in their professional skills, and supervisors can take more of a mutual problem-solving approach with them. A chief advantage of this model is the supervisor's ability to accurately identify the supervisee's level of development and provide appropriate guidance based on that level. The model also points out that a supervisee may be at one level with respect to task A, but at another with respect to task B, and so forth.

Hersey and Blanchard (1988) provide a developmental model from leadership literature called Situational Leadership. As with the IDM model, it can easily be adapted to student affairs supervision. Here, both the model and corresponding behavior of the leader (supervisor) are based on the concept of readiness of the individual or group to be led. The Style of the Leader is laid out on a 2 x 2 continuum with Task Behavior (Guidance) on one axis and Relationship Behavior (Support) on the other. For instance, if a supervisee is new or lacks willingness to

perform, stronger leadership style is required, including implementation of such Task Behaviors as providing specific instructions and exhibiting low Relational Behavior.   As the individual's readiness and preparedness increase, the leader can increase Relational Behavior such as providing positive feedback, but continue close monitoring. As the individual reaches a greater level of readiness and competence, the leader can continue the Relational aspects but back off the Task Behavior. Finally, when the individual reaches a high level of competence, the leader can provide both less Relational and Task Behaviors.

These two models offer helpful constructs for a student affairs supervision model but are insufficient as stand-along models to fulfill that need. The IDM model is more applicable to professionals in training (doctoral interns in psychology) and lacks the practical advice to supervisors for specific interventions. The Hersey-Blanchard Model provides practical suggestions for supervisors but lacks description of various levels of supervisee development.

Proposed Model

This model expands on the developmental aspects of the Stock-Ward and Javorek (2003) model by combining parts of the IDM and Hersey and Blanchard. Specifically, this model incorporates assessment of developmental level of supervisee and implementation of specific supervision skills based on that assessment. In addition to positing three developmental levels—Beginning, Emerging, and Advanced—the model adds a fourth, Underperforming. It also provides two categories of supervisor behavior: Task Direction and Emotional Proximity. The goal of the model is to encourage maximum developmental opportunities for the supervisee as well as to serve the goals of the institution.

Assessment of the developmental level of the supervisee. In order for a supervisor to be effective, he or she needs to have a sense of the developmental level of the supervisee. By

considering a range of behavioral characteristics, a supervisor can determine a supervisee's

approximate level: Beginning, Emerging, Advanced, or Underperforming. See Figure 1 for

descriptions of supervisee behaviors associated with each of these levels.

Figure 1.	**Assessment of Supervisee**		
	Supervisee Behaviors Exhibited		
Beginning	**Emerging**	**Advanced**	**Underperforming**
☐ Lack of confidence or over-confidence ☐ Role confusion ☐ Disorganization/lack of planning skill ☐ Lack of institutional knowledge/skill ☐ Aggression or passivity ☐ Lack of professional skill	☐ Lack of confidence or over-confidence ☐ Limited skills ☐ Limited self-knowledge ☐ Development/acquisition of new skills ☐ Confusion/possible lack of direction ☐ Issues with competency ☐ Issues with autonomy ☐ Issues with identity ☐ Issues with direction ☐ Issues with motivation ☐ Issues with authority ☐ Issues with emotional awareness ☐ Limited clarity of role ☐ Concern that tasks are performed well and that the proper tasks are being done.	☐ Confidence ☐ Understanding of individual and organizational assessment ☐ Accountability ☐ Ability to produce high quality work ☐ Effective communication ☐ Strong initiative ☐ Good planning and organizational skills ☐ Ability to work independently ☐ Ability to meet deadlines ☐ Creative problem-solving ☐ Sound ethics ☐ Strong leadership skills ☐ Strong followership skills ☐ Ability to work well in teams ☐ Interest in professional development ☐ Good stewardship of resources ☐ Understanding of big picture ☐ Professional competency ☐ Ability to act on feedback	☐ Lack of confidence or over-confidence ☐ Role confusion ☐ Disorganization/lack of planning skill ☐ Lack of institutional knowledge/skill ☐ Passivity ☐ Lack of professional skill ☐ Tendency to blame/be the victim ☐ Lack of initiative/failure to meet deadlines ☐ Unwillingness to communicate/share ☐ Hostility ☐ Bullying behaviors towards other employees or students ☐ Discomfort with accountability. ☐ Resistant to providing specific performance results ☐ Poor work habits ☐ Negative attitude ☐ Lack of ownership of problem behavior ☐ Substance abuse issues ☐ Mental health issues

Determination of supervisory style based on supervisee level. Given the possible range of supervisee expertise and performance, all supervisors should consider having a repertoire of skills for working with a supervisee. These include an ability to give clear instruction, assess tasks, communicate in a directive style and/or relational fashion, demonstrate a solid knowledge of student affairs with particular expertise in his or her area of supervision, and show willingness to allow a supervisee to take on new responsibilities. Moreover, the supervisor needs to be flexible in his or her supervision style, adapting it to the developmental level of the supervisee as necessary. Over time, this process can recycle multiple times with new assessments of the supervisee's developmental level and appropriate revisions to the supervisor's style based upon changes in level. This recycling continues throughout the life of the supervisory relationship. Figure 2 provides a continuum of High to Low Task Guidance and High to Low Emotional Proximity descriptions of supervisee behaviors and supervisor recommended behaviors based on the Hersey and Blanchard model.

Figure 2.

Supervisor *Task Guidance*	Supervisee LEVEL	Supervisor *Emotional Proximity*
HIGH Task Guidance • Knowledge attainment and skills building. Teaching by supervisor and learning by supervisee • Frequent and direct evaluation of work • Identification of special training opportunities to enhance skills	LEVEL 1: BEGINNING OR UNDERPERFORMING	**LOW Emotional Proximity** • Structured supervision sessions • Prescriptive interventions • Direct teaching • Clear accountability • Maintenance of a more authoritarian relationship without close emotional proximity
MID Task Guidance • Flexibility in supervision style – firm when supervisee is challenging • Greater allowance for decision-making and direction-setting as supervisee skills permit • Encouragement of solidifying skills • Identification of special training opportunities to enhance skills	LEVEL 2: EMERGING	**HIGH Emotional Proximity** • Less formal supervision • Emotional proximity and support more readily available • Provision of emotional support to deal with issues but with firmness and consistency in the face of supervisee challenges
LOW Task Guidance • Less structured meetings • Mutual agenda setting • Mutual goal setting • Input by both supervisor and supervisee on success in accomplishments • Encouragement of shared learning and new initiatives (to avoid stagnation)	LEVEL 3: ADVANCED	**LOW Emotional Proximity** • Greater mutuality and less emotional support from supervisor to supervisee • Allowance for autonomy

Application of Model in Case Studies

Level One (Beginning) moving towards Level Two (Emerging).

The supervisee. A student affairs staff member supervised a master's level graduate assistant on a project. The student presented as timid and quiet initially. This, combined with the fact that the supervisee was beginning a task involving new skills, indicated to the supervisor that the supervisee was at Level One. As a result, the supervisor took a directive approach and was friendly but maintained an air of authority.

The supervisor set firm deadlines which the student met. The student was cooperative, but continued to be reticent and rather shy in interactions with the supervisor. Over time, however, the student seemed to gain in confidence. Her work was very good, and the supervisor consistently gave the student positive feedback. By the completion of the project, the student was taking initiative to present the completed project at a staff meeting (Level Two). She still sought direction from the supervisor but treated it more as consultation. As she approached completion of her master's degree, she applied for jobs and sought advice from the supervisor, but it was clear that she was weighing advice versus taking it as directive. After her second job offer, the student had gained enough confidence to negotiate a higher salary in the position she accepted.

The supervisor. The supervisor appropriately started out as very directive since the student was at Level One. The supervisor continued with a fairly strong authoritarian /low emotional intimacy approach throughout much of the work with the student. Towards the completion of the student's project, it was clear to the supervisor that the student was moving to a Level Two with respect to this particular task. As a result, the supervisor shifted behaviors slightly towards Level Two and was less instructive, directive, and emotionally distant.

What is interesting to note about this case study is that supervisee development is dependent on the setting, goals to be accomplished, and relationship with the institution. This particular case involved a student and short-term supervision on a very specific task. The supervisee thus moved from Level One to Level Two in a relatively short period. It is quite likely however that this same individual would go back to a Level One in her first position as a student affairs professional.

Summary.

Supervisee behaviors: issues with competency in completing a project; passivity; and lack of confidence.

Recommended supervisor behaviors: directive instruction; prescriptive interventions; structured sessions; focus on "how to"; emphasis on clear accountability; and establishment of hierarchical relationship.

Level Two (Emerging).

The supervisee. This employee accepted an assistant director position in a student affairs office. She came from another institution where she held a similar position. Her initial adjustment could have placed her at Level One, but due to her previous training and experience, she quickly learned about the institution and her specific responsibilities. Within a few weeks she manifested behaviors consistent with Level Two. The challenges for her at this point, since she possessed the requisite skills for the position and could perform the basic tasks, were related to her personal career direction. She was unsure as to whether she wanted to stay in her current position or apply for the next level in administration either at this institution or another. She questioned her competency from time to time, but showed over-confidence on other occasions. She was interested in performing a variety of tasks in her current position but seemed unable to

carve out a clear area of expertise for herself.   While she completed basic tasks successfully, she struggled to define her professional identity.

The supervisor. The supervisor initially provided a structured approach with regular and frequent meetings and clear task assignments in order to help the supervisee adapt to the new setting. Later the supervisor moved to a less structured approach but with continued frequency of meetings and high emotional support. The supervisor assisted the supervisee in career planning, skills acquisition, and goal-setting.

Level Two often presents the greatest challenge to a supervisor since a range of supervisory behaviors are required. The supervisee may move about in his or her development due to both increased competence and increased challenges. In this case study the supervisee had the skills to perform the tasks of her position, but she was uncertain about her own career direction. The supervisor needed to be flexible in providing her with independence in decision-making and reduced focus on task-guidance but, at the same time, give her emotional support for her personal career challenges. Given this level of supervisory support, the supervisee could both develop professionally at a Level Two level in her current position and responsibilities and also mature emotionally in her own assessment of her career path. This supervisee chose to continue in her current position for two more years and solidified her skills, thus moving gradually to Level Three before deciding to conduct a job search at a next level of administration.

Summary.

Supervisee behaviors: initial lack of knowledge of specific duties increased confidence with time; and confusion about career direction.

Recommended supervisor behaviors: initial teaching and instruction; greater emotional intimacy and support; and reduced focus on task-oriented guidance over time.

Level Three (Advanced).

The supervisee. The supervisee had worked in a student affairs division for a number of years. Functioning as a coordinator for a specific area of responsibility within his office, he was respected by other staff, and served as a role model for newer staff.   He contributed to a positive work environment through his cheerful demeanor. His work habits were exemplary as was his ethical behavior. He was active professionally, presenting annually at conferences and staying current in the professional literature in his field.

The supervisor. The supervisor met with the supervisee on a monthly basis — significantly less than with newer staff. The supervisor and the supervisee often worked on joint projects, and the supervisor relied on the supervisee's knowledge in his specific area of expertise.

Level Three supervisees may appear to be the easiest to supervise, and in many ways that is true. The supervisee-supervisor relationship offers rewarding opportunities for collaboration, and the supervisor does not need to monitor the supervisee as closely. However, it should be pointed out that a Level Three supervisee can shift into an Underperforming supervisee if left completely unchallenged and unmonitored. All supervisees need some level of supervisor concern and feedback on their performance.

Summary.

Supervisee behaviors: accountability; respected by other staff; role model for other staff; cheerful demeanor; professional competency; exemplary ethical behavior; interest in professional development; effective communication; and ability to work independently.

Recommended supervisor behaviors: as needed supervision; collaborative relationship; reliance on supervisee's areas of expertise and performance; and maintenance of sufficient challenges and new tasks for supervisee.

Underperforming (Level One).

The supervisee. The supervisee was a unit head in a division of student affairs for many years. He was pleasant, got along with people at the university, and appeared to be cooperative. However, he often behaved in a passive-aggressive manner toward his new supervisor. For example, he would agree to complete tasks and then simply not do them under the guise of being too busy. At issue was a basic disagreement between the supervisee and the supervisor. The supervisee had operated the unit in a particular way for a long period, and he was resistant to the supervisor's philosophy of the unit and approach to delivering services.

The supervisor. Initially, the supervisor engaged the employee as he did his other supervisees: he focused on developing a cordial relationship and learned about the supervisee's view of his work and his goals for the office. As the supervisor began to ask questions and make suggestions for improvement or change, the supervisee seemed open to the supervisor's ideas; however, he gradually became more defensive. The supervisor continued to discuss the reasons that the new direction was important and desirable. After several years of that approach, the supervisor appointed and chaired a task force, which included the supervisee, to review student needs for the supervisee's office. The task force report enabled the supervisor to confront the supervisee regarding his commitment to leading the unit forward and "opened the door" for the supervisor to encourage the supervisee to consider leaving his role through a move or retirement. After much consideration, the supervisee decided to retire and a new staff member was hired to implement the task force recommendations.

This case study brings out several issues in developmental supervision. A new supervisor can be challenged when the supervisee has been with the institution for an extended period of time. It may be natural for a supervisor to assume certain skills and professionalism of such a supervisee, but experience is not always a guarantee of strong performance. This case study also points to the fact that one style of supervision does not fit all. What may have worked with a Level 3 supervisee did not work with this Underperforming supervisee and eventually resulted in his leaving the institution.

Summary.

Supervisee behaviors: lack of initiative/failure to meet deadlines; unwillingness to communicate/share; aggressive and/or passivity; discomfort with accountability; and negative attitude.

Ineffective supervisor behaviors: highly relational; too trusting; too patient; lenient about autonomy; and too informal about accountability.

Recommended supervisor behaviors: highly directive; more prescriptive expectations; and clearer accountability.

One of the most difficult aspects of being a supervisor is dealing with underperforming individuals. They can be time-consuming for the supervisor and present numerous challenges. The supervisor may struggle with how demanding versus forgiving to be. The supervisor may be new and dealing with a long-term underperforming employee. The underperforming employee may be affecting the morale of other employees. The supervisor's supervisor may be pressing the supervisor for greater productivity. Some underperforming employees may present complicating concerns such as ethical violations. While not intended to solve all complex supervisee challenges, this model can provide helpful guidance for confronting a range of difficult supervisee behaviors. However, there are times that serious issues (e.g. substance

abuse, mental health, etc.) may necessitate assistance from other professionals beyond the supervisor.

Conclusion

As we see in the case studies above, supervisors tend to develop a style that is based on their own personality traits as well as their experience and formal training. Often, supervisors rely strictly on their own past supervisors as models or else rely on hunches of what works best. While this may be a comfortable approach for most supervisors, it can fail to take advantage of a more systematic style of supervision with a greater emphasis on specific behaviors and performance of the supervisee. Similarly, wanting to be liked by the supervisee or treating all supervisees alike is a trap that can lead to the perpetuation of problematic behaviors. Successful professionals tend to be those who draw upon helpful feedback from their work setting to become even more successful.

Supervisors can strengthen their skills and provide customized supervision by adapting their approach to suit the behaviors exhibited b**y** their supervisees The advantages to utilizing this approach to supervision include the following: a specific assessment of supervisee behaviors to determine current developmental level, a recommended supervisory approach based on that determination, further assessment of the supervisee's progress, a means of confronting stagnating supervisees, and developmental advancement of the supervisee which then contributes to greater productivity for the institution.

Although the model focuses on behavior, it does not address cross-cultural issues that can be challenging and may impact behavior. The relationship between behavior and culture in supervision warrants further exploration in any behavior based model.

Finally, the interplay between supervisor and supervisee is about aligning supervisor behavior with the needs evident in supervisee behavior, which is the challenge of any supervisory relationship. Since this model intends to improve the effectiveness of this alignment, it could be applicable to other supervisory relationships beyond student affairs in higher education.

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