

## Supervision: Step Back and Examine the Process

Betty Schnettler and Marge Twiname-Dugan

In our hurried working world many of us who work with people find ourselves bombarded with crisis situations that keep us constantly acting and busy. As Confucius said: "We are so busy doing the urgent that we don't have time to do the important."

We have an awareness that we may not be proceeding toward our goals but rather reacting to immediacy and other people's demands but we may not be able to easily alter this pattern.

Supervision is something we practice every day without necessarily understanding or appreciating it. It too often becomes a reactive response rather than a proactive process.

In this article we will ask you to step back from your immediate situation to forget the urgent phone calls, mounds of paperwork and persistent knocks on the door, to step back and examine the process of one part of our working world, supervision.

We're talking about investing several minutes of time now, in the midst of everything, and actually focusing on this subject, which involves a good part of our work time, whether we're involved with paid or non-paid personnel. By really paying attention to the supervision process we feel you'll be able to understand and use the process better and therefore perform this part of your work more effectively and comfortably.

We come to the subject of supervision with a history of individual and joint experiences with it:

- we've been supervised
- we supervise
- we've observed supervision
- we've taught supervision to supervisors
- we've researched the subject
- we've been "workshopped" on it and presented a national workshop on it

With this mass of history it could be said that by now we would truly have "supervision."

Think of the image this conjures up

- seeing through people
- reading their minds
- predicting the future



We do not possess these powers. Our ideas are tentative, growing and still evolving. But we have some insights because we have taken the time to "examine the process" of supervision and we invite you to now do the same.

In beginning to examine supervision we need to realize that we all practice dual roles—supervisor and supervisee. To apply our information to your own situation we suggest that you complete this exercise.

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Exercise #1

A. Write down the name of your direct supervisor—

—is it fuzzy?

—is it somewhat unclear?

—is it a board, advisory council, director, president?

B. Whom do you directly supervise?

Write down name(s) or category of people.

Do they perceive you as a supervisor?

Is it clear? Written down?

C. Whom do you indirectly supervise?

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This and the following exercises should help you think about how our ideas connect with you, and the people you supervise or are supervised by.

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Exercise #2

A. Write down 3 words to describe you as a supervisor.

B. List 3 words that describe your supervisor.

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Our definition of supervision is the challenging process of helping paid and unpaid personnel function at their best. There are several assumptions inherent in this definition.

1. Supervision is *challenging* for both supervisor and supervisee. It involves taking risks, making mistakes. It is creative and growth producing for both sides. It's additionally challenging because most supervisors come to their positions without specific training in the supervision process. Additionally, time for supervision is often limited.

2. Supervision is a *process*. It builds, it grows, it's ongoing. It has stages and involves specific skills. Lawrence Shulman (1982) has studied and written about this aspect of supervision. It is a progression toward goal achievement and involves both administrative and educational aspects.

3. It involves paid and nonpaid personnel such as volunteers and interns. Whether or not money is exchanged does not affect the basic process of supervision which demands respect, belief in people and their abilities.

4. Supervision involves helping people be "their best" not our best. This requires being nonjudgemental and accepting, recognizing that it takes all kinds of people to make a team. Supervisees need to be helped to discover the best that they can be, to be encouraged to grow toward their own goals.

5. Supervision is an interactive process. Both parties must participate.

6. The supervisor must balance his/her support of the supervisee with the fact that the supervisor's ultimate objective is to deliver to agency clients the best possible service, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in congruence with agency policies and procedure.

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Exercise #3

In order to further connect this with your own situation we'd like you to identify a supervisory relationship that you need to focus on, one in which you are supervisor or supervisee.

A. Write down the names of the people in that relationship.

B. List three skills you see yourself possessing in that relationship.

C. List three skills the other person possesses.

D. List one skill the other person lacks or needs to build.

E. List one skill you lack.

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This exercise focuses on the fact that you have power to change this particular relationship. You have skills and so does the other person. (This is sometimes hard to remember when a relationship is a difficult one.) You've also identified a skill you can start to work on yourself to effect change.

We have identified components of the supervisory process. We feel that a more

clear understanding of these elements will result in more appreciation of the process and more focus on carrying it through. It is our experience that investing time and energy considering these components pays dividends in terms of building positive, effective supervisor-supervisee relationships.

The key components of the supervisory process are:

1. Bonding—involves creating connectedness, establishing a base of trust. This begins in the initial contact with the agency and in the initial interview with the supervisor. Trust building is not an easy process but our experience leads us to believe that orienting a supervisee well to the agency and to his or her position builds trust, as does modeling clear communication.

2. Contracting—involves being clear about roles, functions and authority. This sets the style and climate and brings issues out in the open and allows them to be dealt with now rather than facing them later with consequences. Contracting may need to be done periodically as a preventive technique.

3. Mediation—relates to the linkage role of the supervisor. It may involve connecting supervisee and the agency or the supervisee with community resources so that he or she can better meet personal or professional goals. In order to implement these linkages, the supervisor requires these skills: technical knowledge, empathy, communication skills, time management, delegation, goal setting skills, and skill in referring.

4. Communication—People working with people spend a great deal of time listening and communicating. Unless we take the time to tune in to these processes we may become lazy in their use and less effective. We may adopt the correct physical posture for listening without actually concentrating on what another person is saying verbally or nonverbally. We need to periodically evaluate our use of our listening skills. Using audio-visual aids to record ourselves listening and then observing and critiquing our process may be useful even though it may feel uncomfortable.

In listening effectively we must be conscious of the words, the undertones, the display of emotions and the other nonverbal communications. The verbal and the nonverbal may be congruent or at odds.

When we communicate we use eye contact, we reflect feelings and allow silences. Our questions are asked to understand a point. They are open-ended and sometimes tentative.

We are conscious of the stereotypes we hold and our prejudices and how these may be unconsciously communicated to the listener. We are aware that categorizing people or accepting the opinions and biases of others limits our acceptance of other individuals and our ability to communicate with them.

Our written communication (for example, position descriptions, evaluations, and letters of recommendation) is clear and specific.

We risk taboo subjects in our relationships in order to get at barriers and help the supervisees better reach their goals. For example, if a person has difficulty meeting deadlines, the supervisor may need to bring this up as a problem that needs change, even though the supervisee may not want to discuss the issue. If a new supervisor is experiencing resistant behavior from supervisees, he/she may need to bring this out into the open for discussion.

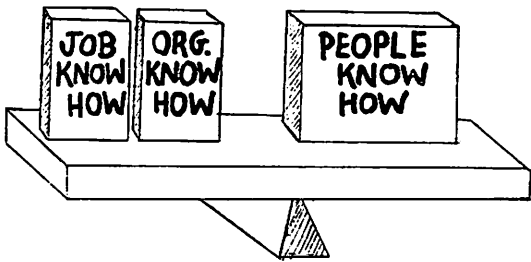
In addition to individual supervisor-supervisee communication, the supervisor must also be aware of communication within the organization. He/She must keep staff aware of information and act as an information link from staff to administration.

5. Handling Conflict—Many people worry about conflict and confrontation and, therefore, it often goes unexplored. It is our feeling that confrontation is a necessary element in supervision and one which can be handled comfortably. Rather than creating hostile reactions, confrontation can unmask distortions and help discontinue feelings and behavior that are destructive. Confrontation should be directed at patterns of dysfunctional behavior rather than individual instances and should help the supervisee see how

behavior may effect action in negative ways. It should always benefit the supervisee and should be done tentatively and respectfully through the use of clear, specific feedback. This feedback should focus on changeable behavior and the confrontation should allow time for response from the supervisee and discussion of the topics.

The supervisor may or may not reach his or her goal in a confrontation but may be able to help the supervisees see barriers which are obstructing their progress. The supervisor may also be the subject of confrontation by the supervisee and must be open to hearing feedback as well as supplying it. A particular challenge to the supervisor will be confronting his or her own supervisor on a particular issue.

6. Self-Balancing—speaks to the vital importance of balancing supervisory concerns. Lester Bittel (1985) sees that one of the greatest challenges of the supervisor is to be as employee-centered as job-centered.



The supervisor requires technical knowledge of the job and the system; organizational knowledge related to how to function in the agency appropriately; and people know-how. This latter relates to the ability to communicate and engage with others, to empathize and work with individuals and groups. The supervisor must maintain a fine balance between these demands and avoid leaning too far in one direction or another. Focusing on only one aspect of this scale will lead to problems in supervision. Constant maintaining of the balance is required.

7. Motivation/Respect Building—People have reasons for behaving in particular ways. These reasons are sometimes logical but are often emotional. A supervisor must realize that that which motivates him or her may be different

from what motivates supervisees. Some people are influenced by money or title, but many people respond more favorably to other forms of recognition or remuneration, *e.g.*, interesting work, appreciation for involvement, or good working conditions. We have observed that fear is a short-lived incentive; whereas, being respected and involved seem to be strong motivators.

There are ways to pull staff members together, to increase their respect for each other and to focus on improving morale in an agency. Such techniques as sharing success stories at staff meetings, sharing written job descriptions and allowing discussion and sharing help each team member understand and value what others do and accomplish.

8. Increased confidence—It is our feeling that attention to the first seven elements of the supervisory process leads to increased confidence in the supervisory role. This develops from congruence and clarity and processing of experiences.

We've described our preferred definition of supervision and examined the elements we see as integral to the supervisory process. This fits into the supervisory cycle illustrated on the following page.

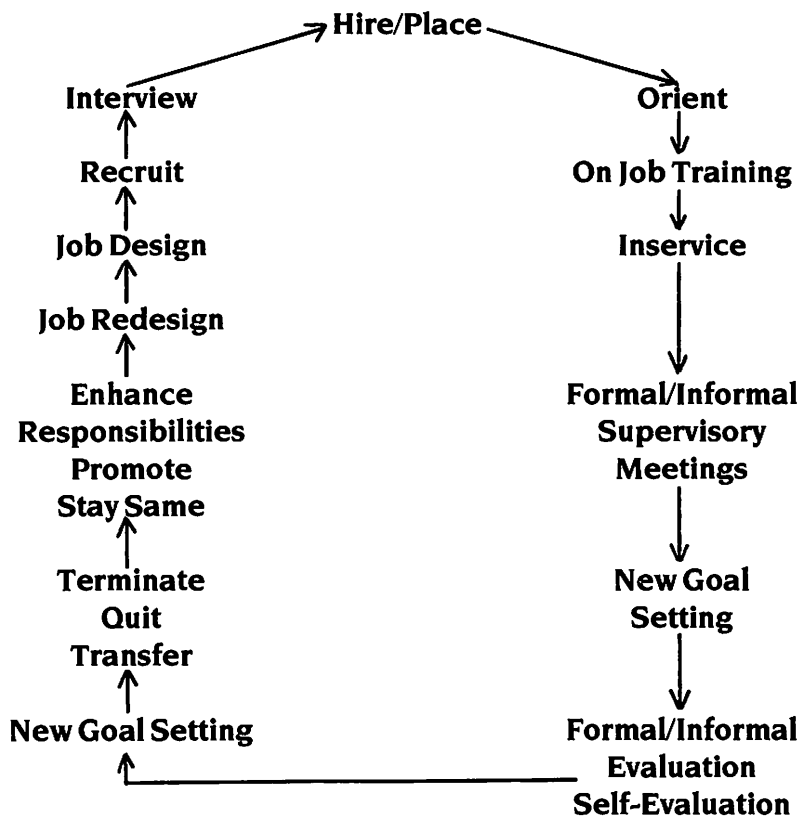
Included throughout this cycle is a focus on recognition. We believe it is integral to all steps of the cycle beginning with the supervisees' introduction to the agency where they are accepted as individuals and treated with respect. Later, when a relationship has developed, recognition is based more on demonstrated abilities and skills as well as task accomplishment.

This supervisory cycle creates the environment in which people can work well together. It is the structure through which the supervisory process can occur. The cycle supports the process.

In this article we have provided a discussion of supervision, the concepts involved in making the process work, a look at the supervisory cycle and described how the process makes the cycle work. Hopefully, you've been able to connect our points with your own situation.

We would like to recognize that there are issues related to supervision that need further attention, *e.g.*, supervising

## Supervisory Cycle



the person who is doing well, male/female issues in supervision, age difference issues, cultural differences and language issues, the community service volunteer.

In conclusion, we suggest you complete this exercise—

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### Exercise #4

- A. On the top of a page write the date of one year from today.
- B. Below that write one point related to supervision that you will have accomplished or are accomplishing on that date—  
*e.g.*, I am a member of a supervisor's networking group that meets once per month.  
 or  
 I have set up regularly-scheduled meetings with all my supervisees.
- C. Place this paper in your desk calendar at a date three months from now. When you reach that date your paper will re-

mind you to work toward your future goals regarding supervision.

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