

The Importance of Supervision in Professional Practice in Federations*

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I would suggest that the unease (of Federation executives) may be produced by the vulnerability of the Federation professional to lay decision-making and an inability to deal with the resultant practice problems openly due to organizational rhetoric which masks the problem and the essential differences between staff and lay volunteers. Indeed, the Federation field seems to accept without question the job title of executive vice-president which blurs the difference between facilitative staff and decision-making board and makes them one and the same.

Rediscovery of Need for Supervisory Practice

During the past five years, there has been an almost complete absence of discussion of supervision in the pages of the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*.¹ Recently, however, the need to undertake continued education of staff employed in Federations was acknowledged with the inclusion of "skills development" in supervision in a list of areas in which the "continued learning" is recommended.² Preceding supervision in importance in this list are the following areas: administration, fiscal management, campaigning, planning, budgeting, endowment development, leadership development, and board development.

This recognition of the need for inclusion of education content in supervision

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¹ The only article on supervision which appeared in the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* between 1975 and 1980 concerns the practice issues involved in supervising senior citizen volunteers in a Center arts and crafts program. See Chaim Joseph Cohen, "Supervision of Senior Citizen Craft Teachers: Goals and Practice," this journal, Vol. LV, No. 1 (1978), pp. 105-111.

² Robert I. Hiller, "Implications for the Profession of the Review of the Council of Jewish Federations," this journal, Vol. LVI, No. 2 (1980), p. 144.

took place with the strongest of endorsements. It grew out of a major survey of Jewish Federation professionals to which nearly half of all staff responded.³ The survey was then reviewed by the leadership of the Council of Jewish Federations. The recommendation for inclusion of content on supervision was made by Robert Hiller, the new Executive Vice-President of the Council.⁴

Why the absence of intellectual ferment with respect to the practice of supervision in all settings? Why should the acquisition of greater understanding and greater competence in supervision receive such attention now? And why, even when it is made a priority for continued education of experienced professionals, does supervision take last place in the array of priorities?

Have we recognized in supervision the classical goal of professional development and have we seen how competent staff are sometimes forced to move to another organization because of limited opportunities for promotion? The irony is that organizational investment in the form of

³ Andrew B. Hahn and Arnold Gurin, "Jewish Federation Professionals: Status and Outlook," this journal, Vol. LVI, No. 2 (1980), p. 126.

⁴ Robert I. Hiller, op. cit., pp. 140-145.

supervision then leads to personnel loss. Have we thus downgraded communal interest and enhanced organizational interests through lowering personnel turnover rates?

Have we assumed that ideological agreement with broad organizational objectives is enough? Have we felt that emulation of experienced staff was sufficient education? Have we thought that hard work would somehow develop competence on its own? Have the old-timers who made it the hard way as pioneering professionals assumed that this was the way new entrants into the field should be inducted as well? Have we assumed that observing, instructing, and assessment of results were the basic ingredients of supervision and that little else was necessary or useful?

Why the interest in supervision now?

Lay leadership experienced in business management are aware of the importance of supervision in executive competence and are aware of the growing literature in supervision in public and business administration. Have such lay leaders encouraged professionals to utilize such intellectual resources in their own work? The range of required competencies in Federation work is quite broad and supervision must be acknowledged as essential to the development and improvement of these competencies. This range includes management or business skills, grantsmanship, community organization, social planning, and "the generic skills of the enabler who is able to motivate lay leadership, build structures and leadership for problem solving and development."⁵ Have professionals come to terms with the need to help staff develop and maintain this wide range of requisite competencies?

The conscious efforts to bring new people in to replace the retiring professionals have given rise to deliberate efforts

⁵ Andrew B. Hahn and Arnold Gurin, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

to facilitate their entry. Have we given special consideration to the need to orient, assist and provide supportive oversight of these new staff members?

Federation professionals have become concerned about the problems attendant to worker burnout. An important paper given at the 1980 meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service called attention to the stress factors facing the Federation professional and others engaged in communal work: long hours, difficulty in disengaging from work, intensity with which work is performed—and the resultant physical and emotional stress for the Jewish communal worker and the family.⁶ Have we begun to recognize that supervision can provide the supports necessary to organize work more effectively, to convey emotional rewards, and to sustain the job security necessary to deal with the continuing conflict and drains on emotional resources attendant to this role in community life?

A final aspect of this renewed interest in supervision may lie in the recognition that old formulas are no longer adequate for dealing with the new situations facing the Jewish communities in the United States. Is supervision being seen as a problem-solving process in which the constantly emerging challenges to Jewish communal organization and their staffs are recognized and discussed, and in which organizational initiatives are framed?⁷

These questions require answers if the

⁶ Edward Lee Cushman, Miriam Scharf Garfinkle, Karen Mendelson Schulman and Linda Ann Singer, "Between Two Loves: The Effects of the Jewish Communal Work Field on the Worker and Family," a paper delivered at the 1980 meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Denver, Colorado. (Mimeo.)

⁷ For a discussion of planning issues which create an agenda to which the supervisory process can be directed, see Louis Levitt, "Social Planning as a Political Process," this journal, Vol. LVI, No. 1, (1979), pp. 77-83.

proposed continued education program in supervision is to effectively meet the needs of practicing professionals.

Supervision as an Organizational Value

When all is said and done, if supervision is to be given priority by organizations in guiding the time allocations of their staffs, it must be seen as of value to organizations in enhancing their capacity to maintain themselves and to achieve organizational goals. Therefore, we need to build an understanding of supervision from an organizational perspective if we are to maintain a priority of attention in practice as well as in continued education.

It is interesting to note that early writings about supervision in social work stressed the organizational dividends to be rendered through utilization of this "process." "The early writings defined it as a broad institutional process which involved providing surveillance of all charitable and correctional institutions and recommending changes that would make them more efficient in operation."⁸ By the turn of the century, the emphasis had moved to individual supervision of the staffs of charitable organizations. "The functions of supervision were to keep the work of the agency up to the standards it set for itself and to promote the professional development of the staff."⁹ Munson suggests that the institutional dimensions of regulation, control and accountability paralleled the development of supervision on an individual basis.¹⁰

Bearing in mind the clarity of this early organizational perspective, we will attempt a formulation of the functions of supervision from a contemporary orientation.

Organizations can be understood "as being composed of a number of groups divided by alternative conceptions, value

preferences and sectional interests" and united by a shared interest in organizational maintenance and enhancement.¹¹ In some organizations, such as Federations, ideology can serve as a unifying force. Relations between individuals in organizations embody patterns of "inequality, dependence and compliance."¹² What we have described is a kind of *centrifugal* force quite capable of pulling the organization apart. If organizational existence is to be characterized by the stability of a dynamic equilibrium, we require another kind of force that pulls in the opposite direction.

What is required for this *centripetal* pull is a sharing of "deep-seated assumptions about the way to approach and proceed" to handle the constant changes and crises which characterize organizational life.¹³ "This shared background of mutual understandings constitutes the agreement between members that enables the orderly production of roles and rules."¹⁴

Relying on this perspective, we define supervision as a process by which an organization, through a specific delineation of staff roles, functions, statuses, and authority relations, attempts to accomplish the following:

- a. Maintain a two-way communications process regarding the continuing redefinition of organizational goals and their achievement.

Through this process, staff learn of goals and changes in their content or priority and plan together with a superordinate person how these changes will be confronted. The return flow of communication permits the executive echelon of the organization to learn of degree of achievement of goals and the conditions in the field which enhance or retard their achievement. In turn, this facilitates decision-making

¹¹ That part of the definition of organization within quotes stems from the work of Stewart Ranson, Bob Hinings and Royston Greenwood, "The Structuring of Organizational Structures," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 1, (March 1980), p. 6.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸ Carlton E. Munson, *Social Work Supervision*. New York: The Free Press, 1979, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

which modifies the content and array of goals, providing a return flow of communication.

In this scheme, mutual problem-solving triggers the information flow both ways rather than the static and lifeless quality associated with the flow of information exclusively through memoranda.

b. Hold staff answerable for the quality and quantity of their work performance.

This part of the process of supervision demands from the superordinate a continuing clarification of what is expected from the subordinate. The supervisee is expected to develop acceptable benchmarks to guide his own work and test these standards in mutual discussion.

c. Provide assistance to staff to facilitate their achievement of organizational goals in accordance with standards set by the organization.

Through such assistance, work problems are defined and objectified, workers learn ways in which such problems may be resolved, shared assumptions are continuously refined, stress factors are shared and defined, and approaches to dealing with them are evolved.

d. Provide opportunities for staff to work towards organizational and professional advancement.

Supervisors help staff think through the practice principles governing problem-solving so that they can move to handle situations other than those discussed in supervision. A conscious approach is taken to continuing to define the new challenges the worker is ready to take on, given the continuing accretion of learning and competence.

e. Provide assistance to staff to think through the emotional problems inevitable in the tight interaction of organizational life, the heavy workloads and the consequential involvement of self with organization and community which seems to characterize Federation work.

In this way, the supervisor acknowledges the normalcy of these problems, helps the worker to understand that he is not alone, and helps the staff member to develop the understanding and self-discipline necessary for such problems to be dealt with in a constructive fashion.

Staff burnout, a form of deep depression about the possibility of success and satisfac-

tion on the job, is not only a function of heavy job responsibilities; it is also a function of the degree of autonomy and responsibility given to the worker, his capacity to utilize this autonomy to handle the challenges of his position and the degree of support provided by the organization through supervision.¹⁵

f. Provide the recognition of achievement, the sense of security of being a valued member of the organization and the sense of certainty which comes from knowing how one is regarded in organizational life.

Organizations can be regarded as economies of incentives and rewards. While monetary rewards are of great importance they are not the only rewards of value. In organizations with significant ideological components, such as Federations, the non-monetary rewards herein described may be of equal value . . . at times even greater.

g. Provide a role model, who in manifesting concern for the welfare of subordinates, and in ethical conduct, provides emulative standards for staff.¹⁶

Staff learn and build-in standards for their own performance through identification with the supervisor. These psychological processes work simultaneously with the cognitive components of learning and act as catalysts for learning. That is, they serve to enhance, deepen or retard cognition.

Attention to supervisory practice may periodically disappear only to be revived when practitioners and scholars join in renewed recognition and study of this essential organizational requirement. At a time of rediscovery of the importance of supervision some twenty years ago, Charles Levy entitled a memorable article, "In Defense of Supervision." He sums up by suggesting that the social work super-

¹⁵ For a research based discussion of the relationship between mental strain and job design and demands, see Robert A. Karasek, Jr., "Job Demands, Job Decision Latitude and Mental Strain: Implications for Job Redesign," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 24, June 1979, pp. 285-307.

¹⁶ See Charles S. Levy, "The Ethics of Supervision," this journal, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1973), pp. 14-21. This subject will also be treated by Dr. Levy in a forthcoming book.

visor, "by virtue of the role to which he is assigned in the agency and by virtue of the relationship through which he activates that role, helps his supervisee to do a better job for the agency and to become a creative and proficient social worker in his own right."¹⁷

From an organizational perspective, supervision thus makes an invaluable contribution. Through supervision, individuals are helped to maximize their contribution to the achievement of organizational goals. At the same time, the organization which inevitably consists of disparate individuals and groups is aided to become a more coherent entity through the evolution and strengthening of shared assumptions of organizational participants and the pooling of their efforts in an additive manner.

Particular Problems of Supervision in Federation Work

I believe that Federation work has an especially frustrating set of factors built into the job. The Federation professional tends to be measured by what is achieved in the areas of organizational life for which he is given responsibility . . . and because money is so often involved, a crude dollar index is frequently utilized for this purpose. The report of the Federation survey utilizes such a calculation in defining staff deployment in the field as one staff member for each \$500,000 raised.¹⁸

The exquisite difference between the Federation professional and other professionals, an architect, for example, is that the architect is responsible for the blueprint and in fact executes it. The Federation professional facilitates the achievement of the campaign goal by others who are usually more affluent and more powerful than the staff member. In planning, the allocative decisions and the blueprints

¹⁷ Charles S. Levy, "In Defense of Supervision," this journal, Vol. XXXVII, No. 2, (1960), p. 201.

¹⁸ Andrew B. Hahn and Arnold Gurin, op. cit., p. 127.

which guide them are similarly made by others with the professional facilitating their actions.

The questions of social class, status and power tend not to be acknowledged. They are blurred by a deceptive language which confuses who is a leader (one talks simultaneously of lay leadership and professional leadership for problem-solving and development) and thus confuses who has responsibility for what. "Ability to motivate lay leadership" was mentioned most frequently by lay leaders as an attribute they sought in Federation professionals.¹⁹ In fact, motivation is an *internal* process controlled by an individual; no one *can* be motivated by others; people motivate themselves. This way of thinking holds the professional responsible for a process he can only influence but not control. Sometimes a parallel error is made in education when teachers confuse the teaching process with the learning process. While related, the two processes are not identical.

The survey reveals that 28% of Federation executives have concerns about job security.²⁰ When they interviewed a small sample of such respondents, the authors of the survey found a sense of unease seemingly not warranted by the fact of turnover statistics.

I would suggest that the unease may be produced by the vulnerability of the Federation professional to lay decision-making and an inability to deal with the resultant practice problems openly due to organizational rhetoric which masks the problem and the essential differences between staff and lay volunteers. Indeed, the Federation field seems to accept without question the job title of executive vice-president which blurs the difference between facilitative staff and decision-making board and makes them one and the same. This model may work at the top but it contributes to an inability of staff on the lower echelons to

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 131.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 130.

utilize the supervisory process for their greater certainty.

Supervisory Practice Principles from an Organizational Perspective²¹

1. Assessment of work performance is facilitated by descriptive statements of specified delineated behaviors of the supervisee as opposed to judgements of the total person. These statements should be made in relative rather than absolute terms and should refer both to actions taken and those not taken.

2. The supervisor should make clear statements of his reactions to the behavior in question and should include both positive and negative feelings. He should differentiate objective consequences of the role-performance from subjective reactions of his own and the supervisee.

3. The discussion should be of a mutual problem-solving nature. Both the supervisor and supervisee should be free to introduce problems of concern to them. The character of the problem should be discussed on its own merits. The worker's intentionality should be part of the discussion but the discussion should center on what was done and not done rather than on the psyche or motivation of the worker.

4. The quality of supervision depends in large measure on the working relationship which is established between supervisor and supervisee. The problem of communication between the two is enhanced by a climate which *reduces* defensiveness. A *defense-arousing* climate is stimulated by the following: an emphasis on constant evaluation rather than description of the problems and their consequences; an effort to control the behavior of the supervisee rather than efforts at mutual problem-solving; an approach which suggests that a strategy is being followed rather than spontaneous interaction; neutrality rather than empathy when dealing with feeling and strain; emphasis on the right to give directions and exact answers rather than an implicit assumption of authority reinforced

through acting the role in contrast to stating it; certainty in judgement when a more tentative "provisionalism" would invite speculation and contributions from the supervisee; one-way communication rather than a complex give-and-take flow of ideas, information and judgements.

5. Supervisory conferences should be routinely scheduled and consistently held and interruptions prevented except for actual emergencies. Both participants should be expected to prepare the work of the previous period as well as the work to be anticipated to form the implicit agenda. The explicit agenda, both in content and priority, are mutually determined.

6. The job should provide for independent thought and action. Supervision should be the time for assessing the results of that action and the setting up of the framework to guide future action.

7. Supervision should contribute to self-actualization, a major component of job satisfaction. The supervisee should be able to obtain reinforcement of feelings of worthwhile accomplishment and self-fulfillment, and should, in fact, have opportunities for personal growth and development on the job which are facilitated through the supervisory process. Such incentives and rewards should be based on a realistic assessment of job performance.

Conclusion

Federations require exceptionally competent staffs to help them achieve the complex and difficult missions defined for them by the Jewish community. We have laid out the case for the importance of supervision as an essential organizational process for engaging the staff in the achievement of organizational goals attendant to these missions.

²¹ These principles are in part based on the concept of "administrative feedback" as a function of supervision. See Andrei L. Delbecq and Dennis Ladbrook, "Administrative Feedback on the Behavior of Subordinates," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (March 1980), pp. 153-166.