

Grassroots and Nonprofit Leadership

A Guide for Organizations in Changing Times

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Chapter 10

PADDLING AT OUR BEST

Supervising Staff and Volunteers

WE DO OUR BEST WHEN OUR VICTORIES AND EXTRA EFFORTS GET NOTICED and our weaknesses get corrective assistance; our strengths get stronger. This is true in rafting a river and even more true in working for social change. Effective organizations make sure everyone gets thought about. Volunteers, director, staff, and board members benefit from thoughtful supervision. We offer some suggestions in this chapter.

Make the Supervision Process Consistent with the Values of the Organization

The real thrust of supervision is helping people grow and become more effective in their role: it is about empowerment. The trouble is, the work ethic in our culture values doing, rather than nurturing. It is easier to evaluate and reward an effective doer who accomplishes measurable goals than it is to reward a supervisor whose job it is to help others accomplish their goals. The authors find the average supervisor says twenty-five percent of his or her time is spent supervising; seventy-five percent of his or her time is spent doing other things for which they are rewarded. If that report were accurate, fifty to seventy-five days per year would be devoted to supervisory activities—four to five hundred hours a year. The supervisors we've interviewed, offered that bit of math, usually revise their supervisory estimate downward.

The large action organization was suffering from low morale and high turnover. Some staff members bragged to each other about the “shit-fights” they engaged in with political or regional rivals inside the organization. Others complained constantly that the group failed internally to live up to its public statements about cooperation and a new way of life.

The consultant brought in noticed early that managers and task leaders had little experience and no training in the art of supervision. Because the culture of the group was antiauthority, managers thought it best to hire good people and “let them go for it.” In interviews with staff, however, the consultant found strong feelings of anxiety and insecurity; the projects were often high risk, the political environment outside the organization constantly shifting, and the organization’s own strategy was frequently adjusted to cope with the environment. These highly motivated staff members’ insecurity meant that they especially needed thoughtful supervision: someone to assure them that they were on course and assist them when they were off. Lacking reassurance, it was natural for the anxiety to be expressed in rumor-mongering, cliques, divisiveness, and a sense that “I’d better watch my back.”

—from the consultant who was involved

Nonprofit groups have an advantage over businesses when it comes to supervision and the mission of the organization. While the bottom line of a business is profit, the bottom line of a social change organization is the empowerment of people. We can use our values to support an organizational culture which places supervision in a different context. Instead of providing referees for the competition over status and salary, supervision in our organizations can provide coaching and support for the growth and development of people.* Supervision does not require a traditional pyramidal structure. A collective can create a framework for supervision by asking who will be most helpful in supervising whom. The point is to make sure that

* One of the authors, Rod Napier, has found in his practice that salary is a relatively poor motivating factor for productivity, even in corporate life. Those who are passed over for salary increments usually feel resentful and become either passive or belligerent. Those who receive a salary increment feel appreciative in the short run and then typically change their attitude and decide that they deserved it all along and feel no reason to make any extra effort.

everyone in the group gets the quality attention she or he deserves.

Increasing effectiveness is what supervision is about. It is a myth that supervision is needed to prod people into action, into working harder. The reality is that a highly motivated person may be ineffective in getting her or his job done well. Usually, working smarter is more important than working harder. Even when a group understands that supervision supports empowerment, some members are likely to mistrust it. Activists who have chosen to work outside the mainstream in order to maintain some sense of their own freedom and integrity may worry about unnecessary control, constraints to personal freedom, and narrowly based judgements. Nearly all of us have some personal experience with arbitrary and subjective evaluations, which often began with grading in school.

Despite the frequency of negative past experiences, the authors have found that people in organizations are extraordinarily open to being helped and to learning, as long as they do not feel stupid or punished. The secret is creating a context for personal development within the organization, so feedback and review are a natural part of any process and do not occur only when something is wrong.

Treat Ongoing Volunteers as Unpaid Staff

In too many organizations volunteers are an afterthought, doing what the staff doesn't want to do, expected to be here today and gone tomorrow. Volunteers can actually be critical to the success of the organization, providing needed skills and energy.

We needed an initial staff of at least six even to have a chance to win a referendum in our city, but we had money only for one and a half! We decided to pay an overall coordinator and a training/volunteer coordinator, and recruit volunteers to do the rest. We created job descriptions, interviewed people who were interested, and appointed two field organizers, an office manager, and a policy staff person—all of them unpaid. They worked two to four days per week, depending on their other jobs and circumstances. Our volunteer coordinator/trainer was careful in interviewing to make sure volunteers were clear about what they could get out of these positions—how their own goals could be advanced.

As the campaign grew we were able to hire some additional organizers and a full time office secretary, but we kept the unpaid staff—we needed

them, and they found their work satisfying. These core volunteers (there were a lot of other volunteers who gave less time) were treated like staff in every way: staff meetings, supervision, staff development opportunities like workshops and conferences, status, supervisory roles regarding other volunteers. The only difference from paid staff was that they were not paid.

It was easier in the heat of a referendum to get volunteers to commit large amounts of time to the campaign, but even after we won, a tradition of unpaid staff continued for years. There was some turnover, but some paid staff turned over, too. The main thing was that the campaign received a lot of top-quality, highly responsible work from this dedicated group.

—former coordinator of the organization, which was a coalition of justice and peace groups in a large east coast city

Even though today's economy of two-job families makes recruitment of volunteers a challenge, volunteers exist. Look for students, people who are between jobs, people who are returning to the job market and need to build their resumes and learn new skills, newcomers to the community interested in plugging in, and retired people who can now devote their skills and time to their interests. Define your target group in order to focus your appeal to them. Advertising is one way to recruit: community newspapers, bulletin boards at colleges and universities, local churches, volunteer fairs, volunteer clearing houses, computer bulletin boards, and public service announcements on radio and television. The most productive means of recruitment of volunteers, however, is through existing members and volunteers—over seventy percent are recruited this way.

Treating volunteers as staff clarifies the relationship enormously. Most of the advice in this chapter applies to volunteers as well as paid staff. "You can't fire a volunteer!" is a myth; like paid staff, volunteers sometimes need to be let go.

Create a System of Supervision

Overseeing the work of others, or accountability, is at the heart of supervision, but it entails several parts. To get a job done, there must be a definition of the job, a gathering of needed resources, a clarification of the level of authority that goes with the job, a picture of

One of our newer volunteers brought useful skills and considerable charm—he was a real people person. In fact, he spent more and more time socializing with other members and started missing deadlines. After a couple of meetings with his supervisor, it became clear that his passion was really more for partying than for the cause, and he halfway acknowledged it himself. We fired him, and the morale in the organization rose immediately. I was surprised by how much his failure to come through at a high level of excellence was disturbing the others in the group.

—executive director of a peace group

how the job fits into the larger scheme of things, and regular meetings with someone for sharing information, coaching, and feedback.

Design the job carefully and describe it clearly, whether to be carried out by a paid staff member or a volunteer. Time is wasted and confusion occurs when people are asked to carry out an ill-defined job. Whether you are recruiting a new person or reassigning someone to carry out a new project, write a job description:

- tasks to be done
- expectations of performance
- kind of experience being sought or training available to make up gaps in experience and skills
- timeframe (permanent/temporary, full-time/part-time, etc.)
- level of authority for making decisions
- who will supervise

If a person is to be held responsible for a job they must have the authority to make decisions. Too often, people are asked to take responsibility for a job but denied commensurate authority to get the job done. They are left frustrated and set up to take blame for things gone wrong even though not receiving credit when things go well. Some supervisors think they must be the experts in a given area, and thus exert too much control by withholding authority. In fact, their responsibility is to select the best person to get the job done, provide the freedom they need to work, and provide assistance as they request.

Provide Access to Resources

“Resources” may be facilities, materials, organizing contacts, leads to volunteers, access to the public relations unit in the organization, and the like. Volunteers and staff members find it extremely frustrating to be ready to work but to lack the resources. Some organizations fill up their supervisors’ workload with tasks that leave them little time for actual supervision, resulting in bottlenecks and wasted time for staff members and volunteers who are waiting for the resources they need.

How a project or position fits into the whole organization is crucial for success. Often in social change organizations the structure is loose, in the name of operating a democratic organization or out of fear of appearing hierarchical. The looseness may appear to be more comfortable, but actually increases confusion, anxiety, and even hostility when one part of the organization clashes with another. When a person is asked to work without a clear idea of how what they do fits into the organization’s strategy and structure, that person is being asked to work in the dark. Working in the dark makes it hard to see the boundaries, to maintain clear communication links, or to maintain the authority that goes with the job. This is also true when the person responsible for supervision is not clearly designated, or when supervision is divided.

Orient Carefully

Orientation needs to include not only the requirements of the position or project, but also the criteria for success. The orientation provides the first description of how the job fits into organizational mission and goals. Training and staff or volunteer development is most easily put on the agenda at that first meeting. An agreement is made on frequency of supervisory meetings.

The most important aim of the orientation is to create an open channel between supervisor and volunteer or staff member, so that hesitations and questions can be raised by the staff member as they come up. The chief block to accomplishing this aim is the widespread fear of being supervised. Bruising earlier encounters with teachers, then bosses, have resulted in fears that usually can’t be swept aside by rhetoric. The staff member or volunteer will need to see that the supervisor actually walks his or her talk.

During the days of the "War on Poverty" programs, the federal government made grants to traditional institutions for various community programs. There were community advisory boards put in place to advise the institutions regarding the community's needs. There was an individual hired as an executive director by the institution and the community together. The executive director was paid by the institution (from the grant) and was responsible to the institution and to the community advisory board. The executive director was accountable to each of these entities and often found her/himself caught in the middle in any crossfire. There was a large turnover in executive directors, where this confusion was cited as a major cause. One executive director put it this way: "I knew that unless I got them to talk with each other before they came to me on a policy directive, I would lose my mind and the organization would be unable to do the job it was set up to do. So, I accepted the job with the clear stipulation that the director of the institution would meet with the chairperson of the community advisory board and myself on a regular basis, if I were to take the job."

—a former executive director in a community health center in New York City

Develop Mutual Relationships

The best supervisory process is one in which individuals believe that it is in their best interest and that of the organization to develop each person as fully as possible. If they believe a supervisor truly is interested in their growth and will help them, then they will come to trust the supervisory process. However, personal growth and development, by its very nature, assumes the involvement of individuals themselves along with their supervisor. This means supervision becomes even more threatening, potentially, and the individual even more exposed as personal limitations and strengths are explored in the context of the job.

The best way to minimize this naturally threatening situation is to have the supervisor model vulnerability. The supervisor persuades the staff person that the supervisor needs information about his or her own performance in order to grow personally and develop professionally. If the supervisor is seen to be open to such feedback and to respond to it in a direct and meaningful way, it will be easier for the person supervised to do the same.

Creating a feedback system for people you supervise has two

advantages: providing credibility and helping you to improve your work. Both the credibility and the personal improvement will further enhance your ability to assist those you supervise to do their very best. Here is a survey instrument which you can use to get feedback. You may want to fill it out yourself as well, in order to understand it better and to improve the supervision you receive.

Effective Supervision Survey

Use this instrument to assess the behavior of your supervisor. Be honest.

Your responses will be anonymous and help your supervisor determine behaviors which are effective and those which need strengthening.

To the left of each item rate your supervisor on a scale of 1–10 (10 = excellent), and to the right rate the degree (1–10) to which you would like to receive this kind of attention.

The supervisor:

- Clearly defines her or his own limit of authority.
- Provides me with a clear understanding of my own authority as it relates to my role.
- Provides me and others with clear organizational goals and priorities.
- Helps me to establish my own goals and objectives in an atmosphere of openness and collaboration, where my ideas and concerns are seriously considered.
- Determines with me the criteria of success upon which my own performance will be measured.
- Believes that my career development is a crucial part of the supervisory process and actively focuses with me on career opportunities and my own long term goals.
- Meets with me regularly to keep in touch with my progress and explore my concerns.
- Establishes with me a climate of help and accessibility that makes it easy to approach him or her.
- Provides me with organizational information I feel is important to my own work and maintains my interest and involvement in the organization.

- Provides me with the opportunity to develop specific skills or experience necessary for my present job or future development within this organization or elsewhere.
- Helps me develop a clear and easily followed plan that outlines my progress and how well I am meeting my own goals and objectives, both in terms of the job itself and my person and professional development.
- Helps me evaluate my own performance in areas of strengths and limitations.
- Takes time periodically to observe me on the job, doing those things that are most important for my success.
- Solicits my own views of my performance based on the criteria to which we previously agreed.
- Solicits, along with me, information from individuals I impact in my job and compares this with his or her conceptions of my performance, as well as with my own.
- Works with me to improve my performance in areas that appear to need strengthening, based on the information I have gathered.
- Gives problems I have within the organization appropriate attention, shortly after I've stated them.
- Involves me in problem solving where I have the expertise or where I feel the eventual decision will directly influence my own life.

An additional way to develop supervisor credibility is to share with those you supervise the organizational goals, where you and your staff and volunteers fit in, and your individual goals for the coming year and how you will be measured and held accountable for them. The more a supervisor can establish his or her own goals, specific objectives, and measures of success, and the more willing she or he is to share these, the more those supervised will be eager to do the same.

Suit the Supervision to the Person

Not everyone requires the same kind of supervision. A newcomer to a job deserves and expects a more intense level of supervision as she or he becomes familiar with the work, establishes goals, and builds the support systems needed for success. Some individuals are already

familiar with the work, achievement oriented, and skillful to such a degree that work gets done on time with excellence; they need much less time. Be cautious however: people who are skilled often find it difficult to ask for help. Supervisors need to stay close enough to keep the lines open for tactful intervention.*

Stay Resourceful by Staying in Touch with New Developments in Your Field

Your supervision is stronger if you are staying informed of changes, learning new skills and perspectives, and learning how to pass them on to those you supervise. Reading the latest articles and networking with counterparts in other organizations working on the same issues keep you fresh and maximally helpful.

Make Evaluation a Fully Participative, and Positive, Process

For social change organizations, the aim of a successful evaluation is greater empowerment for achieving goals and correcting weaknesses. This can most easily be done with a positive tone and maximum interaction.

One way to create a positive and participative evaluation session is to hold a brief meeting three days to a week ahead of time to outline the format and expectations and to answer questions. While a certain amount of anxiety is a natural part of any major evaluation or performance review, the meeting can also be perceived as a real opportunity for planning, development, and learning. The supervisor should quickly review his or her own goals and how the individual fits into the supervisor's area of accountability. It is also useful to review the givens, the nonnegotiable expectations that are established by the supervisor and need to be accepted by the supervisee as part of the framework of the job and the organization. This discussion lays important groundwork for the later one.

At this point a series of questions are given to be used to prepare for the evaluation. Each question is answered twice by the supervisee:

* Such an intervention requires a sensitive judgement call. We are clearly not advocating a second-guessing or meddling approach, which is sometimes justified with the concept of coaching. (See chapter 7 on the windowshade concept of authority.)

We were a really inexperienced bunch of rafters for taking on the Colorado, but our river guide didn't seem to mind. He complimented us on even little things we did right, until our confidence rose, and he was patient about showing us how to change the things we did wrong. Sometimes we were all talking at once in the beginning, trying to get it right before we hit the first whitewater. Even though I was plenty nervous, it being my first time, I still noticed how gung ho our guide was, like he believed in us even when we made mistakes.

—a long-time activist who has directed a number of nonprofits

once from his or her own perspective and once as she or he imagines the supervisor would answer it. The supervisor is responding also. Note that no set of questions will evoke an honest dialogue about performance if the relationship is marked by distrust. If the supervisory relationship has been at least adequate, however, questions like these (answered by both parties, and answered twice by the person supervised) will stimulate a high degree of honesty and nondefensiveness and prepare the way for improved performance in the future:

1. Please note three to five of your greatest successes or achievements on the job during the past six months or year. What led you to pick those?
2. What do you like most about working in this organization?
3. What kinds of things do you like least about working here?
4. Please note three to five things you would have liked to have accomplished over the course of the last year but didn't.
5. What do you see as your most important areas of responsibility during the coming year? Explain clearly the projects, goals, and outcomes you wish to achieve. What kind of time will each of these projects or specific goals require from you?
6. What measures would you establish to determine if you have been successful or not in completing your goals and projects? Please be as specific as possible.
7. What factors, either personal, supervisory, or organizational, might block you from being effective in accomplishing these particular goals?

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6. What measures would you establish to determine if you have been successful or not in completing your goals and projects? Please be as specific as possible.
7. What factors, either personal, supervisory, or organizational, might block you from being effective in accomplishing these particular goals?

8. What responses, skills, education, experiences, or special help do you think you will need to accomplish these goals in the most successful way possible?

In the evaluation session itself, the supervisor's first aim is to evoke a maximum of information and acknowledgement of how things have gone. The set of questions is a tool for that. Each question can lead to interesting discussion and new information, if the style is conversational exploration rather than interview. The supervisor needs to probe, inquire, and encourage a convergence of perspectives on the staff member's or volunteer's performance.* If an important discrepancy is discovered between the views of the two, the discussion can move deeper. Disagreements can lead to valuable new understandings: for example, of differences rooted in culture, or of uncommunicated organizational constraints and traditions.

The second aim is to negotiate changes. We use the term "negotiate" in order to acknowledge that, even in grassroots and nonprofit organizations, staff members' interests may differ somewhat from the organization's. Even when there is full agreement on the givens, which were reiterated in the preparatory meeting, there is usually a great deal of room within which the staff member can maneuver, in terms of how the job gets done and how ill-defined quantities of time are actually spent. Ideally, the organization receives what it needs and wants from individuals. But an employee's or volunteer's needs for training, new experiences, and certain responsibilities may be at odds with the organizational interests and needs at any particular point in time.

Since satisfied workers produce more, have less down time and absenteeism, and win more allies for the organization, it only makes sense that the closer one can come to meeting both organizational and individual needs, the better off one will be. The negotiation, therefore, is to maximize the benefit to both staff member or volunteer and organization. A question about goals and timelines leads naturally to this dialogue. There is no use in entrapping anyone into commitments they will not be able to keep. The goal of the supervisor is the success of the staff member. It is her or his job to help the individual clarify

* See chapter 13 for advice on how to give feedback in ways which will reduce defensiveness.

what needs to be done and why and to make sure the goals of the individual also reflect the needs of the organization. Underlying this are three principles:

- If you want to be successful, you first have to know what will constitute success.
- The more precisely success is defined, the easier it will be to decide the best way to get there.
- If the path to success is precisely marked and laid out, it will be easier to keep track of how things are going along the way.

The negotiation opens the door to help an individual know what is to be achieved, to be aware of how much freedom he or she has while achieving the goals, and to know how well she or he is progressing toward the goals. There is plenty of room to take into account the specific nature of the job, which might be unique, the experience and qualifications of the individual, and the kind of supervision which is appropriate given these realities. This is a natural point for the supervisee to press for changes in the kind of supervision she or he feels is needed. The wise supervisor knows that the person wearing the shoe knows best where it pinches.

Underlying all of this is the strong belief that as individuals help to develop specific goals and targets for performance, they experience more internal control and success: empowerment.

Put Supervision in Context

Create a contract to support the relationship. A contract in a supervisory relationship may seem needlessly formal, but we recommend it in order not to leave the results of negotiation to memory and possibly demoralizing confusion. A contract simply details what has been agreed to for the coming year: key job responsibilities, expected results, how results will be measured and what kind of supervision. The contract can be useful in avoiding misunderstandings, increasing accountability, and providing opportunities along the way for midcourse correction.

Some supervisory relationships start out strong, then deteriorate in the crush of work, sometimes leaving staff members out of touch when they need a supervisor most. Because jobs and individuals

differ, a rule about frequency of supervision meetings is not useful. Connecting frequency of supervision specifically to the work plan and contract is a way of individualizing the process while holding both parties accountable for seeing that staff and volunteers get the attention they deserve.

Part of the role of the supervisor is to develop an informal and trusting relationship with the supervisee that includes, but also goes beyond, the structured contract. A cool, impersonal attitude is not realistic or necessary in this process. There are no pat formulas for developing a warmer kind of relationship. Informally dropping in on the volunteer or staff person, occasionally going to lunch, and being aware of what is important in other aspects of his or her life can go a long way in breaking down barriers and developing a constructive climate for work. This does not necessitate being friends or buddies with those you supervise; think of the golden rule: supervise as you would like to be supervised. Build a relationship with open and honest communication, based on a range of experiences; this provides the means through which you can become an ally for the empowerment of those you supervise.

In our experience, organizational cultures typically resist effective supervision: supervisors are overloaded with other work to do, feel less competent than others, want to avoid seeming to be authoritarian, worry about how accountability relates to diversity issues in the organization, or all of the above. This means that leadership needs to face resistance and overcome it in order to allow supervision to reach its potential.

Unless your organization is quite exceptional, you will need to create consequences and rewards to encourage effective supervision. Accountability needs to come to the seat of authority in your group, whatever its internal structure: leadership needs to demonstrate that failure to supervise effectively results in loss of leadership position.

There are specific behavioral measures that can be used. Insist that the eight-question evaluation interview described above happen once each year, with a report prepared by the supervisor. The eight-question format is, in our experience, highly effective if used fully; it provides the opportunity for supervisors to motivate, to explain, to demonstrate, and, through active listening, to assist with problem solving. Another measure is to have supervisees evaluate the

The scientists in a major university who were managing important research projects needed to learn to be more effective supervisors in order to produce quality work. The consultants who were brought in to lead a supervision skills workshop noted that the scientists tended to have a tone of antibureaucracy and antiauthority which usually goes with resistance to becoming effective supervisors; nevertheless, by the end of the workshop the scientists became enthusiastic about making changes in their practice.

Two years later the lead consultant was telephoned by a top research manager who was extremely frustrated because the scientists did not follow through. They all expressed enthusiasm for what they learned, but they failed to implement it.

—the lead consultant in the project

supervisors; earlier in this chapter we offered a format for that. A third measure is through work plans. Our experience is that when we ask supervisors how much time should be given to supervision, a typical response is fifty percent. When we ask how much they actually do, they typically say twenty-five percent. When we then ask whether they spend more than one full day a week, they typically acknowledge that they spend much less time than that. Since time reflects priority and value, leaders can use work plans to emphasize that doing the work of supervising takes time and needs time.