

Supervisor as Ombudsman?

LAWRENCE W. DOOLITTLE *

SUPERVISION is a tough concept, related to "checking-up." When Likert uses the word he is talking about someone in business who is charged with the responsibility of seeing that the ideas of the higher echelons are carried out by those who must produce the product or deliver the service, and that each producer carries out his role completely. In business the goal is to produce item X as efficiently as possible, that is, produce the item in as little time as possible, using as little material as possible. In order to accomplish this task the supervisor uses tools such as time and motion studies, teaching procedures, inspections, and production figures. Further, the supervisor must have a means by which he is cognizant of the performance of each individual in relation to the goal of the organization.¹

It seems that this definition of supervision is related to communication. The supervisor must see that the ideas developed in one level of the hierarchy (the goals of the discipline, for example, English, science, mathematics, or the community as reflected by the policy-making body of the school) are carried out in total by the lower levels (the individual on the front line, for example, the teacher, counselor, principal, or office clerk). But this does not necessarily mean that supervision has to lose its personal orientation.

The *Riksdagens Justitieombudsman*, or Parliament Agent of Justice, in Sweden is a

¹ Renis Likert. *The Human Organization: Its Management and Value*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967.

supervisor of bureaucratic activities.² "The Ombudsman is an officer of parliament who investigates complaints from citizens that they have been unfairly dealt with by governmental departments and who, if he finds that a complaint is justified, seeks a remedy." In order to accomplish this task he is required to "supervise how judges, governmental officials and other civil servants observe the laws."³

This kind of supervision would be useful in American public schools when applied to the kind of situation described in the article, "Is This What Schools Are For?" The incident, as the student describes it, stems from a "Do Not Enter Without an Appointment" sign on his counselor's door. The student needed help from his counselor, but the sign was on the door every time the student's program would have allowed him to see his counselor. He also got the "run-around" by the main office secretarial personnel when he sought help to see his counselor. The student in question was free to see his counselor only before and after school and during lunch, but

² A discussion of the ombudsman as a position in the hierarchy of American public education can be found in: Lawrence Doolittle. "Ombudsman: Is It Applicable to Education?" *Pennsylvania School Journal* 117: 60-62+; February 1969.

³ Alfred Bexelius. "The Ombudsman for Civil Affairs." In: Donald C. Rowat, editor. *The Ombudsman: Citizen's Defender*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968.

* Lawrence W. Doolittle, Chairman, Department of Education and Psychology, Shippensburg State College, Shippensburg, Pennsylvania

the counselor was available at these times by appointment only. Appointments were to be made during study hall. The student had no study hall.

Because his vital interest was lost in the general flow of the school bureaucracy, he prefixed his description of the incident with the following conclusion:

"It's a system, you have to understand that. I guess it's because there are so many kids and they all have to be in school so many hours. Or maybe it's because the people who run schools finally get to the point where they don't like kids and don't want to have too much to do with them. Anyway, it's a system. It's like a machine. One person like me, say, can't beat it."⁴

He and the authors of the article were willing to assume that the entire "system" was somehow designed to thwart him. His problem was finally resolved by an appeal to his parents.

However, if there had been an ombudsman-like person available, the student would not have had to appeal to his parents. If someone had properly supervised the counseling activities and facilities, or the relations between clerks and students, the incident might never have occurred; or having occurred, the incident would have been used by an ombudsman-like supervisor to ensure that it did not occur again. This kind of supervision calls for a criticism of the counselor, the clerk, and the principal for allowing a bureaucratic convenience (the "Do Not Enter Without an Appointment" sign) to stand in the way of the purpose of the counselor.

Yet as simplistic as this supervisory role may seem, it is not one that is easily played. Criticism of the type that would be necessary in this case is not usually welcomed by its recipients, and how many of us have the intestinal fortitude to hand out this kind of criticism? How many of us believe that it is necessary to play this ombudsman-like role? Its exercise requires a kind of integrity and honesty reminiscent of ancient concepts of nobility. Perhaps noble is an appropriate

⁴ Kathryn J. Noyes and Gordon L. McAndrew. "Is This What Schools Are For?" *Saturday Review* 51 (51): 58-59; December 21, 1968.

term for describing the ombudsman's character.

A Special Posture

Whatever terms are used, it is still obvious that a special kind of posture is required by the person assuming the role. This special posture should include a firm belief in oneself as a critic and as a protector of individual dignity as well as belief in the value of the system being supervised. In order for ombudistic⁵ supervision to work, the person playing the role must approach his responsibility without an ax to grind and without fear of offending; he himself must have the "everybody knows we need an ombudsman" view.

These criteria seem to grant the role its unique quality. It is fairly easy to criticize an organization or some segment of it if one has no stake or belief in it. Kozol, Goodman, Fantini, and Sizer represent excellent examples of this kind of critic. Yet to criticize and remain a part of the system is quite another matter. Hurwitz, the Danish ombudsman, has exemplified this fact by stating that he has built his office much more conservatively than his political outlook.⁶ It seems that Professor Hurwitz is developing his office with the "I hate to do this, but . . ." attitude that is prevalent among teachers.

This ambiguous role is described by Jackson in *Life in Classrooms*:

In a sense he (the teacher) is working for the school and against it at the same time. He has a dual allegiance—to the preservation of both the institution and the individuals who inhabit it. This double concern and the teacher's way of dealing with it imbues his work with a special quality. The social theorist, Charles Horton Cooley, once pointed out that, "An institution is a mature, specialized and comparatively rigid part of the social structure. It is made up of persons, but not of whole persons;

⁵ Means ombudsman-like—should be ombudsmanistic, but the "man" is dropped to make the word more manageable.

⁶ Henry J. Abraham. "The Danish Ombudsman." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 37: 55-60; May 1968.

each one enters into it with a trained and specialized part of himself . . . in antithesis to the institution; therefore, the person represents the wholeness and humanness of life. . . . A man is no man at all if he is merely a piece of an institution; he must stand also for human nature, for the instinctive, the plastic and the ideal." Paraphrasing Cooley, we might conclude that a teacher is no teacher at all if he is merely a piece of an institution. He too must stand for qualities extending beyond the official boundaries of his task. Some teachers (no one seems to know how many) recognize this fact and act accordingly.⁷

In this instance, Jackson is talking about a teacher and an activity that he carries out in quiet. Ombudistic supervision is not carried out so quietly. The independent ombudsman of the Swedish tradition plays this role for all to see and his power is dependent on the noise he makes. As the ombudsman's power is reduced, then the noise he can make is also reduced. Yet the role must not be lessened by fear of reprisal. Even the exceedingly weak ombudsman of the university serves as someone to whom complaints may be carried; this might be all that is basically necessary.

However, the presently benign role of the university ombudsman will not be able to escape the trap that has befallen other similarly instituted roles. He will either serve the bureaucracy instead of the individual, or become so inoffensive as to be ignored.

Perhaps it is valid to predict that unless the supervisor captures some portion of the noble aspect of the role, he is assured of falling into one of the awaiting traps. There is ample historic evidence of this. Noble detachment makes the ombudistic supervisor a critical element to the school bureaucracy. He is the source of information that enables the administrator to make decisions based on accurate information as well as appearing to increase public confidence in those decisions. Yet without nobility and a history of action on complaints, no one will be motivated to transmit information to the supervisor.

This is a powerful role and not one that

⁷ Philip W. Jackson. *Life in Classrooms*. Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968.

necessarily "wins friends and influences people."⁸ It does not entail, however, the sort of inspection or supervision usually associated with the term "snoopervision." Instead it functions as an open type of inspection designed to ensure that the needs of the individual client are being met. Activities are inspected to see that they comply with the goals of the organization, whether these be counseling, English instruction, or service. The type of compliance sought is tied to the goal, not the means by which that goal is accomplished, that is, it is not concerned with the teacher's being on page 134 on January 15, but rather with whether or not John's and Mary's needs are met by that particular portion of the curriculum. For example, the supervisor in the school case cited earlier was not concerned with whether or not the counselor used direct or indirect counseling procedures; he was concerned about the fact that one student received no counseling at all.

This kind of intervention and its accompanying criticism will serve to strengthen, not weaken the organization. The most valuable element of an organization is its access to accurate information, and this is never forthcoming when pleasing the boss is criterion number one for forwarded communication. The kind of organization-strengthening criticism that is embodied in ombudistic supervision is essential if the school is to meet its responsibilities in the last decade of the 20th century.

We must toughen our concept of supervision so that it includes ombudistic inspection and criticism. We must build a noble image for some segment of the organization so that individuals with complaints will feel that they can make themselves heard. Every time we allow organization-perpetuating activities to stand in the way of achieving client goals, we weaken the organization. It may be that all that is required is an investigation of, and a reply to, a complaint, but no matter what is done, we must have a person who will place himself between the flow of the organization and the individual. □

⁸ John Bainbridge. "A Civilized Thing." *New Yorker* 40: 136-54; February 13, 1965.

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