

Altering the Thrust of Supervision Through Creative Leadership

Ben M. Harris

This author looks penetratingly at present critiques of supervision. He holds that supervisors can use their extensive history, tradition, and current practices as "the basis for creatively building the newer forms of instructional leadership so urgently needed."

Hardly anyone knowledgeable about supervision of instruction in elementary and secondary schools would disagree that supervising practices are in need of change. The rapidly evolving changes in our society demand no less from supervisors in the way of response, than is demanded of any other responsible segment of the teaching profession. What concerns many scholars and practitioners alike, however, are the persistent questions about what directions and forms supervision of instruction should take (7; 8; 4).

There are those who hold that supervisors as such are not needed, for supervision of instruction in narrowly defined forms can readily be delegated to principals and teachers. Others would merely change the words we use to think and communicate about supervisors and supervision, hoping to disguise old practices in new semantic vials. Still others seek to borrow from the advocates of unisex and propose to blend administrative and supervisory practices into a single undifferentiated function.

Each of these positions could be given supportive argumentation and only time will reveal the actual course of future events. However, this paper proposes to argue for the preservation of the strong and extensive supervisory root system that does exist. We argue for utilizing the extensive history, tradition, and current practices of a well-developed specialization as the basis for

creatively building the newer forms of instructional leadership, so urgently needed.

Impediments to Progress

Efforts to develop and employ better supervisory programs have been impeded by several confusing concepts. One is the concept that all professional practice is leadership practice. A second confusion fails to distinguish instructional leadership from administrative leadership. A third source of confusion is the equating of supervisors with a stereotype of limited and generally unpleasant practices.

These impediments to progress in supervisory practices are largely of our own making. In the words of Pogo, a comic strip character, "We have met the enemy, and they are us!" All of us engaged in the complex business of supervision and curriculum development may need to be more concerned with the clarity of our concepts and the terms we use to communicate about supervisors, supervision, administration, and leadership. The use of terms might be of little concern, except for the fact that the clarity and precision of the language we use tends to reflect the concepts we hold.

Instructional Leadership Redefined

Instructional supervision and supervisor of instruction, as terms, hardly need redefinition. An

extensive literature, dating back at least 45 years to the classic work of Barr, Burton, and Brueckner (2), is surprisingly consistent in its use of these terms by most of the writers in the field. This does not mean that changes have not been made in both concepts and technologies associated with supervision of instruction as a field of professional specialization. The basic concept of supervision of instruction as a broad functional specialization directed toward improving instruction (6) is clear and persistent in nearly all major writings (1; 6; 10). The concept of the supervisor

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of instruction as a broad class of specialized personnel with various titles and primary responsibility for leadership in supervision is well established also.

Instructional leadership by contrast is a relatively new term. Its widespread use in the past 20 years has been closely associated with innovative programs, and with training programs for administrators and supervisors. At this particular time, the end of an era in many ways, redefinition or at least a refining of meanings may be in order. There are essential elements that help make distinctions between professional practices in general and instructional leadership practices of special concern to supervisors:

1. *Leadership involves the pursuit of change.* Without change as an essential focus or purpose, there is no need for leadership (6).
2. *Leadership involves responsibility.* Leaders assume responsibility above and beyond that of followers. One does not exercise leadership just by being involved in change processes.
3. *Instructional leadership involves change that is uniquely instructional.* Instructional changes can be clearly distinguished from many other kinds of change.

These three points may appear to needlessly emphasize the obvious. However, administrators, supervisors, teachers, and others whose leadership is required to promote and guide instructional improvements, need to understand more clearly their roles as instructional leaders, administrative leaders, and teacher leaders; as distinguished from other practices as professional personnel in non-leadership roles.

End of an Innovations Era

Evaluation reports assessing innovative programs of the past 20 years are alarming in the frequency with which they reveal little or no real change even after years of effort and excess expenditure (3; 8; 11; 13; 14). Furthermore, this society, which has financed educational innovations in past decades at unprecedented levels, has now grown cautious about innovations, including those for nuclear energy, space explorations, military preparedness, and educational programs.

Some prognosticators see all of this in gloomy perspective. They see a trend toward retrenchment, reduced funding, and little or no demand for improvement of instruction. Such gloomy forecasts may be accurate, but I think not. We have been wasteful, foolish, and inept at times in trying to improve instruction. However, there are obvious inadequacies in educational programs at all levels. Our society is going to demand that we attend to these and find ways to offer more educational opportunity to all segments of the population (7). Our approaches to change must be better than before. There must be a more urgent demand for creative instructional leadership, with a minimum of confusion about what is involved, who is responsible, and what competence supervisors can offer.

Supervision as Change Strategy

Supervision of instruction must be manifested in new and more creative ways in the years ahead. The old verities must be applied to give more clarity to the roles of supervisors as instructional leaders. To do this, more creative use of supervisory competencies is called for in most settings. Old assignments, defined by traditional subjects of the curriculum, or rigidly specified by grade-level or task areas are not likely to suffice.

Supervision applied to a strategy of change is one alternative.*

Extensive theory building and considerable research have been undertaken in recent years to assist us in thinking and working more effectively at producing planned change for improving instruction (8; 11; 12). What has emerged as guidelines for supervisory practice is far from clear-cut. However, several basic elements in the process of changing complex operations, like instructional systems, have been identified clearly. Some of these elements are:

1. Invention or development of alternatives.
2. Awareness of the alternatives by those who might implement change.
3. Trial use of the alternatives under real or simulated, protected conditions to provide opportunities for understanding to be developed.
4. Evaluation of the alternatives during and after trials to permit informed decisions about the advantages and feasibility of the changes involved.
5. Systematic installing of the adopted change including modifications in facilities, regulations, organization, responsibilities, and personnel as needed to accommodate alternative instructional practices.
6. In-service training to provide new and upgraded competencies among all staff personnel involved.
7. Evaluation of the new operation to determine its validity in relation to intended changes.

Figure 1 depicts a change strategy incorporating these seven elements into three stages.

Stage I depicts the variety of sources from which alternative instructional programs or curricula are derived. The use of research and development projects and local invention as sources of new or modified instructional materials, techniques, arrangements, or programs calls on specialized supervisory competencies in interpreting research, analyzing innovations or curricular materials, and assessing needs for change in local settings.

Awareness is depicted as a distinct element in the change process. This refers to more than

supervisor awareness or that of other officials. Changes in instruction call for responsible modification of the practices of many people—principals, counselors, teachers, parents, custodians, school board members, and supervisors. Accordingly, a large and often ongoing operation is required to assure that all who need to know have opportunities to do so. Supervisors play a crucial role in creating awareness that is objective, adequate, and appropriate to the interests of each group.

Stage II is called "adopting" and calls for study activities to be planned for various individ-

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uals and groups who need more than superficial information. These activities call for a kind of in-service education that permits teachers, principals, administrators, and parent or other lay leaders to gain sufficient depth of understanding about one or more alternative instructional changes so that they are prepared to undertake serious trial efforts. This is the point at which fads and ill-conceived programs can be eliminated from further consideration—if supervisors with specialized expertise in teaching, learning, and curriculum are in dynamic leadership roles.

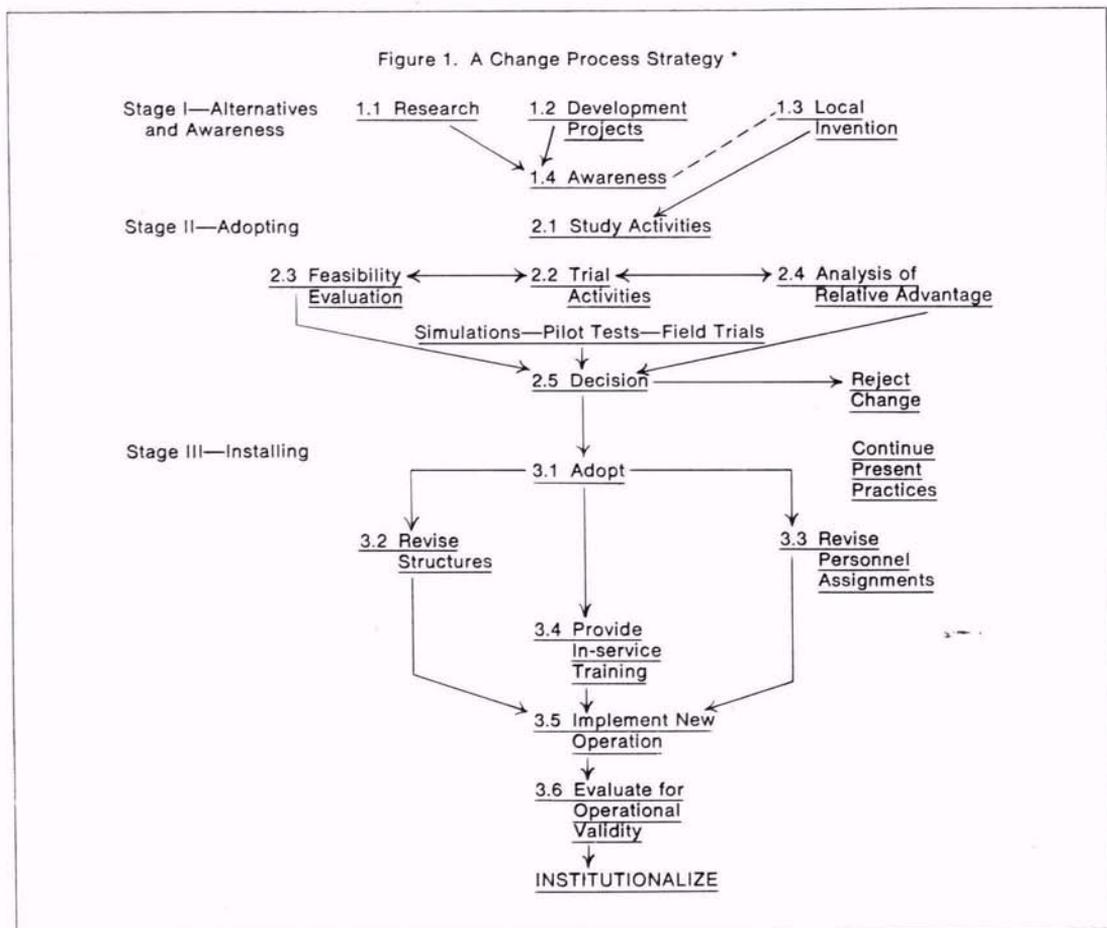
Trial activities are selectively planned and organized by supervisors in close cooperation with administrators and teachers. Trials take various forms that are time consuming and often demand money, released time, and material commitments. Securing such commitments and planning for simulated, pilot, or field trials that are rigorous and authentic demands supervisory leadership of the highest order. It also requires competence in planning, organizing, persuading, communicating, demonstrating, and monitoring. Close-working relationships between supervisors, teachers, and principals are especially important when these trial activities are in progress.

Adoption decisions or rejection decisions are all too often made without systematic evaluation of the instructional change alternatives under trial

* See: "A Three Stage Change Strategy." In: Ben M. Harris. *Supervisory Behavior in Education*. Second Edition. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc. 1975. pp 58-60.

conditions. Trials should not be undertaken, of course, unless the alternatives have teaching and learning merit. However, evaluations in terms of feasibility and relative advantage are proposed in this model strategy. These evaluative efforts must be organized and made systematic by supervisors working closely with those individuals and groups undertaking trials. This calls for a kind of in-service education plus systematic data gathering, so that data can be objectively analyzed, aberrant events screened out, and the values of teachers, principals, parents, and others clearly associated with the alternatives as perceived in trial situations.

Space does not permit discussion of the implications for supervisory practices at each and every step in this strategy. Many implications will be the same for revising structures, personnel assignment, providing in-service training, implementing, and evaluating as have been discussed above. The reader will readily detect an increasing need for administrative leadership as distinguished from instructional leadership as the change process moves into *Stage III—Installing*. The supervisor is required to develop close working relationships with principals and other administrators as well as with teachers. Administrative leadership is necessary to the change



*Adapted from *Supervisory Behavior in Education* by Ben M. Harris, 2nd Edition. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975.

process, but obviously not sufficient. The roles, tasks, and competencies of supervisors and administrators are not identical, but complementary. Their relationships need to be collaborative and collegial, not competitive nor independent.

In summary, leadership for the improvement of instruction is still an urgent need in American schools and is in very scarce supply. Potentially, teachers, principals, and parents as well as supervisors of instruction can contribute much to help improve instruction. However, we who specialize in supervision of instruction, rather than in administration or teaching, must be much clearer in understanding what we are about. The semantic skirmishes about the terms we use to communicate about supervision and instructional leadership have been energy-wasting and obfuscatory. ASCD must take the lead in bringing an end to the word pollution that keeps supervisors from attending to the urgent self-evident tasks that lie ahead.

The three-stage change strategy presented here is an effort to suggest substantial changes in the mode of operation that must be accepted by supervisors who wish to exercise more and better instructional leadership. Other strategies are in need of development and testing, too. Clinical supervision as a teacher education strategy illustrates an alternative that has shown great promise in preservice teaching education and needs creative adaptation to the more complex problems of improving teacher in-service. Numerous other strategies of recent vintage could be readily identified.

The real challenge for each supervisor of instruction, from assistant superintendent to director, consultant, coordinator, specialist and supervisor is to exercise initiative in making instructional change your specialized sphere of influence and domain of competence. This means taking risks because changes often fail. This means attending to the development of new and higher level competencies because instructional leadership requires sophisticated, specialized skills and knowledge. This means, above all, restructuring the way supervisors work, dealing with intermediate- and long-range problems, rejecting demands for "fire-fighting" roles, adopting strategic approaches to problems, and working as supervisory teams. \square

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