

# Peer Observation: A Means for Supervisory Acceptance



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*Teachers have a different attitude toward supervision when they have participated in a program of peer supervision.*

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"I'm so glad you visited my classroom today, Supervisor Jones. The children will benefit from your observations concerning the teaching. By the way, next time you come, would you mind bringing three more skiscratch kits, a set of pre-modal measurement instruments, and a copy of the curriculum guide? I lost mine last year."

Yes, supervisors do visit teachers—and yes, they serve many roles and functions, often the most notable, understood, and acknowledged of which is delivery-person for the system. Teachers, appreciative of that supervisory definition, accept the limitations that go with it. A major challenge to educational leaders is the design of an inservice program that will change teacher perception of the supervisory mission. This article describes in practical terms an elementary school principal's success with that task, through the use of a peer observation clinical approach.

## Background

The rationale for supervision is almost universally supported by educators. This has been so for decades. Unfortunately, the kind of supervisory programs that would assist teachers in their efforts to provide effective instruction exist in far too few schools today. In an informal study, Reavis could not find a practicing teacher who felt her classroom instruction had been or would be improved by present methods of supervision. One teacher stated, "We neither fear nor look forward to the supervisor's observations; it is just something else that interrupts the day, like a fire-drill."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Charles A. Reavis. "Clinical Supervision: A Timely Approach." *Educational Leadership*, 33(5):360-66; February 1976.

Blumberg, in 1974, conducted a study that revealed the following teacher perceptions of supervisors: supervisors seem to be out of touch with the classroom because much of what is communicated involves procedural trivia; supervisors, by avoiding them, make teachers think they are insecure; supervisors play a democratic game, but they don't really mean it.<sup>2</sup>

Despite efforts to free it from its watchdog origins, supervision remains a bugaboo for many teachers, an experience to be avoided at all costs. Besides the inherent risks of having one's professional behavior examined, the teacher must face a dozen extrinsic threats associated with the supervisor's presence. Goldhammer observed, "Because it may count for so much, supervision often counts for nothing."<sup>3</sup>

### The Challenge

Recognizing the difference between teacher perception and supervisor hope, one rural elementary school principal recently decided an action program was needed. He considered the following question: What was the present level of teacher expectancy concerning supervision? Was it possible, through inservice sessions, to attain perception change? Was there an existing technique that could be employed in the school setting without disrupting the learning process? Would the technique chosen strengthen teaching, reduce suspicion of supervision, and increase acceptance? The program ultimately designed was teacher-oriented, teacher-involving, and simple to execute. It required a pretest, use of Cogan's clinical supervision cycle and peer observation teams, and a posttreatment assessment.<sup>4</sup>

### The Design for Action

A 20-item attitude scale was administered to all teachers assigned to the school on the first day of the 1976-77 preplanning session. Teachers were cautioned that there were not right or wrong responses, but that they should mark their true convictions. They were assured that their questionnaires would remain anonymous. They were not aware that this instrument would be used as a pretest and posttest in the study underway.

A description of peer observation was presented during the first week of school. A group

decision to implement peer observation was made during the next staff meeting two weeks later. A committee of three teachers and the principal was formed to design the observation program. Thus began an even-paced implementation of the scheme to change teacher perceptions of supervision. Figure 1 outlines the calendar of events.

The committee selected the five-stage clinical supervision cycle described by Cogan<sup>5</sup> as the process to be used in the peer observation. The need for training in operating the clinical cycle was expressed by the staff at a subsequent meeting.

Two low-inference level observation instruments were selected for use during the observation cycle. These were the Flanders Interaction Analysis and the Georgia Revision of the Purdue Observation Instrument. The principal provided training in the use of the instruments in sessions that included role playing and films of classroom instruction. Two members of the school system central administrative staff experienced in clinical supervision cycle augmented the principal's training with additional sessions in the clinical supervision cycle.

In the next step, the principal and teachers worked together to identify the needs of individual teachers. Peer observation teams were then formed. A teacher with a particular need was paired with two teachers who could offer assistance in that area. Although teachers were encouraged by the principal to privately object to their team membership, no opposition was voiced. This preparatory phase was completed during October.

Before the peer teams began operation in November, the principal completed the first round of clinical observation giving feedback to teachers and familiarizing them with the clinical cycle in actual practice. This phase also was completed during October.

Each member of a peer observation team observed other team members twice using steps in

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Blumberg. *Supervisors and Teachers: A Private Cold War*. Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1974. pp. 12-26.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Goldhammer. *Clinical Supervision*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969. p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> Morris L. Cogan. *Clinical Supervision*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1973. pp. 1-103.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

the clinical supervision cycle. The principal continued his clinical observations. The peer observations were completed in March, after which the attitude scale was again marked as a posttest.

### The Findings

The attitude scale used as pre- and posttest was developed by the principal and field validated in two similar schools prior to its use in this project. The scale was composed of 20 statements. Fourteen statements were designed to cause a response of "strongly disagree" from teachers with a positive attitude toward supervision. The remaining six statements should elicit a response of "strongly agree" or "mildly agree" from teachers with a positive attitude toward supervision.

Appropriate statistical tests were utilized to determine if changes in teacher attitude had occurred between those reflected on the pretest and those expressed on the posttest. This analysis revealed that teacher attitudes toward supervision had significantly improved.

Several of the statements on the principal-designed survey instrument describing possible teacher opinions showed substantial gain. The more notable of these items are quoted below. Explanatory comments based on observation and interview are also included.

- "When being observed, I change from my usual style of teaching." After participation in the project, teachers continue their usual style of teaching even with an observer present. They no longer feel they need to "put on a show" for the observer.

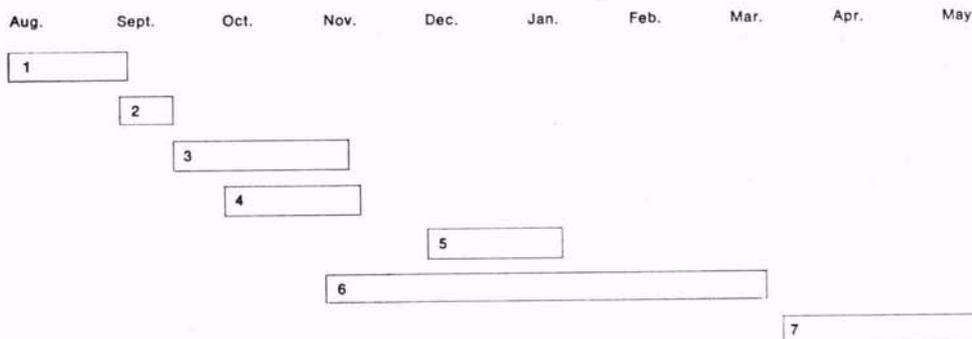
- "Classroom observation is something that I dread." The fear or worry about pending observation appears to have diminished substantially. The purposes of supervision are now probably better understood.

- "Because my teaching is observed, I am a more effective teacher." Classroom observation, as used in clinical supervision, is supposed to enable teachers to become more effective in the classroom. The positive reaction here indicates this is probably the case.

- "I feel at ease to ask fellow teachers to visit my classroom and solicit their advice." It may be concluded that a teacher feels more at ease to ask fellow teachers to visit her classroom and now sees value in seeking the advice of fellow teachers.

- "My students do not respond in the same manner when an observer is present." Teachers now feel that the presence of an observer affects the performance of students to a negligible extent.

Figure 1. Schema of the Program



1. Annual Pre-Planning: Idea of Peer Observation/Clinical Cycle Introduced.
2. Group decision to adopt program.
3. Inservice program for teachers.
4. Principal conducts initial observations.
5. Principal continues observations.
6. Peer Observation Cycle.
7. Evaluation.

## Future ASCD Annual Conferences

1980	March 29-April 2	Atlanta	Georgia World Congress Center
1981	March 7-11	St. Louis	Congress Center
1982	March 20-24	Anaheim	Convention Center

Properly introduced to the idea, teachers are receptive to supervision according to the experience described here. Teachers support and have reacted favorably to the implementation of clinical supervision when a peer is a member of the supervisory team. This, perhaps, reemphasizes some principles that enlightened administrators and supervisors have recognized for quite some time. In brief, teachers are more receptive to supervision: when they have helped to determine

its purposes and procedures; when the supervision is for the purpose of assisting them to do a better job and not for evaluation; and, when the problems being worked on are, indeed, the teacher's problems as he/she perceives them.

Whether it serves as a waystation in a larger school system between the traditional supervisor role and its potential or as a low-cost substitute in a smaller, less affluent system, the clinical supervision/peer observation team design described here may be seen as an effective catalyst for changing teacher opinion. Principals who recognize the problem of supervision acceptance and supervisors who desire a more effective response from teachers may welcome this design or similar clinical peer panel approaches for bringing about positive teacher attitude changes toward supervision.

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## LETTERS

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for expanded discussion of crucial educational concerns.

Gary L. Payne  
Superintendent  
Wyoming City Schools  
Wyoming, Ohio

Dear Editor:

I have not always been enamored with our professional journal, *Educational Leadership*. Some of the issues have been less than stimulating and have had little relevance to the real world I live and work in. Part of the problem is the overly sentimental, syrupy, so-called "humanistic" philosophy which pervades our journal.

Anyway, the December issue of *Educational Leadership* was a refreshing change for the better. Let's have more down-to-earth, helpful, practical articles as this issue contains. And please let us continue to hear more viewpoints than one.

Richard H. Hart  
Director of Instruction  
Scappoose, Oregon



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